MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENTS: NO EXCUSE FOR OBEDIENCE

In this paper I argue that most participants in Milgram's obedience experiments behaved *deplorably*: their behavior was seriously wrong and lacked an adequate excuse.

Milgram's (1974) nineteen *obedience experiments*, conducted between 1960 and 1963, are all variations on the same theme; I will describe one basic variant. Upon arrival at the laboratory, the participant meets another putative participant (in fact a confederate of the experimenter). The experimenter states that the purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of punishment (specifically, by administering electric shocks) on learning. After a rigged draw which assigns to the participant the role of "teacher" and to the confederate the role of "learner", the confederate is strapped into an "electric chair" apparatus. The participant then goes to an adjacent room and sits in front of a "shock generator" having 30 switches labeled from 15 to 450 volts (in 15-volt increments). The experimenter instructs the participant to administer a shock to the learner each time the learner gives a wrong answer in the learning task, starting from 15 volts and *moving one level higher* on the generator with each wrong answer. The learner receives in fact no shocks but goes through a standardized sequence of protests (played back from tape): he claims that his heart is bothering him, demands insistently to be released, refuses to answer further questions, and emits progressively longer and stronger agonized screams. After 330 volts, he is no longer heard from. The experimenter remains impassive throughout. If the participant refuses to continue, the experimenter goes through a sequence of four "prods", one of them being "it is absolutely essential that you continue". If the participant disobeys after the fourth prod, the experiment stops; otherwise, the experiment continues until the participant depresses the 450-volt switch three times.

Call those participants who went *at least* up to 225 volts (i.e., halfway through the "shock generator") *obedient* and those who went all the way up to 450 volts *fully obedient.* Call those participants who were certain or at least highly confident that the learner was getting painful shocks *nonsuspicious* and the remaining participants *suspicious*. My claim that most participants behaved deplorably is based on two premises: (i) most participants were nonsuspiciously obedient; (ii) nonsuspicious obedience was deplorable. The first premise is based on the facts that 80% of the 40 participants were obedient (65% were fully obedient) and that according to a follow-up questionnaire about 80% of the participants were nonsuspicious (so that about 64% of the participants were nonsuspiciously obedient). The second premise is based on the claims that nonsuspicious obedience was not adequately excused (see below) and that it was seriously wrong: it violated the duty to avoid acting so as to inflict severe pain on an innocent and nonconsenting person. Both premises are subject to powerful objections.

Objecting to the first premise, one might claim that the incongruity between the experimenter's imperturbability and the learner's apparently extreme suffering must have made most participants seriously doubt that the learner was getting shocks (Orne & Holland 1968: 287). I have two replies. First, participants who relied on the experimenter's reassurance that the shocks were not dangerous may have interpreted the experimenter's imperturbability as due to a blasé attitude (much like some dentists can be blasé about patients' screams). Second, if suspicions among participants were widespread, then how come most participants protested repeatedly or "were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh"? Orne and Holland (1968: 287) respond with an analogy: in a stage magician's trick in which a volunteer from the audience is strapped into a guillotine and another volunteer is requested to trip the release lever, the latter volunteer is likely to feel nervous despite knowing that it's only a trick. I reply that this analogy fails on two counts. First, the volunteer is unlikely to protest or disobey the magician's request, whereas most participants protested and many eventually disobeyed the experimenter's requests. Second, the volunteer will probably feel only mild nervousness, whereas many participants displayed severe nervousness.[1] Given these differences between the nervousness of the participants and that of the volunteer, it is plausible to explain the former—even if not the latter—by appealing to a belief about pain or harm.

[1] One might object that in a "role-playing" variant of Milgram's experiment (in which the participants were told that the learner would not get shocks but were asked to behave as if they had not been told) most (though not all) participants displayed severe nervousness (Mixon 1972: 150). I reply that in another role-playing variant this result was not replicated: most participants displayed only mild nervousness (O'Leary, Willis, & Tomich 1970: 91).

Objecting to the second premise, one might claim that nonsuspicious obedience was not deplorable if it was based on *justified trust* in the experimenter (Mixon 1989: 29, 41). But in what exactly would such trust consist? Not in the belief that the learner was not getting shocks, since we are talking about *non*suspicious obedience. Maybe the trust consisted in the belief that the experimenter had some (perhaps unfathomable) *scientifically* valid reason for conducting the experiment. I reply that such trust, even if epistemically warranted, would not morally justify nonsuspicious obedience because it would not guarantee that the experimenter also had a *morally* valid reason for asking the participants to inflict severe pain on the learner: even if experiments are normally scientifically justified, they need not always be morally justified. (Witness Sheridan and King's variant of Milgram's experiment in which 20 out of 26 participants were fully obedient in administering *real* shocks to a "running, howling, and yelping" "cute, fluffy puppy" (1972: 165), or Landis's experiment in which 15 out of 21 participants, "after more or less urging" (1924: 459), complied with the experimenter's request to behead a *live* white rat with a butcher's knife!) Maybe, however, the trust included in addition the belief that the experimenter had some such morally valid reason. I reply that such trust would at most *explain* but would again not morally *justify* nonsuspicious obedience because it would be epistemically unwarranted: the participants' belief that the learner was in agony should have made them question the experimenter's moral (as opposed to scientific) competence (Pigden & Gillet 1996: 248). One might rejoin that the participants relied on the experimenter's reassurance that the shocks, although painful, were not dangerous (Mixon 1989: 32). I reply that the perceived pain itself should have made the experiment look morally unacceptable (and did make nonsuspicious obedience deplorable) even in the absence of any perceived danger (Pigden & Gillet 1996: 247).

One might also object to the second premise by claiming that an action which most people perform cannot be deplorable. In reply I grant that *some* actions which *almost everyone* performs are excusable: maybe it's not deplorable to divulge state secrets when tortured in a way that makes almost everyone succumb. But nonsuspicious obedience in Milgram's experiments was nowhere near universal: a substantial minority did disobey. Indeed, a nonsuspicious obedience rate of about 64% seems tailor-made for my purposes: it corresponds to a majority, but not to a majority so overwhelming as to make plausible the claim that nonsuspicious obedience was excusable.[2] Moreover, some actions are deplorable although almost everyone performs them: consider the inactivity of 38 witnesses to the Kitty Genovese murder (Rosenthal 1964), or the "selections" performed by German doctors in Nazi concentration camps. It seems thus that the excusability of an action is not guaranteed by near-universal performance of the action but depends rather on features of the situation. I don't need to provide a general account of this dependence: for my purposes it suffices to point out that Milgram's experimental situation did not make nonsuspicious obedience excusable because no dire consequences threatened disobedient participants.

I conclude that most participants in Milgram's obedience experiments behaved deplorably.

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[2] One might object that almost everyone (97.5% of the participants) went at least up to 150 volts. I have two replies. First, only about 78% (i.e., 80% of 97.5%) of the participants did so *non*suspiciously. Second, given that the learner did not withdraw his consent until 150 volts, arguably going nonsuspiciously up to 150 volts was not deplorable even if going nonsuspiciously up to 225 volts was.