

A Free and Responsible Quest for Truth and Meaning

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I am indebted to humanist philosophy and to a Unitarian religious principle, both of which advocate a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This principle can provide a valuable guide to our ethical thoughts and it can unite humans in a common cause. In theological studies, the search for meaning or purpose is called *teleology*. In secular thought, a similar goal can be the pursuit of worthwhile aims giving meaning to humans in the course of their lives.

There are five key words to be considered in this ethical principle. These are *free*, *responsible*, *search*, *truth* and *meaning*. Here are a few comments about how each relates to ethical goals. Let's begin with the word *free*. This suggests we are free to change our ethical perceptions from time to time. Indeed, for thoughtful believers, this is likely to happen over the course of one's life. We can expect to encounter many possible interpretations concerning which purposes and meanings are of most value.

The second key word is *responsible*. This word includes consideration for others. It implies a moral obligation in protecting the freedom of one's fellow humans to make choices different from my own. Responsibility requires respect for the worth of others, even when their views differ from mine. There are limitations to individual choices, such as avoiding what is hurtful to others. Responsible use of our free will takes note of ethical obligations towards our fellow humans.

The third key word is *search*. Search suggests a continuing process. It implies an on-going quest. It takes account of changing social and economic realities. Search implies growth and development in both our religious and secular choices. As we read new books or acquire new knowledge, we can expect to look at questions of purpose in the light of new experiences. While there are traditions we continue to value, we can anticipate being slightly different people today than we were yesterday.

The fourth key word is *truth* – a small word with a big meaning. In philosophy the study devoted to the pursuit of truth is *epistemology*. This area of study concerns how we know the things we claim to know. There is a wide range of knowledge, including certainty and evidence at one end of this scale, to much less certainty at the lower end of the epistemological range. At the lower end of knowledge, language shifts to words such as trust, hope, opinions, wishful thinking, down to everyday expressions such as, “I haven’t a clue what’s wrong with my computer”.

Some ways of acquiring knowledge are more reliable than others. If we want to know what’s going on around us, science offers fairly reliable knowledge, although its methods are not perfect. Science tends to change and adjust to the discovery of expanded knowledge. Science does not arrive at absolute certainty, nor do good scientists make this claim. Absolute certainty is very hard to arrive at but some methods are more reliable than others.

When we seek truths about religious knowledge, many engage in interfaith dialogue. Typically, we try hard to respect the moral beliefs of adherents of other religions. We attempt to be inclusive and tolerant of their opinions. Yet this does not mean that all religious ideas are of equal value. So while we agree to be tolerant, we need not go so far as some postmodernist philosophers. Extreme postmodernists argue that there are many views and each person has chosen what is most meaningful. Thus, they sometimes erroneously conclude that all views are of equal value.

The last key word is *meaning*. It is quite possible for us to possess a great deal of truth and knowledge without attaching much meaning to it. For example, many people die of undernourishment daily but if we do not care, our knowledge will not be useful. If we are emotionally unable to connect the concept of undernourishment with the way we live, the knowledge we have will be without meaning.

In the end, a good principle in reaching ethical goals, regardless of one's personal religious choice, is through the pursuit of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Many religions and philosophies can be improved by following this principle.