

Introduction to Taking Children Seriously

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 30 August, 2003 - 09:03

This superb brief introduction first appeared on [Virtue Pure](http://virtuepure.blogspot.com/2003_08_01_virtuepure_archive.html#106193129195923590) (http://virtuepure.blogspot.com/2003_08_01_virtuepure_archive.html#106193129195923590).

If you come to learn about Taking Children Seriously (TCS), one thing that may stand out is the strong emphasis on philosophy. This is not par for the course in parenting discourse. Some of our concerns are things like:

- We want TCS to be true
- We want TCS to include only good explanations, selected with a very high standard for what is considered to make sense
- We do not want accepting TCS to introduce unexplained complications into our worldview
- We want TCS to be rationally defensible and do not want to ignore any known criticism of TCS
- We want TCS to be consistent with our best theories in other fields, such as morality, epistemology, and physics

And so we come to the question of why philosophically oriented people might be highly interested in parenting, and create a parenting philosophy (make no mistake, TCS *is* about parenting). One quick answer goes as follows:

If a person parents in such a manner that his children have no choice but to enact the same parenting method, then barring outside interference, this family tree's parenting practices will *never* change (and thus never improve). (Yes, we are aware that people marry outside their family tree, but we do not consider the possibility that a spouse might step in and stop bad parenting a saving grace – the parenting is still wrong.) This may be an extreme case, but it still deserves some attention to see both how it could come about, and how it could be avoided, which is one issue TCS addresses.

You may object that no child will parent exactly the same way as he was parented, and thus things will change. While its true that there are fluctuations, we suggest that we should not rely on this sort of variance as our method for change. We cannot count on randomness to improve the world.

Now that I've mentioned the extreme case, I would like to share a more practical insight. It begins with this point: *any suggested behaviour or system of behaviours that, if taken sufficiently seriously (enacted by enough people with enough precision), would lead to disaster, is wrong*. Now, imagine a theory that it is good to force children to learn our best theories of math (put another way: *teach* them math, whether they like it or agree, or not, rather than suggesting to and advising children). If taken seriously (by future generations too), this suggestion will lead to the same math theories being passed on for *eternity*. On the simple premise that some of our current math theories are imperfect, this is an entirely disastrous course of events.

This insight applies to more than just math. It applies to teaching any theories at all (as opposed to suggesting). We cannot insist that any specific theory should be taught to children, because we should hope that our theory might, in time, be improved. So what TCS advocates is a parenting philosophy designed around *error correction* which recognises that no

matter how sure we feel, we may be wrong, recognises that children are people and may be right, and recognises the grave dangers involved in propagating ideas through force instead of persuasion.

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Comments

What's this to do with parenting?

Submitted by Pokemamma on 3 September, 2003 - 12:32

What's this to do with parenting? Now tell me how to take my kids seriously.

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Re: What's this to do with parenting?

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 3 September, 2003 - 22:03

it speaks of classes of parenting theories and their consequences. how should we make specific parenting choices without an idea of what to aim for? to that end, thinking about what happens if a parent causes his child to parent the same way is important.

and more than that, Virtue Pure has presented a criterion with which to criticise theories, esp parenting ones. If you'd like to take your children more seriously, simply apply the criterion to some/all (the more the better, but any at all will help) of your parenting theories, and reject all the ones that fail.

-- Elliot

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Re: What's this to do with parenting?

Submitted by Alan Forrester on 4 September, 2003 - 00:07

Pokemamma wrote:

'What's this to do with parenting? Now tell me how to take my kids seriously.'

Parenting has to do with how one ought to raise one's children. Now suppose I told you that the right way to raise your child was to throw them off the Eiffel tower when they reach the age of three. Obviously, you would think I was nuts, this would be a disastrous thing to do because the laws of physics tell us that throwing people off the Eiffel Tower tends to have a deleterious on their lives. So the right way to parent is not independent of things like the laws of physics.

Just as we should take account of the laws of physics in raising children so we should take account of our best theories about the way in knowledge is produced. Now given that we are fallible, i.e. - we make mistakes, our

knowledge of the world is imperfect and that we don't want our children to be stuck with bad theories we need to raise children in such a way that they can change bad theories rather than sticking to them. At present non-TCS parents don't do this, they raise children in such a way that they do end up stuck with bad theories. TCS attempts to outline a way to make sure that parents don't do the psychological equivalent of throwing their children off the Eiffel Tower.

In general there is not a mechanical way to do TCS the actual solution to any given problem will usually hang on details of the parents and children concerned that they should not tell to outsiders because it would be a violation of privacy. Outsiders can give suggestions as to how to solve a problem but in the end it's down to the family concerned to come up with a solution. You might as well ask 'What's all this freedom stuff got to do with running a democracy? Just give me a machine that can crank out the right answer to how to solve a given problem in a liberal democracy!'

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Does this argument make sense?

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 4 September, 2003 - 05:53

The author makes the argument (via Kant's categorical imperative) that forcing math (or any knowledge) on children is bad because it causes the stagnation of knowledge due to coercive learning.

However, imagine a scenario where parents force their kids to learn the important math, but at the same time forced the idea that knowledge is fallible. Here children would be coerced, but could later (perhaps as "adults") create new knowledge. In this situation knowledge wouldn't become static like in the author's analogy.

This seems to render the author's main argument invalid. I do, however, believe coercion is wrong -- but for other reasons.

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Re: Does this argument make sense?

Submitted by Elliot Temple on 4 September, 2003 - 10:05

Part of forcing a theory on someone, is forcing the person to be unable to abandon that theory. They learn that it *is* true. That's the point of teaching, and sufficiently effective teaching would have that effect. Real teaching only has it sometimes, and is failing more and more in our present society. Virtue Pure's argument was about *if* the teaching (or other stuff) was taken sufficiently seriously, and part of taking it sufficiently seriously is teaching sufficiently effectively. without the premise of taking stuff seriously, the conclusions don't happen.

so anyway, if you will, sufficiently effective teaching requires saying that fallibility does not apply to the material being taught. teaching fallibility would just confuse kids, because teaching is an infallibilist thing to do.

[to post comments](#)

I Kant understand it!

Submitted by Alan Forrester on 4 September, 2003 - 19:25

A reader wrote:

"The author makes the argument (via Kant's categorical imperative) that forcing math (or any knowledge) on children is bad because it causes the stagnation of knowledge due to coercive learning."

To be honest I haven't the faintest idea what Kant's whatsit is, the argument is from Popperian epistemology (the theory of knowledge). Popper argues that we learn by making guesses about how to solve problems and then subjecting the guesses to criticism.

"However, imagine a scenario where parents force their kids to learn the important math, but at the same time forced the idea that knowledge is fallible. Here children would be coerced, but could later (perhaps as "adults") create new knowledge. In this situation knowledge wouldn't become static like in the author's analogy."

That would make the child's life a lot more difficult than it needs to be. First of all you're giving conflicting messages that our knowledge is fallible but nevertheless it is so perfect that if the child questions its content or the point of learning it then they will be punished again and again and again as often as is necessary until they shut up and don't ask any more forbidden questions for fear of more punishment. This may result in the child having a mental block around the area of knowledge in question where they're too scared to ask questions even in the absence of punishment.

As for restoring the ability to learn properly in adulthood, there are far more ways of being wrong than being right, it is a lot easier to destroy a person's knowledge about how to learn than it is for them to recreate it afterward. It's a bit like saying that it was alright for the Communist party in Russia to kill all the political opposition and a free press because after all one can always generate a new opposition the fact is you can't do it easily.

One last comment life starts before eighteen, childhood is not a preparation for adulthood. Children are real people, not just people in training who don't deserve to be taken seriously.

[to post comments](#)

Kant's Categorical Imperative

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 4 September, 2003 - 20:40

Immanuel Kant (18th century philosopher) formulated what a moral theory called the "categorical imperative", usually quoted as "act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Book: "Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals"). I quick google search will turn up much more info.

The author's statement "any suggested behaviour or system of behaviours that, if taken sufficiently seriously (enacted by enough people with enough precision),

would lead to disaster, is wrong" is in similar form.

[to post comments](#)

Kant And The Categorical Imperative

Submitted by Virtue Pure on 7 September, 2003 - 02:57

Dear a reader,

I have replied about the relationship between my views and Kant's **here** (http://virtuepure.blogspot.com/2003_09_01_virtuepure_archive.html#106290360413032991). I hope this clarifies matters.

~**Virtue Pure** (<http://virtuepure.blogspot.com/>)

to post comments

Residential Social worker

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 12 February, 2004 - 08:33

Can I use some of your articles in our in-house newsletter please.

to post comments

I agree about the theory,

Submitted by Kristel (not verified) on 11 June, 2006 - 19:02

I agree about the theory, but what you write makes me wonder what school system I was part of for 12 years. The main point of that WAS criticism, never to believe any information only as such. The coercion was about being there every day.

I think the criticism of schools should be taken to this day and it should take into account that the teaching theories have improved. Which is good. Even if it's based on pseudo scientific methods.

The problem never was and isn't now either: How (exactly) do whatever. Rather; under what kind of circumstances. That's the TCS I want to talk about.

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to post comments

Pedagogy versus andragogy

*Submitted by **Steve Roiland (not verified)** (<http://passtheorchmusic.com>) on 24 April, 2010 - 18:29*

A friend suggested my reading your TCS material and I am glad he did. Fear and insecurity about the economy, the future has the majority of the music education establishment clinging to pedagogy. Relying on external

motivation to teach a powerful, magical art: music, is illogical and self defeating. Though andragogy was developed to serve the needs of adult education I believe that andragogy which requires selling students on the rewards of knowledge sought and facilitating the acquisition of that knowledge is increasingly critical for today's sophisticated, jaded student. Music education needs to be about self expression, improvisation and using classical teaching to gain mastery of those personal rewards. Pleasing one's parents and bringing pride to one's family by parotting accurate performances like a "prodigy" is mostly ineffective and highly responsible for the decline in education in music and otherwise.

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