

Brandon Miller  
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Political Philosophy  
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### Obedience to Authority and the Military

In Obedience to Authority, Stanley Milgram says, “It is ironic that the virtues of loyalty, discipline, and self-sacrifice that we value so highly in the individual are the very properties that create destructive organizational engines of war and bind men to malevolent systems of authority” (188). I believe Milgram would agree with the statement that the demand capacity of those at lower levels in such highly hierarchical structures as a military organization reduces their responsibility and the appropriateness of punishing them. In Milgram’s book, he gives a variety of psychological research data revealing a basic learned instinct for people to obey authority. He also reveals people take little or no responsibility for their actions when they are obeying authority. Milgram gives four basic reasons why people obey authority, but yet at the same time are able to take little or no responsibility for their actions. His reasons are they consider obeying is their duty, they find it extremely difficult to resist obeying, they see their behavior as useful to society, and they were raised in a society that taught everyone to obey.

The main, recurring reason people say they obey authority is “I was just doing what I was told” or “I was just doing my job.” One may wonder how this argument could be so strong in so many individuals’ minds. Milgram explains, “Man feels responsible to the authority directing him but feels no responsibility for the content of his actions that the authority prescribes” (145). People start to view themselves only as the instruments for carrying out other people’s demands and thus no longer feel any responsibility for their actions. They also lose most of their morality when not feeling

responsible for their own actions, and find less of an obligation to justify the orders they carry out.

Most people find it extremely hard to disobey authority. Disobeying would require confrontation, and people want to appear polite and uphold their promises to the authority. In other words, there is absolutely no way a person can stop carrying out a command without violating the authority and thus the authority's competence. After the authority's competence has been violated, the violator fears he/she will appear rude and arrogant, and feel embarrassed.

Most people also believe strongly in upholding their personal promises to authority. In the military, for example, an oath of allegiance is always utilized to strengthen recruit's commitment to their role in military service. This binding oath certainly has a profound significance on the recruit.

Milgram explains some "binding factors" which contribute to the difficulty of disobeying as well. One of these factors is called "the sequential nature of the action." As a person inflicts morally wrong pain or death upon other people, he/she must try in some way to justify what he/she has done. One way of justifying the actions is to carry out the command to its fullest extent. In order for a person to disobey, he/she would have to admit that all of the actions that had been committed up to this point were wrong. Upon this realization, then, he/she would have to disobey the authority. However, if the person were to go on following the orders and inflicting pain or death, the person reassures himself/herself about his/her past actions. Thus the person never has to admit to any personal wrongdoing in his/her own mind.

Other tangible reasons for not disobeying include trust in the authority, fear of punishment, and conformity to the obeying group. Many people believe the person commanding them deserves their respect. This respect stems usually from past experience with the authority, and through those past experiences people have learned to trust the person commanding them. Thus, when an issue of following or not following a command comes to light, many people will usually obey it out of trust. An example of this trust can be found in Pasquale Gino's statement about Milgram's (Professor at Yale) obedience experiments. Gino said, "I figured: well, this is an experiment, and Yale knows what's going on, and if they think it's all right, well, it's all right with me. They know more than I do.... I'll go through with anything they tell me to do" (88). Another tangible reason is fear of punishment. This reason can be readily applied to the military. In military service, people are expected to follow the orders of their commanding officers. If they don't follow the orders, they can expect severe consequences. Lastly, many people will simply obey authority, because other people around them are obeying the authority. Many people think of this as strength in numbers. People find justification in committing morally wrong actions in a group much easier than if they were thinking of doing them individually.

Great majorities of people see their immoral behavior as useful to society, and thus obey the authority. When Milgram speaks about this reasoning, he says, "The actions are always justified in terms of a set of constructive purposes, and come to be seen as noble in the light of some high ideological goal" (187). This was certainly the case in the mind of many German Nazis during World War II. The German government made their soldiers believe that the mass extermination of Jews was a "hygienic" process.

There had been nearly a decade of anti-Jewish propaganda circulating throughout Germany. When the extermination process began, the German people were ready to accept the annihilation based on the years of government propaganda. Milgram explains, “Systematic devaluation of the victim provides a measure of psychological justification for brutal treatment of the victim and has been the constant accompaniment of massacres, progroms, and wars” (9).

Soldiers, in particular, view their role in immoral actions as patriotic, loyal, and courageous. In America, one of many soldiers’ greatest fears is appearing un-American and disloyal. The soldier derives his orders, moral and unmoral, from the highest authority, the President of the United States. From the soldier’s standpoint, he/she should have no reason to disobey such high authority. Soldiers are also told that the people they encounter during battle are the enemies of his/her nation and should justly be destroyed. Governments even go as far as to rename the enemies, so that they appear subhuman, and thus require no sympathy. For example, during the Vietnam War the government gave the Vietnamese the demeaning name “gooks.”

From people’s conception, they grow up in a hierarchical society surrounded by authority. This is yet another reason why people obey authority; they have learned to. First, children are taught to respect and obey their parent’s authority. Next, they move on to the school, an institutional system of authority. At school, children learn to work within an orderly environment, which is regulated by a single authority: the teacher. As Milgram says, “The first twenty years of the young person’s life are spent functioning as a subordinate element in an authoritative system” (137). Once the young people move away from the school, they go directly into another authoritative environment, the

workforce. Once on the job, people find themselves once again under the direction of superiors, their bosses.

Throughout these authoritative systems, people are taught to obey authority. They learn that obeying authority leads to rewards, while failing to obey leads to punishment. In the career world, for example, those that obey their superiors are the ones who get the promotions, and those who disobey get fired.

In the military, the authoritative system becomes even stronger. First, the oath of allegiance takes place to strengthen soldier's commitment. Then the soldiers go through basic training. Milgram wonderfully defines basic training when he says,

Although its ostensible purpose is to provide the recruit with military skills, its fundamental aim is to break down any residues of individuality and selfhood. The aim [of the drill field] is discipline, and to give visible form to the submersion of the individual to an organizational mode. Columns and platoons soon move as one man, each responding to the authority of the drill sergeant. The entire aim of military training is to reduce the foot soldier to this state, to eliminate any traces of ego, and to assure, through extended exposure, an internalized acceptance of military authority (181).

The military grooms its soldiers to obey authority. This makes it nearly impossible for many soldiers to ever think of disobeying their superior officers orders.

It is important to remember also that Milgram points out, "The results [to the psychological obedience experiments], as seen and felt in the laboratory, are to this author disturbing. A substantial portion of people do what they are told to do,

irrespective to the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from legitimate authority” (189). Based on this statement, I believe Milgram would in no way applaud military personnel obeying authority in such terrible events as the My Lai Massacre and the Nazi extermination of the Jewish people. I feel also he would firmly support the punishment of the higher authorities or governments that gave the terrible orders for the military personnel to obey.

After reading Obedience to Authority, I also would agree with the statement that the demand capacity of those at lower levels in such highly hierarchical structures as a military organization reduces their responsibility and the appropriateness of punishing them. Milgram makes his theory of obedience and the reasons that people obey extremely clear through his psychological study at Yale. He marvelously exemplifies how people can take little or no responsibility for their actions when obeying authority. Though his psychological research data is quite alarming, it is certainly believable and difficult to refute.

Milgram certainly gives a variety of data and examples revealing a basic learned instinct for people to obey authority. People virtually take little or no responsibility for their actions when they are obeying authority. Many people are able to do this because they consider obeying is their duty, they find it extremely difficult to resist obeying, they see their behavior as useful to society, and they were raised in a society that taught everyone to obey.

Milgram, Stanley. Obedience to Authority. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1974.