

TCS and Fallibilism

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 9 July, 2003 - 20:07

by **David Deutsch**

This article was first published in Taking Children Seriously 23

Over two millennia ago, the idea that human beings are inherently fallible was introduced into the foundations of the theory of knowledge by Pre-Socratic philosophers. Ever since, everyone who has taken this insight seriously – and who has therefore denied the possibility of revealed knowledge, certain knowledge, or justified knowledge – has been accused by defenders of tyranny of denying the possibility of knowledge (true theories) itself. ‘You've got to build on solid foundations or you'll never get anywhere’, they claim.

They are mistaken. We (the likes of Xenophanes, Socrates, William Godwin, Karl Popper and TCS supporters) are rationalists as well as fallibilists. We believe that it possible for human beings, through conjecture, reason and criticism, to come to know and understand truths about the world, including truths about the human condition and about specific people, and including truths about matters that are not experimentally testable. We do not believe that we possess the final truth about any of these matters, but we do believe that our successive theories can become objectively truer – with more true implications and fewer errors. But because we are fallible, it is not possible for us to know which of the ideas that we believe to be true are in fact true, or in which cases we are right when we believe that we have obtained a truer theory than we had before. History is full of examples of ideas – the flatness of the Earth, Newton's laws, the subservience of women – that were once the epitome of certain, unquestionable truth but are in fact severe errors. We hold it to be true that many of the ideas that we now believe to be true, including some of those that we believe most strongly to be true, are in fact riddled with errors.

That is why the frameworks that we endorse for science, politics and interpersonal relationships are fundamentally different from those of non-fallibilist world views. Our frameworks – protocols, rules, maxims etc. – are all about what to do in the face of opposing theories, ideas, values etc., which may be true, given that we start from the premise that our own may be mistaken. Other frameworks are all about how to obtain ‘justified’ (revealed, certain, etc.) knowledge – i.e. theories for which you can know in advance that anyone who contradicts you will be wrong – and how to behave when you have it. The former is invariably a fraud; the latter a recipe for tyranny.

Those who think that believing that one may be mistaken, even when one is sure that one's theory is true, is self-contradictory, are mistaken. They have not understood the fallibilist conception of objective knowledge. As Sir Peter Medawar said in *Advice to a Young Scientist*:

I cannot give any scientist of any age better advice than this: the intensity of the conviction that a hypothesis is true has no bearing on whether it is true or not.

In the fallibilist scheme of things, arguments take the form of criticisms of theories that contradict the one that is being argued for. In science, for instance, an experimental test may establish that a range of previously plausible theories is false because their predictions were not borne out, but it cannot prove that any theory is true, because it may yet make many false predictions in some – or even all – other situations. Quite generally, you cannot hope to find evidence that some future criticism, of a form you do not yet know, will not reveal a fatal flaw in your favorite theory.

There is often a moment of understanding, when you assimilate an explanation of why something is so, rather than merely that it is so. And this often comes along with an increased conviction that the idea is true. But remember the Medawar quote. Even when you get this conviction, it does not mean that the idea is true. If anything, it would mean that you should be especially careful to criticise the idea.

So in regard to the theory of TCS parenting, we believe it to be true even though it is not experimentally testable, but we could be wrong. We believe that it is true for the following reasons. First, what passes for rival educational theories all depend on structures of arbitrary authority (parents or teachers have the last word) and mechanical visions of human nature (such as Behaviorism),

which have already been rejected for excellent reasons in every field other than education – and the arguments for retaining them in education are crudely ad hoc or simply circular. Secondly, conventional educational practices are notoriously ineffective even in their own terms: everyone knows that most adults could not begin to pass a test in most of the subjects over which they slaved for most of their time in their school lessons; yet almost no one draws the obvious conclusion that forcing such lessons on children is insane. Thirdly, TCS educational theory is consistent with wider philosophical ideas – fallibilism among them, and others that are fundamental to our society such as the idea of human rights – that we hold for independent reasons. Does anyone really find it satisfactory to espouse lofty principles such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom from involuntary servitude, the right to due process and so forth, while simultaneously justifying locking children up in a classroom all day doing things they hate and then giving them ‘detentions’ for speaking disrespectfully to a teacher when he forcibly prevents them from leaving the room?

Experiment could not refute the theory of TCS, but argument and criticism might. For instance, it might show that the theory contradicts some principles that we have independent reasons to retain. Or it might show that (contrary to what we currently believe) one of the conventional systems of education is consistent with fallibilism and our wider philosophical beliefs, or that TCS theory is not consistent with them, or that some of the wider philosophical beliefs are themselves flawed, or whatever.

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Comments

Excellent

Submitted by Collin Dyas on 29 July, 2003 - 15:01

My, I am enjoying this site! Great article! There's a lot to digest here, and that's what I like.

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OK. TCS could be wrong. The

Submitted by katherand on 30 July, 2004 - 04:59

OK. TCS could be wrong. There is a perhaps totally wrong assumption in the saying "the proof's in the pudding." I have read on this very site some comments made by TCS'rs to the effect that TCS has made being a parent a very rewarding, peaceable theory in practice. I would like to find out if they are right. :)

Again, wish me luck!

Katherand

to post comments

TCS and Fallibilism

Submitted by G.Shippey (not verified) on 14 March, 2005 - 16:15

Those who think that believing that one may be mistaken, even when one is sure that one's theory is true, is self-contradictory, are mistaken. They have not understood the fallibilist conception of objective knowledge.

Hey that about sums me up, I agree most of Popper(a part from his Political world view that is), I am 100% with the fallibalist here!

Hang on isn't that a contradiction in it's self?

Arr well if I am a true fallibalist I must also assume that my framework is wrong as well, aren't I?

to post comments

"So in regard to the theory

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 29 September, 2005 - 20:00

"So in regard to the theory of TCS parenting, we believe it to be true even though it is not experimentally testable, but we could be wrong."

You are.

to post comments

A response, and question...

Submitted by Dwayne (not verified) (http://example.com) on 23 March, 2007 - 16:07

When we say 'Behaviorism' has yet to leave the vicinity of the school system, and that as a result a Humanistic element is missing, are we also saying this is why the use of drugs as prescribed by doctors and suggested to by teachers are still a major threat to the lives of our children inasmuch as they remain subjected to this process of standardisation (i.e. grade school education)? I can relate wholeheartedly to all of the issues preseted by this article, from the 'falibilistic', 'maybe-logic' to the authorotaive demands placed on students by egotistical teachers

who like any "good" slaesperson, have taken "ownership" of their product and when it is "attacked" is relayed and internalised as a personal blow, which is then defended, oft times violently, back upon the student by the "authority figure." School was NEVER easy for me, thankfully my parents were not believers in the psycho-physical pharmacological method, adopted by so many parents too wound up in the hyperreality of their work week to engage in falibilistic dialogue of the highest Moral Nature. And come-on, I mean, my parents were work-aholics, so don't get me wrong. But at the same time the discourse aimed at here being one of persuasion by way of good, efficient, and wharmhearted mind isn't easily come by (or even understood, really though: they killed Socrates), which is why, it is young adults, in my opinion, less jaded and pre-figured by society, that is less calloused to which this 'TCS' needs to be directed toward. And belive me, I will forward this page to as many people as I can. It is an honor to have discovered you, and to think, it was the unreality of time and the work of Julian Barbour who brought me here.

Thanks for the space,

Warmest Regards,

Dwayne (Father & Student).

to post comments

TCS, Fallibilism and Experimental Refutation

*Submitted by **Brett (not verified)** (<http://www.tokcast.net>) on 5 December, 2010 - 10:59*

"Experiment could not refute the theory of TCS, but argument and criticism might."

I agree with all that David has written here except the outright dismissal of the possibility that "experiment could not refute the theory of TCS." What is good - what is morally right - is that which promotes well being. Sam Harris' most recent book "The Moral Landscape" goes into great detail about how science can determine human values. <http://www.amazon.com/Moral-Landscape-Science-Determine-Values/dp/143917...>
(<http://www.amazon.com/Moral-Landscape-Science-Determine-Values/dp/1439171211>)

Once you accept the premise that the only thing we need to consider in our moral judgements is the well being of conscious creatures. To be brief: Harris considers a thought experiment where you imagine a world which is "the worst possible suffering for everyone all the time." Now any state of affairs is clearly better than this. Thus movements either away from this worst-possible state of suffering for everyone or towards it are movements which amount to more or less right or wrong answers to moral questions. Harris admits there may be many such solutions and ways to flourish - but the point is that there is scientific truths to be discovered here. Admitting that...

Although we do not actually need to do the experiment to show that beating a child (or otherwise being coersive) is wrong - we could do such an experiment. Does beating a child improve their well being? Is their health - mental, emotional, physical, spiritual improved by the beating? Do beaten children go out into the world more confident, happy and resilient people or are they more likely to be withdrawn, angry and visit similar violence upon others? To take it another step, despite the infancy of neuroscience at this stage: does their brain - if we had the appropriate scanning technology - show objective signs of the correlates of pleasure, pain, reward, confidence, satisfaction, contentment, fear, shame, and so on? Would not all of these measures constitute an experiment falsification of the theory that "beating a child improves their well being"? After all, isn't such "discipline" the intent originally?

Equally then, could experiment refute the theory of TCS? It seems a similar battery of experiments can be imagined in just the same way. Does a TCS approach produce children with greater well being? Are they happier, better adjusted, more confident, creative and happy people...or are they not? It seems to me that if they are not then we have a refutation. At the limit we can imagine not only studies where participants simply report the contents of their consciousness but also have their brain scanned as they undergo a TCS exchange about whether they can try MDMA this weekend with some friends compared to some other group where the approach is a "just so no" coercive one.

I think then that TCS is falsifiable in the usual sense of the word. One need only grant that what you are actually seeking is the greatest possible well-being of the child as the outcome of putting some parenting theory into practise. If the theory does improve the well-being of the child then it is the best moral - and hence scientific theory currently available. Unless, that is - another theory can be shown to be more capable of improving well being. In practise of course, no such experiments need to be done as those alternatives can be rejected on other grounds that David alludes to.

And is well-being too imprecise a term to be using here? Consider, as Sam Harris does, by way of example - the notion of physical health. It defies precise definition and is rather elastic to changes in medicine. Yet we can still talk meaningfully about being healthy or not. Likewise, our notion of what it means for a theory like TCS to improve the "well-being" can be "perpetually open to revision as we make progress in science." (Harris, p 12).

So TCS does not need to be tested for its capacity to improve well being in the ways I suggest for us to embrace it - but I observe that because TCS is ultimately a theory about how best to achieve well being - and well being is as scientific a concept as is "physical health" then we can say that TCS is a falsifiable, scientific theory.

Brett.

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