Children Are Not Born Knowing Right And Wrong

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 5 August, 2003 - 09:05

The idea that there is such a thing as right and wrong, and that we should all strive to do right, is important in TCS theory and practice. So is the idea that we are all, parents and children alike, fallible (i.e., we can make mistakes).

The idea that children can do no moral wrong is a positively frightening misconception of TCS. It implies that they are born with perfect knowledge in the sphere of morality, or that they guess the truth the first time. But that is no more likely than that they would guess the true theory of physics the first time. Children are bound to make moral mistakes, no matter how they are raised. They do not have perfect moral knowledge. It is vital to understand this, otherwise you will be failing to give your children the benefit of your moral wisdom, and the results could be catastrophic.

![Taking Children Seriously]

So what are the implications? Look out for more on this subject soon, including an article about how the TCS position differs from the conventional one, and why this sometimes results in the above misconception.

to post comments

Comments

b more careful

Submitted by Elliot Temple on 6 August, 2003 - 06:02

"Children are bound to make moral mistakes" -- I think you should be more careful to avoid things that sound like doing wrong is inevitable (this is ambiguous -- maybe you mean they'll think of wrong moral theories, in their heads, which is a bit different [but I doubt it]).

Anyway, doing wrong isn't inevitable. And we do not need perfect knowledge of morality to avoid doing wrong. Doing right only involves making the right choice from the *possible* candidates.

If you disagree about doing wrong being inevitable, tell me a specific wrong thing that can't be fixed. In attempting you may understand.

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

to post comments

Misunderstanding
Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 6 August, 2003 - 06:39

The same is true for adults, isn't it? I think you are conflating two things here.

to post comments

err
Submitted by Elliot Temple on 6 August, 2003 - 18:07

Why should it be true of adults?

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

to post comments

Mistakes
Submitted by Woty on 7 August, 2003 - 21:07

Elliot --

Would you agree that "scientists are bound to be wrong about physical reality sometimes" is a different statement from "scientific mistakes are inconsequential"? Would you agree that it in no way implies disrespect for scientists or lack of regard for scientific truthseeking?

~Woty **http://woty.davidsj.com (http://woty.davidsj.com)**

to post comments

Re: Mistakes
Submitted by Elliot Temple on 7 August, 2003 - 23:57

woty,

Yes I agree those statements are different. I also agree that 'disrespect for scientists or lack of regard for scientific truthseeking' is not implied. But I still object to the notion of bound wrong doing.

Having false theories and doing wrong are not analogous, btw, because acting rightly virtually always involves acting on imperfect theories.

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

Alice Bachini

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 8 August, 2003 - 11:53

Elliot,

As everything we do has moral implications, surely the only *way* never to make moral mistakes is never to do anything? How do you know moral mistakes are *not* inevitable: by what theoretical means could they be avoided?

Doing nothing when one should act for good and against evil is itself wrong. And as everything we do has moral implications, we should be maximising our good actions all the time. Which means sometimes taking risks. Which means making mistakes inevitable.

There are usually ways to minimise the implications of these risks. We can make them such that, if they go wrong now, we can put them right later on.

But, not always. Without revealing the ending of Terminator 3 (which btw is brilliant),

sometimes the only way to decide how to save the world is to choose which level of optimism to aim for and then invest *everything* in that choice. Too high can be as wrong as too low. A small mistake, maybe, but a mistake nonetheless, and if everything is moral, a moral mistake.

Erm...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 8 August, 2003 - 11:54

Put my name in the wrong place up there... *hides embarrassed*... *wonders if it was immoral*...

Alice

Elliot Temple ;p

Submitted by Elliot Temple on 8 August, 2003 - 18:45

*As everything we do has moral implications, surely the only *way* never to make moral mistakes is never to do anything?*

Actually, doesn't work. You can't literally not make choices. Rather you choose to stay where you are, not move, possibly hold your breath, etc Which sounds like a mistake, in most contexts.

How do you know moral mistakes are *not* inevitable: by what theoretical means could they be avoided?

The means is: when people are presented with choices, they choose good things (nothing is stopping them) instead of wicked things.

A force to make wrong choices (sometimes) inevitable would be an unexplained complication. And after a few questions about it, it'd be revealed as *really* complex (a *large* blight against elegance and explanation). ie: which wrong is inevitable? by what mechanism? doesn't inevitable wrong defeat the notion of a choice in the matter? how can something not chosen be wrong?

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

to post comments

i'm not sure i buy any of this...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 29 December, 2003 - 19:21

i'm not sure i buy any of this, since i vehemently disagree that there is any such thing as an objective moral Right and Wrong.

morality is a moot point and not worth the spilled ink involved in debating it. the only questions worth asking are ones of goals and efficacy, as in "what sort of society do you want to build, and will this help or harm that goal?" and "what sort of behavior are looking to elicit in reaction to your actions, and is that a reasonable expectation?"

to post comments

What does...

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 30 December, 2003 - 23:29

The ending of Terminator 3 have to do with anything...

and further...

It was TERRIBLE! The movie sucked beyond all belief!

I refuse to acknowledge the series continued after T2.

I disown and disavow T3.

to post comments

underachiever, flunking 8th grade

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 3 March, 2004 - 04:52

How many TCS parents encounter very bright children who show no desire to read books, study, or do well in school? (If this has been addressed already, sorry, I missed it.)

Home-schooling is popular in my area, not just for protecting Midwestern kids from "liberal" and corrupting indoctrination (evolution, e.g.), but because h.s. kids learn at their own pace and are less likely to be bored. (I've not tried home schooling, but the freedom from institutionalized learning sounds great.)

Having just read Paul Zindel's "The Pigman," I'm reminded of how schools can squash creativity and reward conformity. What do TCS parents do with the creative, musically gifted children who can't stay awake (or out of mischief) in school?

What do they do when schools tell parents their child needs to be tested for Attention Deficit Disorder, that the child must learn to prove himself (via completed homework) in order to grow up to be an independent, self-supporting adult (not a welfare case or a homeless, starving musician)? That the child must attend summer school if he flunks the same class twice in a row?

Do all smart kids hate school, or just lazy kids who don't like to work at that which doesn't come naturally?

Rock stars are a dime a dozen. What if the budding musician believes (most adamently) that she or he is "good enough" to make it, because s/he can play along (on guitar or drums) with any rock song they want, even the more challenging rock pieces? What if renowned musicians tell them this isn't true, but the child still knows more than anyone else? (By age 21, this extraordinary self-confidence allegedly starts changing.)

What if this arrogance (?)leads to the child quitting 3 or 4 different teachers (piano, violin, drums, guitars) and bouncing from one instrument to another? It's great to experiment, but expensive. Lessons are great, but not if the child considers himself good enough not to be bothered with those boring milestones and foundations of learning.

How seriously should parents take a child when the child doesn't take fundamental social things seriously?

to post comments

Punishing children for mistakes makes the problem worse
Submitted by Kyle (not verified) on 27 December, 2004 - 22:24

What I disagree with is many parents punishing their children for making mistakes, whether it be over moral matters or not. I've noticed through observations that punishing them for making mistakes sometimes makes the problem worse.

Have a nice day, -Kyle

to post comments

Also, Re: underachiever, flunking 8th grade
Submitted by Kyle (not verified) on 27 December, 2004 - 22:35

I definitely agree. Not just with musicians, but with other artistic children of minority minds. I am actually a teenager, and I despise the teaching method of schools, especially prep schools, an empire working to get their students to conform to a standardized way of life through standardized and brainwashing educational methods. They're a big reason why we have a vast majority of drooling masses spawning across the world. The school officials there can have a tendency to spot out anybody who appears different and getting on their backs for their diverse and unique personalities, doing whatever they can to get them to conform to being 'good students' that fit their standards and expectations. An entire class is taught how to play the violin, but Johnny wants to play the electric guitar. Because of this, school officials are convinced that he is diagnosed with a serious mental disorder and must be dealt with immediately.

-Kyle

to post comments

Right, Wrong...Enigma...

Submitted by Serious on 7 March, 2005 - 06:23

IMHO Children take a bit from mom, dad, siblings, peers, teachers, books, experience, etc and put it all together to fit a puzzle within their own heads. What we as parents input is what we will model for output from our children. Our children have brains and given room, they will do their best and if their best isn't good enough in the eyes of the parents, what does the child have left, to offer their parents? Peace!

to post comments

ok

Submitted by __a reader (not verified) (http://www.myspace.com/MR_T_M)__ on 31 October, 2005 - 02:34

ok here is yalls major problem... You talk about taking kids seriously for what there doing but do yall ever listen to us? im 13 by the way and probably know more than most of you incompetent insensitive brainwashing adults anyways... i know one group of adults that listen to me and they are doing great...they have a worldwide buisness...you can see it at **www.redvsblue.com (http://www.redvsblue.com)** but anyways...you speak of right from wrong.... now as adults we know and you know that everyone can and will make a mistake...but i came to think of something...you only talk about our wrongs and rights never yopurs as if you are immune to them....this isnt true as a matter of fact they say 57% of all kids by grown ups are mistakes... then you say just because a kid knows right from wrong he/she will do right... not true! i know right from wrong but trust me i do way more wrong than right! When a kid knows right from wrong they KNOW they made a mistake thats the only thing!!! im sry if some of you blood-sucking-communist-adults find this offensive/pointless but trust me...it would mean alot more to a kid...

plus a kids brain is stronger than adults..in fact over twice as strong as stated at **www.babycenter.com/general/toolscales/6752.html (http://www.babycenter.com/general/toolscales/6752.html)** i hope you dont find this pointless

but as my last words i wil agree on one thing with you... if a kid knows right from wrong they (my opinion about 98% of the time) will do the right thing.

~~Bax

to post comments

Congratulations, Bax.

Submitted by **_Fizz (not verified) (http://www.chiliahedron.com)_** on 16 March, 2006 - 03:30

You have demonstrated why so many people DON'T take children seriously.

to post comments

PuhLeaze

Submitted by dan (not verified) on 12 April, 2006 - 04:17

Bax, you have brought shame on our age group.

I would like to point out just why this whole argument was a complete waste of time and effort (not to mention blood, sweat and tears). You see, the person who seemed to think that one could potentially be wrong would either a) give in, assuming she was actually wrong or b) not give in, thus proving that she didn't really believe she could be wrong. So either way, which ever of you believed that it is possible to never commit a moral wrong would win the argument. But, alas, there is no law or doctrine that would make them RIGHT. (So na-na-na-boo-boo...)

I realise that I may seem to be confusing a moral wrong with an "erroneous" wrong but please take just a few more minutes to realise that they are not so different.

Also take a few minutes (take your time...seriously) to realise that neither of you took the time to define the parameters of your personal ethical value system. The potential to commit a moral wrong is so vast that statistically you are more likely to lean on a wall and find yourself falling right through it (look it up. It's not very likely but it's possible) than to avoid ever committing a moral wrong. If I were Jewish, I would believe it would be WRONG to eat meat and drink milk in the same meal. I'm sure you have done this. Does that mean that (oops!) YOU have commited a moral wrong in the eyes of the world's Jewish population?

to post comments

The subject of this debate

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 30 December, 2010 - 16:14

The subject of this debate seems to have become "why aren't I taken seriously?" as opposed to the original subject posed here: children are not morally aware. I would disagree with this. No one is morally perfect, obviously. But look at Kohlberg's stages of moral development. By age ten, an individual can be in a state where they perfectly understand right and wrong. Even though they aren't fully developed yet, they have a strong moral core. Another study from the University of Chicago shows that children are born knowing right and wrong. In order to truly take children seriously, I believe we need to assume that they have some sort of moral knowledge. Some of it must be

taught, of course. But if they are never punished for wrongs, because people don't believe they "understand what they are doing", then the next generation will be a sorry one indeed.

to post comments

Knowing right from wrong

Submitted by Alan Forrester on 3 February, 2011 - 21:55

The previous comment states that children know right from wrong perfectly. This is false. Children have disagreements with one another and so it can't be the case that they are born knowing right from wrong or they wouldn't disagree. And we know that adults don't know right from wrong either for the same reason. However, the relevant issue is whether children can figure out right from wrong. Children do learn about right and wrong. They don't do this perfectly, but adults don't either so this can't be an excuse for coercion.

to post comments

More articles

- **Medical Emergencies**
- **Feeling Bad**
- **Unschooling and Academic Education 1**
- **Taking Toys Seriously (Yes, Really)**
- **What TCS Is, And What It Is Not**
- **Unschooling and Karl Popper**
- **Learning to Sleep**
- **Coercion — the Meaning of the Word**