

Personal Principles[©]

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This essay introduces my principles, things I've come by naturally or have learned, and which now frame my behavior. I live my life in harmony with these core beliefs, and weigh social conventions against them. If you don't have principles, your behavior will be so variable that no one can predict your future actions, making you unworthy of a stable society. I'm not saying here what your principles should be; just being predictable is good. You probably do conform to a set of personal principles, but composing them as I've done here will be valuable. You will understand why you behave as you do, clarify what's important to you, and reveal how complementary life-stances form the person others know. After this thoughtful exploration, really an ongoing process, you might find some principles indefensible, or others incompatible, in which case it is time to either behave differently or reformulate your principles. Furthermore, if a social convention (law, institution, custom, etc.) contradicts your fundamental beliefs, you should oppose it, but if you find you cannot or will not try to change it, then you should reevaluate your principles, because they are hypocritical notions. Having principles does not mean you refuse to change, but rather that changing your mind is a deliberate process of evaluating all the evidence, and new evidence frequently becomes available.

I recommend my personal principles to everyone—else why hold them? They are presented here as a catalogue of concise statements, but in no meaningful order, and I've included explanations where necessary. Because they're briefly stated, be wary of assuming my beliefs are wholly consistent with organizations sharing the titles I use (e.g., "American Conservative Union," "American Humanist Association").

Secularist. I follow no religious or spiritual advice, and those who do are a *potential* threat. Mysticism comes naturally to humans, evolving from a need to attribute intentionality to important natural objects, like prey, predator and other humans, and doing so in ignorance of natural causes but with a mental capacity permitting transcendental notions. We instinctively seek patterns and meaning in nature, imagining them when evidence eludes us. This evolved behavior is at the heart of supernatural beliefs, and together with the reproductive benefits of group cohesion and alpha male dominance, humans devised organized religion. An enlightened learning

environment cleanses a person of this ancient behavior, because mysticism and subservience to spiritual authority no longer have adaptive value. In fact, religions are ruinous to modern society, which requires diverse and far-flung communities to interact, not build walls of hatred, which inevitably arise from competing gods, prophets and sacred writings. Each individual is free to remain unenlightened, but only as long as that does not impede another's freedom. They can proselytize, as I'm essentially doing here, but the unenlightened introduce religion to impressionable children to indoctrinate them and counteract modern knowledge, knowing they would become secularists without this early programming. The separation of church and state is critical, and should be strengthened to reduce the opportunities for religious brainwashing, especially of children. I disavow the term atheist because it suggests knowledge that is unattainable, is simply the other side of the religious coin, and if that were taken out of circulation (as it should), the term atheist would have no meaning.

Compromise. I often seek compromise, as all worthy citizens do, but I do not compromise my principles. If I find myself urged to compromise a principle, then I should reconsider it. Perhaps new evidence is available, it does not rise to the level of a principle, or the principle is too broad, and I have not captured its essence.

Goodness. I no longer use the term moral, and urge you to drop it from your vocabulary as well. Instead, my social interactions are guided by virtue of reasoning, not because I adhere to a narrow, inflexible code designed to signify who is "in" my group and who is an outsider. I endeavor to ensure that the apparent and immediate consequences of my actions are neutral to other humans, bring others happiness, or result from a need to defend myself (pacifism is not necessary to social goodness).

Forgiving. I forgive mistakes, because my human frailties mean I make my share of them. I expect everyone can make this same confession, so I must be as forgiving of others' mistakes as I am of my own. This forgiveness, though, begins with an admission of error, includes punishment or compensation, and ends with a plan to prevent its repeat.

Naturalist. There are no supernatural objects or events. Humans are highly intelligent animals, and the brain *is* the mind. Consciousness is a product of each human's unique biological brain, which itself is the product of antecedent, natural causes. Human

nature is a product of each individual's environment, especially during the developmental process, but only as constricted by their genetic endowment, with much of one's character wholly determined by their genes. As such, we all have different capacities across a range of dimensions, few of which need result in social inequality. Human interests are best served when activities are harmonized with the rest of nature, but conflict resolution should favor human welfare.

Evolution. The "theory" of evolution as revealed by Charles Darwin is a fact, and no less important than the "theory" of gravity. Through the process of natural selection, humans descended from an ancestor common to all living things. Evolution not only makes modern biology possible, but provides a sobering, enlightened, and, therefore, helpful view of man's place in the universe: we are not specially-created animals *above* nature. Furthermore, evolutionary psychology has revealed many genetically-framed, universal behaviors, importantly informing social policy. We finally understand many of the origins of positive and negative human behavior, and should use this knowledge to manage social interactions.

Essentialist. There exists a single truth about objects and processes, and rigorous application of the scientific method provides sufficient objectivity to enable its discovery. I believe in reductionism, that all sciences are unified under a simplified principle. We may never know this single, unifying principle, but the effort to find it is valuable in its own right. Scientific truths must be incorporated into all social conventions and institutions; ignoring them is harmful.

Skeptic. I am a skeptic, but skepticism is a method of thought and inquiry, not a position. Most thesauruses include synonyms like cynic, doubter, and disbeliever, which misrepresent the essence of skepticism. "Skeptic" is derived from the Greek word, "skeptikos," which translates to "thoughtful." It means I am "inquiring" or "reflective," that I ponder the truth of things many people accept, not with the purpose of disbelieving, but to understand.

Rational. Emotional behavior is innate and important, but I try to form my opinions through a logical progression of reasonable deliberations, using only evidence discernable by the senses (or extensions of them, like the microscope).

Personality. I accept the intractability of my basic personality, and adopt it to my principled behavior rather than try to change it. Every human is born with a predisposed manner of dealing with the world, their personality, which encompasses their emotional content. We are not born with a "blank slate," which the environment then molds into our character. While everyone's personality is malleable to some extent (some aspects more so than others), we are inclined to interact with the world according to our unique, genetically-framed predisposition. As such, we must learn to adopt our given personality to the situation in which we find ourselves. Descriptive behavioral attributes encompassing all normal, agreeable humans is possible and useful, and the most widely used one is the five-factor model of personality. I believe everyone should take this personality "test," so it is only fair to reveal that I am on the high side of the openness to experience (imaginative or creative), conscientiousness (I am more impulsive and quicker to express anger than most people), and extraversion scales (I am decisive, outgoing and assertive), in the middle on the agreeableness scale (I value getting along with others, but not so much that I won't quarrel), and on the low side of the neuroticism scale (I'm not a worrier and have high self-esteem). There is no such thing as a "good" or "bad" personality, save behavior resulting from impairment (e.g., anti-social personality disorder, ADHD, bi-polar disorder, etc.).

Male. I am a male heterosexual because of my genetic endowment. Sexual orientation is inherited and intractable, as are significant behavioral differences between males and females.

Determinist. I believe everything occurring in nature has antecedent causes, which includes human behavior, and that free will, as commonly understood, does not exist. There is neither a "soul" nor homunculus residing in our bodies. Human beings are fully-caused creatures in nature, that is, their behavior is determined by their genes and environment (including learning), which are causes not under their control. This interactive array is so complex that behavior often appears to be freely willed, which makes it acceptable to think of individuals as having made conscious choices. This natural truth means I oppose the death penalty, but not concepts like punishment, accountability and reward.

Conservative. I hold a conservative sociopolitical perspective. It best serves human interests, because history carries valuable lessons, which are

incorporated into existing social conventions. Change is often good, but precipitous, wholesale change is usually bad. Conservatives prefer slow revisions toward an improved state, which is almost always possible and desirable; a conservative is not unreasonably wedded to stasis but recognizes its value.

Capitalist. I believe the socioeconomic system known as capitalism, whereby the means of production and distribution are privately owned and operated in a competitive environment, is the only one that embraces human capabilities (and limitations), thus maximizing industrial efforts. Neither social inequality nor exhaustion of earth's resources is an inevitable outcome of capitalism. The collective efforts of private individuals chasing novel profits—Adam Smith's "unseen hand"—is the best way to correct the occasional social disruptions inherent in any vibrant economy. Government interference usually corrupts the free flow of goods and services, thus impeding human industry; its role should be limited to enforcement of the competitive environment, without which capitalism will not succeed.

Global. My principles must harmonize with global welfare. Shortfalls from universal welfare norms in health, education, self actualization and self-sufficiency should be addressed through the voluntary, collective efforts of private citizens, and not centralized governments. These needs will be ever present, resulting from the shifting, unequal distribution of capital resources that is a hallmark of a vibrant, global economy. Individual cultures, including the social conventions and institutions of nation-states, might vary, but only insofar as they do not have a deleterious effect on any global citizen's welfare. Society is only as worthy as its efforts to ensure that all global citizens enjoy universal welfare norms, and individual liberties are imperiled in direct relationship to these shortages.

Communities. I believe the human capacity for successful socialization is limited to small groups, so I must constantly work at devising ways in which my small community can still have a global reach; humans can no longer exist as isolated or insulated communities. Most studies show that the human ability for complex social interaction breaks down after more than 150 people are included in the group whose physical attributes, past behavior and suspected thoughts must be catalogued and constantly evaluated. Therefore, global ideals are only achievable through small, close-knit communities,

whose activities consider their global impact. Because status-seeking is innate behavior, a global reach is achieved by elevating the status of the finer social attributes, like compassion and altruism, and diminishing (but not eliminating) others, like wealth accumulation.

U.S. Constitution. I believe all humans should "sign on" to a social covenant, an instrument governing the behavior of citizens adopting the local community, and the U.S. Constitution circumscribes the best government humans have produced. It is a system of limited government, established only to maintain civic order and facilitate the competitive structure necessary for capitalism (America has drifted away from the original Constitution). Most importantly, the Constitution can only be modified by the onerous amendment process, a critical safeguard against tyranny by the majority.

Humanist. I subscribe to Humanist Manifesto III as an excellent summation of desirable fundamental principles (as are Paul Kurtz's "Affirmations of Humanism"). Furthermore, its principles are sufficiently broad (but clearly demarked in the truly important dimensions) so they accommodate many different cultures and individual applications.

Democratic activist. I seek to change social conventions that conflict with my principles, but my activism is bounded by other principles (e.g., I do not murder those who disagree with me), by respect for individual freedom, and by a desire to cooperate with my community's fairly-reached decisions. I call this being democratic, a willing member of a group that may not agree with all of my principles. If the group freely decides to violate one of my principles, and I cannot abide that decision, then I must join another community.