

# A Christmas Question

## *Should Children Believe in Santa Claus?*

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When Christmas season arrives, I often look back on my childhood. Rich memories flood my mind. Memories of presents, family, and friends. Memories of food, Christmas trees, and Santa Claus. Like most children, I believed in Santa Claus. The belief was quite real. I remember truly thinking that Santa would visit my house and deliver presents. As far as I remember, I did not question the rationality of the belief. Well, why would I? I was young and disposed to believe anything my parents told me. They told me that Santa Claus exists and I had no reason to question them.

The hoax was quite well perpetrated. My parents, indeed society, created an elaborate system of belief according to which I would never actually see Santa Claus, and therefore it was impossible for me to test the truth of his existence. It was built into the understanding of Santa Claus that he was not observable. This is a good trick. If you want people to believe in something that doesn't exist, you simply build into the mythology the notion that the entity is invisible—or does his work when no-one is watching. I was told that Santa Claus visits while I sleep, and if I happen to be awake on Christmas eve, he will not stop at my house.

I still remember looking out the window at night—maybe around 9pm—wondering if he was on the way. The sky was dark blue and the evening was quiet. It was a cloudless night, and the stars were brilliant. I pondered the possibility that I might see his sleigh flying across the sky. It would, of course, have been risky to stay awake and wait for a glimpse of Santa. After all, if he knew I was awake, he would pass by my house without delivering his payload. Good judgement prevailed and I snuggled under the sheets and went to sleep. The memory is vivid and magical. I remember waking up the next morning and finding presents under the Christmas tree. It never occurred to me that my parents put them there. It was obviously Santa Claus, and it was magical.

All good things come to an end, and so did my belief in Santa Claus. Perhaps it was my school friends who enlightened me, or perhaps it was simply the beginning of a rational skepticism. I do not really remember, but something caused me to question the existence of Santa Claus. It was the end of an innocent and magical belief.

Now, many years later, I watch my beautifully innocent daughter enjoying the same mythology that had captured my imagination, and I realize how easily she accepts Santa as real. She doesn't have the faculty to question the myth. She simply believes what I tell her. Common sense would suggest that belief in Santa Claus causes no problems, and since children grow out of it, there's no harm in spreading the lie. But is it that simple? Is it right that parents knowingly implant a false belief in Children? Parents are willingly telling their children lies and asking them to believe in a non-existent entity. The lies they tell their children are not simple white lies either; they are blatant falsehoods, which require parents to construct elaborate hoaxes to maintain the lie. Its fraudulent. Can this be justified?

Perhaps the answer lies in the motivation of the parents. Do parents have good intentions? In most cases, it would be fair to say that parents do have the best intentions. They want their children to experience the same magic as they did

when they were young. But many parents also have a hidden agenda. Part of this agenda involves giving Santa *omniscient* abilities. Santa watches children all year round and keeps a checklist of good and bad deeds. Children who have behaved themselves are rewarded with presents at Christmas, while naughty children receive nothing.

It sounds familiar—almost like a certain religion we have come to know quite well. We have the all-knowing ever watching Santa keeping an eye on the children of the world, and then passing judgement on December 25th. This is how many religions work. They provide a moral conscience for people who may have an underdeveloped moral sensibility.

Before proceeding I need to state that in my comparison between religion and Santa Claus I am assuming that both stories are based on untruths. I understand that some people will object to this assumption, but for my purposes there is no difference between the two situations. Sure, some people *think* the characters contained in their religion are real, but that doesn't matter. In situations involving mythical entities nobody *knows for certain* that they exist, and therefore nobody should claim certainty regarding their existence. Furthermore, if we assume that religious beliefs are based on lies, we can see the power that false beliefs can have over people. This will help illustrate my point about Santa Claus, so for these reasons I am treating the situations as analogous.

Now, in religion, the mythology around eternal rewards and punishments is so well entrenched that it provides a powerful deterrent to undesired behavior. And the belief system is instilled at such a young age that it becomes very real for its believers. If you think your memories of Santa Claus are vivid, consider the strength of emotion some people experience when they contemplate eternal damnation in Hell. I remember watching biologist Richard Dawkins interview a former Christian, during which she described her understanding of Hell and damnation. Even though she no longer subscribes to Christian

doctrine, the poor woman was reduced to tears because of the impact the myth had on her. She described it as feeling very real and terrifying, and that the memory of the fear continues to haunt her. I believe it is morally wrong to use fictional entities to control people in this fashion. Whether or not Hell exists is irrelevant. The point is that if it *doesn't* exist, then the emotion and fear is the result of a lie. Inducing such strong emotion on the basis of a lie cannot be justified.

An obvious response to this point would be to suggest that there is a big difference between religious belief and Santa Claus. Religious entities have an extremely long history and a detailed back-story. Given its history, for example, it is not surprising that the Christian belief has become so well entrenched and produces such strong emotions in people. Furthermore, the detail of the Christian depiction of eternal damnation is powerful and terrifying, so when introduced to an infant's mind and mixed with a child's natural fear of monsters and fire, the result is a bound to be unsettling. Santa Claus, on the other-hand, is a relatively simple myth. The back-story can be described in a few sentences, and the imagery is generally positive and child-friendly. Sure, we can argue that religious beliefs based on lies are morally unjustifiable, but Santa Claus does not fit into that category.

This is a good point, however I'm not sure that there *is* a difference between the two situations. It is true that religious belief is more powerful and can be very frightening, but when we reduce both situations to the basic facts we are dealing with very similar situations. In both cases we are willingly attempting to deceive young children. Now, young children have a natural disposition to trust adults. They do not have the capacity to skeptically analyze information presented to them by their elders. They simply accept, as true, the things adults tell them. Isn't it a violation of trust to take advantage of childhood innocence to make them believe an untruth—regardless of whether the lie is fun or frightening?

People may respond to this point by comparing Santa Claus, God, and Satan to the fictional characters found in novels and movies. Some of these characters are so well written that they also induce strong emotions in people. Indeed, these characters can feel so real that people identify with them and talk *as if* they are real. This is especially true in soap operas. Now, if it is okay for these characters to be written as if they are real, then surely there is no harm in Santa Claus.

There is, of course, a difference between the fiction of a novel and the fiction of Santa Claus. When we read a novel we understand that it is fiction. It is made clear to us from the outset that we must *suspend disbelief* for the illusion to work. We effectively enter into a contract with the author in which we accept that we are going to read a collection of untruths about a collection of non-existent entities. However, the same is not true in the case of Santa Claus (or God). We do not tell our children that Santa Claus is fictional before constructing our stories. Instead, we start by telling children that he *is* real. It's the same as learning about the exploits of Huckleberry Finn on the six o'clock news, where the assumption is that he is a real person.

Now, suppose that we were to accept that it is morally permissible for people to implant a belief in Santa Claus so long as it makes their children happy. This would give rise to the further question of whether adults can use similar lies in other situations. If it is okay to implant a false belief in Santa Claus, then what about the tooth-fairy? What about the Easter Bunny? What about the difference between males and females? What about the difference between races? What about the slavery in Chinese factories? If it is permissible to implant false beliefs to make people happy in one situation, then it is okay in other situations.

In his famous writings, Philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated a theory of ethics in which he stated that an action is morally right if it satisfies two criteria. First, it must treat people as an end, never as a means to an end. In

other words, don't take advantage of people to further your own goals. Second, the action must be *universalizable*—to be able to be carried out in all cases with no logical contradictions. He uses the example of a false-promise. Kant suggests that false-promises are not universalizable because the concept of a false promise yields a contradiction. He suggests that if it were okay for all promises to be broken, then a promise would never be a promise, which renders the whole idea of "promise" meaningless. In the case of telling lies, we have the same problem. The action of telling a lie is not universalizable because if it were okay for all statements to be lies, then a contradiction emerges when someone claims to be telling the truth. A statement of truth would be a lie—a contradiction.

If we apply Kantian ethics to belief in Santa Claus we can see that it is not morally permissible to use lies in order to implant the belief. Doing so violates Kant's second criterion. It also violates his first criterion in that the adult is using the child's innocence as a means to an end—to further their own goal of propagating the Santa Claus myth.

When we convince children that Santa Claus exists we are taking advantage of their innocence, and we are doing so in order to propagate a lie that we want them to believe. Children have no skeptical ability and are therefore at the mercy of their caregivers. Regardless of whether or not belief in Santa increases the child's happiness, the fact remains that the child's trust is being betrayed by the adult that spreads the lie. It may seem harmless to let children believe in Santa Claus, but it is one step away from implanting other false beliefs. Through the ages children have had religious, racist, and sexist beliefs implanted into their innocent minds. The ease at which Santa Claus is believed by children should sound a warning bell for enlightened people. Our children are innocent and are disposed to believe whatever we tell them. We must be careful.