

TCS and Karl Popper

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 28 July, 2003 - 08:12

In my opinion (which is not shared by all Popperians, note) TCS could quite accurately have been called “Taking Karl Popper Seriously in the field of educational theory” – something that Popper himself never did. As a young man, Popper was preoccupied with educational theory. His aim was to place it on what he then thought of as a “scientific” (inductively justified!) footing. His failure, despite immense effort, to do this played a significant role in leading him eventually to understand the true nature of science. But he then made a sharp break from the *psychology* of discovery to the *logic* of discovery, and never again wrote about the former – at least, not directly. He even went so far as to ask friends and colleagues who had copies of his early, unpublished writings on education, not to show them to anyone. Yet there are tantalising side-remarks about education and learning in most of his works. For instance:

The inductivist or Lamarkian approach operates with the idea of instruction from without, or from the environment. But the critical or Darwinian approach only allows instruction from within – from within the structure itself.

...I contend that there is no such thing as instruction from without the structure. We do not discover new facts or new effects by copying them, or by inferring them inductively from observation, or by any other method of instruction by the environment. We use, rather, the method of trial and the elimination of error. As Ernst Gombrich says, “making comes before matching”: the active production of a new trial structure comes before its exposure to eliminating tests.”

– pages 7-9, *The Myth of the Framework* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0415135559/takingchildrseri>)

While Popper almost always made such remarks in the context of original discovery rather than learning, the implications for education are inescapable. I should stress that applying Popper's philosophy of science to the growth of knowledge in children applies only when the children are learning science. Our position is much broader, namely that Popper's general idea of how a human being acquires knowledge – by creating it afresh through criticism and the elimination of error – applies equally to non-scientific types of knowledge such as moral knowledge, and to unconscious and inexplicit forms of knowledge. Thus we see ourselves as trying to extend Popperian epistemology into areas where, by its inner logic, it applies, but where Popper himself resolutely refused to apply it.

TCS assumes that Popperian epistemology applies equally to all knowledge creation, including in particular to the acquisition of *existing* knowledge. In fact, another way of characterising the distinctive feature of TCS is that we believe that all knowledge in a human mind is generated by that mind's internal *criticism* of existing knowledge (whether inborn, cultural or from whatever source),

rather than by the *transmission* of existing knowledge either by instruction or otherwise.

This leads to some far-reaching conclusions about the style and practice of education. What, for instance, is the analogue, in the nursery, of the *academic freedom* that is a precondition for science to create new knowledge? What is the analogue

of intellectual integrity?

The analogues are freedom from coercion, and autonomous learning.

In short, we have **concluded** that it is possible and desirable to bring up children in such a way that their learning is motivated entirely by the problem situations within their own minds, and not by externally imposed incentives or penalties.

to post comments

Comments

Philosophy

Submitted by Collin Dyas on 29 July, 2003 - 14:45

It's good to see philosophy brought into parenting. It is very refreshing to see rational discussions instead of the touchy-feely nonsense you find on most parenting sites.

to post comments

Where do you get this? The wo...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 30 July, 2003 - 06:24

Where do you get this? The world needs order. Kids need a structure to their life and education. You guys are saying we should throw it all away. Crazy talk.

to post comments

World Order

Submitted by Elliot Temple on 30 July, 2003 - 16:47

We do not think order comes from dictatorship, as a form of government or a form parenting. OK, I grant that would lead to one kind of order... But we favour a different one, based not on rulers but rather on error correction.

-- Elliot Temple <http://curi.blogspot.com/> (<http://curi.blogspot.com/>)

to post comments

Order, Jawohl!

Submitted by Alan Forrester on 2 August, 2003 - 19:43

A reader wrote:

Where do you get this? The world needs order. Kids need a structure to their life and education. You guys are saying we should throw it all away. Crazy talk.

You say the world needs order. So let's look at societies where absolute rulers try to impose order. What's the result? Well, there is order of a sort, but not the kind that anyone with a lick of sense would want to imitate, as it typically involves mass murder, political oppression etc.

The Western world doesn't work like that. Instead the bits of our society that work reasonably well are those that value rational discussion, truth seeking and criticism. This is not a coincidence, because, as noted above, it is through such discussion and criticism that knowledge grows. The order that emerges from this depends largely on the logic of the issues involved and not on whatever bizarre fixation Castro or whoever happens to have. The bits that work badly do so largely because they obstruct such discussion.

Similarly, by aiming to promote a rational, truth seeking approach to parenting, TCS tries to avoid falling down the trap of mistaking the imposition of a parent's hang-ups for helping a child to learn new and better ways of doing things. Again, this provides a better chance that the 'order' that emerges is such that it actually depends on the issues involved rather than irrationality on the part of either party, if you want to think of it in those terms.

Any approach that fetishises 'order' at the expense of rationality is going to turn out badly for all concerned.

to post comments

beautiful

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 27 July, 2005 - 14:14

i love this site. taking children seriously is what this world needs.

to post comments

On instruction from within

Submitted by [Josh \(not verified\)](http://dbkweb.org/knowles/) on 30 November, 2006 - 22:44

In "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" Robert M Pirsig recalls his experience of teaching rhetoric to students at college. He took the approach of not marking his students' essays or indeed giving them any grades whatsoever with the effect that the students realised (eventually) that they could recognise the quality of their essays themselves, and improvement naturally followed. "Essay" is a good word, of course, with its origin in the French "to try". I believe it is within us all to enjoy the *trying* much more than the empty receiving of good grades, and if children learn at an early age in this way, that is all to the good. Well done TCS!

to post comments

- Doing Nothing Academically?
- Can An Emotion Be Wrong?
- In Defence of TV Soap Operas
- Reacting to an Angry Child
- Common Preferences and Non-coercion
- Forget About It!
- Waste Not, Want Not
- No Way Out - And Loving It