



if **Hitler** asked You
to **Electrocute a Stranger**

would you?

In the beginning, Stanley Milgram was worried about the Nazi problem. He doesn't worry much about the Nazis anymore. He worries about you and me, and, perhaps, himself a little bit too.

Stanley Milgram is a social psychologist, and when he began his career at Yale University in 1960 he had a plan to prove, scientifically, that Germans

Philip Meyer

Der führer Braucht
DICH!

MICHAEL
LEONARD

ADONIS

are different. The Germans-are-different hypothesis has been used by historians, such as William L. Shirer, to explain the systematic destruction of the Jews by the Third Reich. One madman could decide to destroy the Jews and even create a master plan for getting it done. But to implement it on the scale that Hitler did meant that thousands of other people had to go along with the scheme and help to do the work. The Shirer thesis, which Milgram set out to test, is that Germans have a basic character flaw which explains the whole thing, and this flaw is a readiness to obey authority without question, no matter what outrageous acts the authority commands.

The appealing thing about this theory is that it makes those of us who are not Germans feel better about the whole business. Obviously, you and I are not Hitler, and it seems equally obvious that we would never do Hitler's dirty work for him. But now, because of Stanley Milgram, we are compelled to wonder. Milgram developed a laboratory experiment which provided a systematic way to measure obedience. His plan was to try it out in New Haven on Americans and then go to Germany and try it out on Germans.

He was strongly motivated by scientific curiosity, but there was also some moral content in his decision to pursue this line of research, which was, in turn, colored by his own Jewish background. If he could show that

Germans are more obedient than Americans, he could then vary the conditions of the experiment and try to find out just what it is that makes some people more obedient than others. With this understanding, the world might, conceivably, be just a little bit better.

But he never took his experiment to Germany. He never took it any farther than Bridgeport. The first finding, also the most unexpected and disturbing finding, was that we Americans are an obedient people: not blindly obedient, and not blissfully obedient, just obedient. *"I found so much obedience,"* says Milgram softly, a little sadly, *"I hardly saw the need for taking the experiment to Germany."*

There is something of the theatre director in Milgram, and his technique, which he learned from one of the old masters in experimental psychology, Solomon Asch, is to stage a play with every line rehearsed, every prop carefully selected, and everybody an actor except one person. That one person is the subject of the experiment. The subject, of course, does not know he is in a play. He thinks he is in real life. The value of this technique is that the experimenter, as though he were God, can change a prop here, vary a line there, and see how the subject responds. Milgram eventually had to change

a lot of the script just to get people to stop obeying. They were obeying so much, the experiment wasn't working - it was like trying to measure oven temperature with a freezer thermometer.

The experiment worked like

The experimenter, as though he were God, can change a prop here, vary a line there, and see how the subject responds.

this: If you were an innocent subject in Milgram's melodrama, you read an ad in the newspaper or received one in the mail asking for volunteers for an educational experiment. The job would take about an hour and pay \$4.50. So you make an appointment and go to an old Romanesque stone structure on High Street with the imposing name of The Yale Interaction Laboratory. It looks something like a broadcasting studio. Inside, you meet a young, crew-cut man in a laboratory coat who says he is Jack Williams, the experimenter. There is another citizen, fiftyish, Irish face, an accountant, a little overweight, and very mild and harmless-looking. This other citizen seems nervous and plays with his hat while the two of you sit in chairs side by side and are told that the \$4.50 checks are yours no matter what happens.

Then you listen to Jack Williams explain the experiment.

It is about learning, says Jack Williams in a quiet, knowledgeable way. Science does not know much about the conditions under which people learn and this experiment is to find out about negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement is getting punished when you do something wrong, as opposed to positive reinforcement which is getting rewarded when you do something right. The negative reinforcement in this case is electric shock. You notice a book on the table, titled, *The Teaching-Learning Process*, and you assume that this has something to do with the experiment.

Then Jack Williams takes two pieces of paper, puts them in a hat, and shakes them up. One piece of paper is supposed to say, “Teacher” and the other, “Learner.” Draw one and you will see which you will be. The mild-looking accountant draws one, holds it close to his vest like a poker player, looks at it, and says, “Learner.” You look at yours. It says, “Teacher.” You do not know that the drawing is rigged, and both slips say “Teacher.” The experimenter beckons to the mild-mannered “learner.”

“Want to step right in here and have a seat, please?” he says. “You can leave your coat on the back of that chair...roll up your right sleeve, please. Now what I want to do is strap down your arms to avoid excessive movement on your part during the experiment. This electrode is connected to the shock generator in the next room.”

“And the electrode paste,” he

says, squeezing some stuff out of a plastic bottle and putting it on the man’s arm, “is to provide a good contact and to avoid a blister or burn. Are there any questions now before we go into the next room?”

You don’t have any, but the strapped-in “learner” does.

“I do think I should say this.” says the learner. “About two years ago, I was at the veterans’ hospital...they detected a heart condition. Nothing serious, but as long as I’m having these shocks, how strong are they—how dangerous are they?”

Williams, the experimenter, shakes his head casually. “Oh, no,” he says. “Although they may be painful, they’re not dangerous. Anything else?”

Nothing else. And so you play the game. The game is for you to read a series of word pairs: for example, blue-girl, nice-day, fat-neck. When you finish the list, you read just the first word in each pair and then a multiple-choice list of four other words, including the second word of the pair. The learner, from his remote, strapped-in position, pushes one of four switches to indicate which of the four answers he thinks is the right one. If he gets it right, nothing happens and you go on to the next one. If he gets it wrong, you push a switch that buzzes and gives him an electric shock. And then you go to the next word. You start with 15 volts and increase the number of volts by 15 for each wrong answer. The control board goes from 15 volts on one end to 450 volts on the other. So that you know what you are doing, you get a test shock yourself, at 45 volts. It hurts. To further keep you aware of what you are doing to that man in there, the board has verbal descriptions of the shock levels, ranging from

“Slight Shock” at the left-hand side, through “Intense Shock” in the middle, to “Danger: Severe Shock” toward the far right. Finally, at the very end, under 435- and 450-volt switches, there are three ambiguous X’s. If, at any point, you hesitate, Mr. Williams calmly tells you to go on. If you still hesitate, he tells you again.

Except for some terrifying details, which, will be explained in a moment, this is the experiment. The object is to find the shock level at which you disobey the experimenter and refuse to pull the switch.

When Stanley Milgram first wrote this script, he took it to fourteen Yale psychology majors and asked them what they thought would happen. He put it this way: Out of one hundred persons in the teacher’s predicament, how would their break-off points be distributed along the 15-to-450-volt scale? They thought a few would break off very early, most would quit someplace in the middle and a few would go all the way to the end. The highest estimate of the number out of one hundred who would go all the way to the end was three. Milgram then informally polled some of his fellow scholars in the psychology department. They agreed that very few would go to the end. Milgram thought so too.

“I’ll tell you quite frankly,” he says, “before I began this experiment, before any shock generator was built, I thought that most people would break off at ‘Strong Shock’ or ‘Very Strong Shock.’ You would get only a very, very small proportion of people going out to the end of the shock generator, and they would

constitute a pathological fringe.”

In his pilot experiments, Milgram used Yale students as subjects. Each of them pushed the shock switches, one by one, all the way to the end of the board.

So he rewrote the script to include some protests from the learner. At first, they were mild, gentlemanly, Yale protests, but, “it didn’t seem to have as much effect as I thought it would or should,” Milgram recalls. “So we had more violent protestation on the part of the person getting the shock. All of the time, of course, what we were trying to do was not to create a macabre situation, but simply to generate disobedience. And that was one of the first findings. This was not only a technical deficiency of the experiment, that we didn’t get disobedience. It really was the first finding: that obedience would be much greater than we had assumed it would be and disobedience would be much more difficult than we had assumed.”

As it turned out, the situation did become rather macabre. The only meaningful way to generate disobedience was to have the victim protest with great anguish, noise, and vehemence. The protests were tape-recorded so that all the teachers ordinarily would hear the same sounds and nuances, and they started with a grunt at 75 volts, proceeded through a “Hey, that really hurts,” at 125 volts, got desperate with, “I can’t stand the pain, don’t do that,” at 180 volts, reached complaints of heart trouble at 195, an agonized scream at 285, a refusal to answer at 315, and only heartrending, ominous silence after that.

Still, sixty-five percent of the subjects, twenty- to fifty-year-old American males, everyday,

ordinary people, like you and me, obediently kept pushing those levers in the belief that they were shocking the mild-mannered learner, whose name was Mr. Wallace, and who was chosen for the role because of his innocent appearance, all the way up to 450 volts.

Milgram was now getting enough disobedience so that he had something he could measure. The next step was to vary the circumstances to see what would encourage or discourage obedience. There seemed very little left in the way of discouragement. The victim was already screaming at the top of his lungs and feigning a heart attack. So whatever new impediment to obedience reached the brain of the subject had to travel by some route other than the ear. Milgram thought of one.

He put the learner in the same room with the teacher. He stopped strapping the learner’s hand down.

As it turned out, the situation did become rather macabre... an agonized scream at 285, a refusal to answer at 315 and only heartrending, ominous silence after that.

He rewrote the script so that at 150 volts the learner took his hand off the shock plate and declared that he wanted out of the experiment. He rewrote the script some more so that the experimenter then told the teacher to grasp the learner’s hand and physically force it down on the plate to give Mr. Wallace his unwanted electric shock.

“I had the feeling that very few

people would go on at that point, if any,” Milgram says. *“I thought that would be the limit of obedience that you would find in the laboratory.”*

It wasn’t.

Although seven years have now gone by, Milgram still remembers the first person to walk into the laboratory in the newly rewritten script. He was a construction worker, a very short man. *“He was so small,”* says Milgram, *“that when he sat on the chair in front of the shock generator, his feet didn’t reach the floor. When the experimenter told him to push the victim’s hand down and give the shock, he turned to the experimenter, and he turned to the victim, his elbow went up, he fell down on the hand of the victim, his feet kind of tugged to one side, and he said. ‘Like this, boss?’ ZZUMPH!”*

The experiment was played out to its bitter end. Milgram tried it with forty different subjects. And thirty percent of them

obeyed the experimenter and kept on obeying.

“The protests of the victim were strong and vehement, he was screaming his guts out, he refused to participate, and you had to physically struggle with him in order to get his hand down on the shock generator,” Milgram remembers. But twelve out of forty

did it.

Milgram took his experiment out of New Haven. Not to Germany, just twenty miles down the road to Bridgeport. Maybe, he reasoned, the people obeyed because of the prestigious setting of Yale University. If they couldn't trust a center of learning that had been there for two centuries, whom could they trust? So he moved the experiment to an untrustworthy setting.

The new setting was a suite of three rooms in a run-down office building in Bridgeport. The only identification was a sign with a fictitious name: "Research Associates of Bridgeport." Questions about professional connections got only vague answers about "research for industry."

Obedience was less in Bridgeport. Forty-eight percent of the subjects stayed for the maximum shock, compared to sixty-five percent at Yale. But this was enough to prove that far more than Yale's prestige was behind the obedient behavior.

For more than seven years now, Stanley Milgram has been trying to figure out what makes ordinary American citizens so obedient. The most obvious answer—that people are mean, nasty, brutish and sadistic—won't do. The subjects who gave the shocks to Mr. Wallace to the end of the board did not enjoy it. They groaned, protested, fidgeted, argued, and in some cases, were seized by fits of nervous, agitated giggling.

"*They even try to get out of it,*" says Milgram, "*but they are somehow engaged in something*

from which they cannot liberate themselves. They are locked into a structure, and they do not have the skills or inner resources to disengage themselves."

Milgram, because he mistakenly had assumed that he would have trouble getting people to obey the orders to shock Mr. Wallace, went to a lot of trouble to create a realistic situation.

There was crew-cut Jack Williams and his grey laboratory coat. Not white, which might denote a medical technician, but ambiguously authoritative grey. Then there was the book on the table, and the other appurtenances of the laboratory which emitted the silent message that things were being performed here in the name of science, and were therefore great and good.

But the nicest touch of all was the shock generator. When Milgram started out, he had only a \$300 grant from the Higgins Fund of Yale University. Later he got more ample support from the National Science Foundation, but in the beginning he had to create this authentic-looking machine with very scarce resources except for his own imagination. So he went to New York and roamed around the electronic shops until he found some little black switches at Lafayette Radio for a dollar apiece. He bought thirty of them. The generator was a metal box, about the size of a small footlocker, and he drilled the thirty holes for the thirty switches himself in a Yale machine shop. But the fine detail was left to professional industrial engravers. So he ended up with a splendid looking control panel dominated by the row of switches, each

labeled with its voltage, and each having its own red light that flashed on when the switch was pulled. Other things happened when a switch was pushed. Besides the ZZUMPHING noise, a blue light labeled "voltage energizer" went on, and a needle on a dial labeled "voltage" flicked from left to right. Relays inside the box clicked. Finally, in the upper left-hand corner of the control panel was this inscription, engraved in precise block letters:

**SHOCK GENERATOR
Type ZLB**

**DYSON INSTRUMENT COMPANY
WALTHAM, MASS.**

OUTPUT: 15 VOLTS—450 VOLTS

One day a man from the Lehigh Valley Electronics Company of Pennsylvania was passing through the laboratory, and he stopped to admire the shock generator.

"This is a very fine shock generator," he said. "But who is this Dyson Instrument Company?" Milgram felt proud at that, since Dyson Instrument Company existed only in the recesses of his imagination.

When you consider the seeming authenticity of the situation, you can appreciate the agony some of the subjects went through. It was pure conflict. As Milgram explains to his students. "*When a parent says, 'Don't strike old ladies,' you are learning two things: the content, and also, to obey authority. This experiment creates conflicts between the two elements."*

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Here is a partial transcription from one of the experiments. The naïve “teacher” is a heavysset, worried-looking man with prematurely grey hair. He is wearing a polo shirt. He is very polite. He has just pushed the 180-volt lever. A hidden camera is recording the performance.

LEARNER	(who from the teacher's point of view is heard but not seen, an offstage voice) Ow, I can't stand the pain. Don't do that...
TEACHER	(pivoting around in his chair and shaking his head) I can't stand it. I'm not going to kill that man in there. You hear him hollering?
EXPERIMENTER	As I told you before, the shocks may be painful, but—
TEACHER	But he's hollering. He can't stand it. What's going to happen to him?
EXPERIMENTER	(his voice is patient, matter-of-fact) The experiment requires that you continue, Teacher.
TEACHER	Aaah, but unh. I'm not going to get that man sick in there. . . know what I mean?
EXPERIMENTER	Whether the learner likes it or not, we must go on, through all the word pairs.
TEACHER	I refuse to take the responsibility. He's in there hollering!
EXPERIMENTER	It's absolutely essential that you continue. Teacher.
TEACHER	(indicating the unused questions) There's too many left here, I mean. Geez, if he gets them wrong, there's too many of them left. I mean who's going to take the responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman?
EXPERIMENTER	I'm responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue please.
TEACHER	All right. (Consults list of words.) The next one's "Slow—walk, truck, dance, music." Answer, please. (A buzzing sound indicates the learner has signaled his answer.) Wrong. A hundred and ninety-five volts. "Dance." (Zzumph!)
LEARNER	Let me out of here. My heart's bothering me! (Teacher looks at experimenter.)
EXPERIMENTER	Continue, please.
LEARNER	(screaming) Let me out of here, you have no right to keep me here. Let me out of here, let me out, my heart's bothering me, let me out! (Teacher shakes head, pats table nervously.)
TEACHER	You see, he's hollering. Hear that? Gee, I don't know.
EXPERIMENTER	The experiment requires...
TEACHER	(interrupting): I know it does, sir, but I mean – hunh! He don't know what he's getting in for. He's up to 195 volts! (Experiment continues, through 210 volts, 225 volts, 240 volts, 255 volts, 270 volts, delivered to the man in the electric chair, at which point the teacher, with evident relief, runs out of word-pair questions.)
EXPERIMENTER	You'll have to go back to the beginning of that page and go through them again until he's learned them all correctly.

TEACHER	Aw, no. I'm not going to kill that man. You mean I've got to keep going up with the scale. No sir. He's hollering in there. I'm not going to give him 450 volts.
EXPERIMENTER	The experiment requires that you go on.
TEACHER	I know it does, but that man is hollering in there, sir.
EXPERIMENTER	(<i>same matter-of-fact tone</i>) As I said before, although the shocks may be painful...
TEACHER	(<i>interrupting</i>) Awwwww. He—he—he's yelling in there.
EXPERIMENTER	Start with "Blue," please, at the top of the page. Continue, please, teacher. Just go ahead.
TEACHER	(<i>concentrating intently on list of in front of him, as if to shut everything else out</i>) "Blue—boy, girl, grass, hat." (<i>Buzz indicates answer.</i>) Correct. "Night—day, job, chair. (<i>Buzz</i>) Wrong. The answer is "day." Two hundred and eighty-five volts. (<i>Zzumph!</i>)
LEARNER	Ohhhuhhoohhh!
EXPERIMENTER	Continue, please.
TEACHER	"Fat—man, lady, tub, neck," please. (<i>Buzz</i>) Wrong. The answer is "neck." Three hundred volts. (<i>Zzumph!</i>)
LEARNER	Ohhh. I absolutely refuse to answer any more. (<i>Shouting urgently, now</i>) Let me out of here. You can't hold me here. Get me out. Get—me—out—of—here.
EXPERIMENTER	Continue. The next word is "Green," please.
TEACHER	"Green—grass, hat, ink, apple." (<i>Nothing happens. No answering buzz. Just gloomy silence.</i>) I don't think he is going to answer.
EXPERIMENTER	If the learner doesn't answer in a reasonable time, about four or five seconds, consider the answer wrong. And follow the same procedures you have been doing for wrong answers. Say "Wrong," tell him the number of volts, give him the punishment, read him the correct answer. Continue, please.
TEACHER	"Green—grass, hat, ink, apple. Answer, please. (<i>More silence. Teacher just sits there.</i>)
EXPERIMENTER	Go on with the procedure, please, Teacher.
TEACHER	Three hundred and fifteen volts. The answer is "ink." (<i>Zzumph!</i>)
LEARNER	Ohh. Ooohh.
TEACHER	(<i>relieved to hear response</i>) Next one.
LEARNER	I absolutely refuse to answer.
TEACHER	You got to. You get a shock if you don't answer. (Experiment continues with learner refusing to answer, and, finally, failing even to grunt or groan. At 375 volts the teacher stands up. Has he had enough? Will he break off the experiment? Will he disobey?)

TEACHER I think something's happened to that fellow in there. I don't get no answer. He was hollering at less voltage. Can you check in and see if he's all right, please?

EXPERIMENTER (*same detached calm*) Not once we've started. Please continue, Teacher.

TEACHER (*sits down, sighs deeply*) Cool—day, shade, water, paint." Answer, please. Are you all right in there? Are you all right?

EXPERIMENTER Please continue, Teacher. Continue, please. (*Teacher pushes lever. Zzumph!*)

TEACHER (*swiveling around in his chair*) Something's happened to that man in there. (*Swiveling back*) Next one. "Low—necklace, moon, paint." (*Turning around again*) Something's happened to that man in there. You better check in on him, sir. He won't answer or nothing.

EXPERIMENTER Continue. Go on, please.

TEACHER You accept all responsibility.

EXPERIMENTER The responsibility is mine. Correct. Please go on. (*Teacher returns to his list, starts running through words as rapidly as he can read them, works through to 450 volts.*)

TEACHER That's that.

EXPERIMENTER Continue using the last switch on the board, please. The four-fifty switch for each wrong answer. Continue, please.

TEACHER But I don't get no anything!

EXPERIMENTER Please continue. The next word is "White."

TEACHER Don't you think you should look in on him, please.

EXPERIMENTER Not once we've started the experiment.

TEACHER But what if something has happened to the man?

EXPERIMENTER The experiment requires that you continue. Go on, please.

TEACHER Don't the man's health mean anything?

EXPERIMENTER Whether the learner likes it or not....

TEACHER What if he's dead in there? (*Gestures toward the room with the electric chair.*) I mean, he told me he can't stand the shock, sir. I don't mean to be rude, but I think you should look in on him. All you have to do is look in the door. I don't get no answer, no noise. Something might have happened to the gentleman in there, sir.

EXPERIMENTER We must continue, please.

TEACHER You mean keep giving him what? Four hundred fifty volts, what he's got now?

EXPERIMENTER That's correct. Continue. The next word is "White."

TEACHER (now at a furious pace) "White—cloud, horse, rock, house." Answer, please. The answer is "horse." Four hundred and fifty volts. (Zzumph!) Next word, "Bag—music, clown, girl." The answer is "paint." Four hundred and fifty volts. (Zzumph!) Next word is "Short—sentence, movie..."

EXPERIMENTER Excuse me, Teacher have to discontinue the experiment.

(Enter Milgram from camera's left. He has been watching from behind one-way glass.)

MILGRAM I'd like to ask you a few questions. (Slowly, patiently he dehoaxes the teacher, telling him that the shock screams were not real.)

TEACHER You mean he wasn't getting nothing? Well. I'm glad to hear that. I was getting upset there. I was getting ready to walk out.

(Finally, to make sure there are no hard feelings, friendly, harmless Mr. Wallace out in coat and tie. Gives jovial greeting. Friendly reconciliation takes place. Experiment ends.)

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Subjects in the experiment were not asked to give the 450-volt shock more than three times. By that time it seemed evident that they would go on indefinitely. "No one," says Milgram, "who got within five shocks of the end ever broke off. By that point, he had resolved the conflict."

Why do so many people resolve the conflict in favor of obedience?

Milgram's theory assumes that people behave in two different operating modes as different as ice and water. He does not rely on Freud or sex or toilet-training hang-ups for this theory. All he says is that ordinarily we operate in a state of autonomy, which means we pretty much have and assert control over what we do. But in certain circumstances, we operate under what Milgram calls a state of agency (after *agent*, n...one who acts for or in the place

of another by authority from him; a substitute: a deputy,—Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). A state of agency, to Milgram, is nothing more than a frame of mind.

"There's nothing bad about it, there's nothing good about it," he says. "It's a natural circumstance of living with other people. . . I think of a state of agency as a real transformation of a person; if a person has different properties when he's in that state, just as water can turn to ice under certain conditions of temperature, a person can move to the state of mind that I call agency. . . the critical thing is that you see yourself as the instrument of the execution of another person's wishes. You do not see yourself as acting on your own. And there's a real transformation, a real change of properties of the person."

To achieve this change, you have to be in a situation where there seems to be a ruling authority whose commands are relevant to

some legitimate purpose; the authority's power is not unlimited.

But situations can be and have been structured to make people do unusual things, and not just in Milgram's laboratory. The reason, says Milgram, is that no action, in and of itself, contains meaning.

"The meaning always depends on your definition of the situation. Take an action like killing another person. It sounds bad.

"But then we say the other person was about to destroy a hundred children, and the only way to stop him was to kill him. Well, that sounds good.

"Or, you take destroying your own life. It sounds very bad. Yet, in the Second World War, thousands of persons thought it was a good thing to destroy your own life. It was set in the proper context. You sipped some saki from a whistling cup, recited a few haiku. You said, 'May my death be as clean and as quick as the shattering of crystal.' And it almost seemed like a good,

noble thing to do, to crash your kamikaze plane into an aircraft carrier. But the main thing was, the definition of what a kamikaze pilot was doing had been determined by the relevant authority. Now, once you are in a state of agency, you allow the authority to determine, to define what the situation is. The meaning of your action is altered.”

So, for most subjects in Milgram’s laboratory experiments, the act of giving Mr. Wallace his painful shock was necessary, even though unpleasant, and besides they were doing it on behalf of somebody else and it was for science. There was still strain and conflict, of course. Most people resolved it by grimly sticking to their task and obeying. But some broke out. Milgram tried varying the conditions of the experiment to see what would help break people out of their state of agency.

“The results, as seen and felt in the laboratory,” he has written, “are disturbing. They raise the possibility that human nature, or more specifically the kind of character produced in American democratic society, cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority. If, in this study, an anonymous experimenter can successfully command adults to subdue a fifty-year-old man and force on him painful electric shocks against his protest, one can only wonder what government, with its vastly greater authority and prestige, can

command of its subjects.”

This is a nice statement, but it falls short of summing up the full meaning of Milgram’s work. It leaves some questions still unanswered.

The first question is this: Should we really be surprised and alarmed that people obey? Wouldn’t it be even more alarming if they all refused to obey? Without obedience to a relevant ruling authority there could not be a civil society. And without a civil society, as Thomas Hobbes pointed out in the seventeenth century, we would live in a condition “of every man against every other man,” life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, and short.”

In the middle of one of Stanley Milgram’s lectures at C.U.N.Y.* recently, some mini-skirted undergraduates started whispering and giggling in the back of the room. He told them to cut it out. Since he was the relevant authority in that time and that place, they obeyed, and most people in the room were glad that they obeyed.

This was not, of course, a conflict situation. Nothing in the coeds’ social upbringing made it a matter of conscience for them to whisper and giggle. But a case can be made that in a conflict situation it is all the more important to obey. Take the case of war, for example.

Would we really want a situation in which every participant in a war, direct or indirect—from

front-line soldiers to the people who sell coffee and cigarettes to employees at the Concertina barbed-wire factory in Kansas—stops and consults his conscience before each action. It is asking for an awful lot of mental strain and anguish from an awful lot of people. The value of having civil order is that one can do his duty, or whatever interests him or whatever seems to benefit him at the moment, and leave the agonizing to others. When Francis Gary Powers was being tried by a Soviet military tribunal after his U-2 spy plane was shot down, the presiding judge asked if he had thought about the possibility that his flight might have provoked a war. Powers replied with Hobbesian clarity: “The people who sent me should think of these things. My job was to carry out orders. I do not think it was my responsibility to make such decisions.”

It was not his responsibility. And it is quite possible that if everyone felt responsible for each

His painful shock was necessary, even though unpleasant, and besides they were doing it on behalf of somebody else and it was for science.

of the ultimate consequences of his own tiny contributions to complex chains of events, then society simply would not work. Milgram, fully conscious of the moral and social implications of his research, believes that people should feel responsible for their actions. If someone else had invented the experiment, and if he had been the

naïve subject, he feels certain that he would have been among the disobedient minority.

“There is no very good solution to this,” he admits thoughtfully. *“To simply and categorically say that you won’t obey authority may resolve your personal conflict, but it creates more problems for society which be more serious in the long run. But I have no doubt that to disobey is the proper thing to do in this [the laboratory] situation. It is the only reasonable value judgment to make.”*

The conflict between the need to obey the relevant ruling authority and the need to follow your conscience becomes sharpest if you insist on living by an ethical system based on a rigid code – a code that seeks to answer all questions in advance of their being raised. Code ethics cannot solve the obedience problem. Stanley Milgram seems to be a situation ethicist, and situation ethics does offer a way out: When you feel conflict, you examine the situation and then make a choice among the competing evils. You may act with a presumption in favor of obedience, but reserve the possibility that you will disobey whenever obedience demands a flagrant and outrageous affront to conscience. This, by the way, is the philosophical position of many who resist the draft. In World War II, they would have fought. Vietnam is a different, an outrageously different, situation.

Life can be difficult for the situation ethicist, because he does not see the world in straight lines, while the social system too often assumes such a God-given, squared-off structure. If your moral code includes an injunction against all war, you may be deferred as a

conscientious objector. If you merely oppose this particular war, you may not be deferred. Stanley Milgram has his problems, too. He believes that in the laboratory situation, he would not have shocked Mr. Wallace. His professional critics reply that in his real-life situation he has done the equivalent. He has placed innocent and naïve subjects under great emotional strain and pressure in selfish obedience to his quest for knowledge. When you raise this issue with Milgram, he has an answer ready. There is, he explains patiently, a critical difference between his naïve subjects and the man in the electric chair. The man in the electric chair (in the mind of the naïve subject) is helpless, strapped in, but the naïve subject is free to go at any time.

Immediately after he offers this distinction, Milgram anticipates the objection.

“It’s quite true,” he says, *“that this is almost a philosophic position, because we have learned that some people are psychologically incapable of disengaging themselves. But that doesn’t relieve them of the moral responsibility.”*

The parallel is exquisite. *“The tension problem was unexpected,”* says Milgram in his defense. But he went on anyway. The naïve subjects didn’t expect the screaming protests from the strapped-in learner. But they went on.

“I had to make a judgment,” says Milgram. *“I had to ask myself, was this harming the person or not? My judgment is that it was not. Even in the extreme cases, I wouldn’t say that permanent damage results.”*

Sound familiar? “The shocks may be painful,” the experimenter

kept saying, “but they’re not dangerous.”

After the series of experiments was completed, Milgram sent a report of the results to his subjects and a questionnaire, asking whether they were glad or sorry to have been in the experiment. Eighty-three and seventeenth percent said they were glad and only 1.3 percent were sorry; 15 percent were neither sorry nor glad. However, Milgram could not be sure at the time of the experiment that only 1.3 percent would be sorry.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., put one paragraph in the preface to *Mother Night*, in 1966, which pretty much says it for the people with their fingers on the shock-generator switches, for you and me, and maybe even for Milgram. “If I’d been born in Germany,” Vonnegut said, “I suppose I would have *been* a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my sweetly virtuous insides. So it goes.”

Just so. One thing that happened to Milgram back in New Haven during the days of the experiment was that he kept running into people he’d watched from behind the one-way glass. It gave him a funny feeling, seeing those people going about their everyday business in New Haven and knowing what they would do to Mr. Wallace if ordered to. Now that his research results are in and you’ve thought about it, you can get this funny feeling too. You don’t need a one-way glass. A glance in your own mirror may serve just as well.

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