

Review

The banality of evil?

by Dr Nick Humphrey

Obedience to authority
by Stanley Milgram
Tavistock, pp 224, £2.50

Nadezhda Mandelstam saw her husband and her friends crushed by Stalin's police. "I often wondered," she wrote in her autobiography, "whether it is right to scream when you are being beaten and trampled underfoot . . . I decided that if nothing else is left, one must scream . . . By a man's screams he asserts his right to live, sends a message to the outside world demanding help and calling for resistance." But the screams may be of no avail. On the basis of laboratory experiments Professor Milgram argues that the majority of ordinary American citizens, so far from intervening on behalf of a persecuted victim, will in certain circumstances play the part of the persecutors. His experimental subjects were instructed by a lab-coated scientist—a "legitimate authority"—to administer electric shocks to an innocent stranger. At 285 volts the victim's response could "only be described as an agonised scream". More than half the subjects continued to increase the shock level to the maximum of 450 volts.

The typical experiment is this. Two "ordinary men" are recruited to the Yale psychological laboratory to take part in an experiment on memory and learning. One of them is designated as a teacher and the other a learner. The experimenter explains that the study is concerned with the effects of punishment on learning and with "what effect different people have on each other as teachers and learners".

The learner is strapped to a chair and an electrode attached to his wrist. He is told that he is to learn a list of word pairs; whenever he makes an error he will receive electric shocks of increasing intensity.

The teacher is instructed to read out the words and to administer punishment by pressing switches on an impressive looking shock generator, increasing the shock level by 15 volts for each new error. The teacher soon finds himself caught up in an increasingly stressful situation: the learner, through stupidity or perverseness, will not learn, and the teacher is obliged to run through the full range of shocks in the face of agonised protests on the part of the learner. If the teacher demurs he is enjoined by the experimenter to continue: "the experiment requires that you go on", "you have no other choice", "although the shocks may be painful there is no permanent tissue damage".

But the "Milgram Obedience Experiment" is of course not what it seems. The "learner" is an actor, an accomplice of the experimenter, and in fact receives no shocks at all. The focus of the experiment is on the degree to which the "teacher" is prepared to act against his

conscience in "obedience to malevolent authority".

Obedience to Authority is a review of this basic experiment and ingenious variations on it undertaken by Milgram in the 1960s. It has been hailed by distinguished American psychologists as "the most important social psychological research done in this generation", "momentous", "stunning". And no wonder, for here in the laboratory Milgram claims to have produced a model for the behaviour which underlay the atrocities of Nazism and Vietnam: not only a model, but in a sense an explanation, for Milgram believes he has established the existence of a "biological propensity for obedience", evolved to underpin the hierarchical organisation of primate societies. Biological obedience, which is "released" by the trappings of authority, must now, like the "aggressive tendencies" which "are part and parcel of human nature", take its place in the catalogue of original sins which it is society's onerous duty to contain. Alas, poor Hamlet: What a nasty piece of work is a man!



The biological theorising, when it is not trite, is ill-informed. But what of the experimental data which form the substance of the book? No one can dispute that many men have behaved, and no doubt will again behave, viciously to other innocents when commanded to do so by a recognised authority. The question is whether the Obedience Experiment provides a valid model and whether it contributes to our understanding of why such behaviour occurs.

On the face of it Milgram makes out a persuasive case. His experiments seem well controlled and are described with care and apparent sympathy. Yet the evidence is fundamentally ambiguous; was it obedience (as Milgram assumes) or something else in the experimental situation which led the teachers to continue shocking the learner? Milgram seems hardly to question his basic tenet. Indeed every aspect of the study is described in theory-laden terms and there is a disturbing lack of objectivity in the analysis. The results of each experiment are summarised simply in terms of a crude dichotomy, the percentage of "obedient" as opposed to "disobedient" subjects. As the book proceeds, the "obedient" subjects become "cogs", then "automata". An "obedient" subject is an automaton in an "agentic" state where

he "no longer views himself as responsible for his own actions but defines himself as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others".

Anyone who presumes that a social psychologist can in an hour's experiment turn a person into an automaton betrays either extraordinary arrogance, or insensitivity to the complexities of human action. Each one of the so-called obedient subjects no doubt put his own gloss on the situation and each one's behaviour was in all probability multiply determined. The citation of selected individual cases (representing less than 1 per cent of the total number) is in no way sufficient grounds for assuming, with Milgram, that all the subjects who did not "have the courage" to break off the experiment had become "agents of the experimenter's will".

Milgram states: "Many of the people studied in the experiment were in some sense against what they did to the learner". Many, by implication, were not against it. What was in the minds of those people who were not against giving apparently painful shocks? Were they not taken in by the acting performance of the learner? Were they angry with the learner for disgracing them as teachers (remember that they were led to believe that their teaching ability was under study)? Were they genuinely reassured by the experimenter's insistence that the shocks did no real harm? Much of the experimental evidence could be explained in terms of the subjects' (justified) belief in the superior knowledge and experience of the experimenter—the belief even if unformulated, that the experimenter knew something that they did not.

As Milgram himself confirmed in another part of the study, almost nobody to whom the experiment was described was prepared to credit that ordinary people would behave so brutally. How much better reason was there for the subjects themselves to doubt that torture is a routine part of Yale's psychology programme. That people should have been so blindly "trusting" would itself require further explanation. But trust is not the same thing as obedience. A trusting man may have refined his own wishes but he has not redefined himself "as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others".

Milgram shows convincingly that his subjects were influenced by the experimenter. But he gives little if any weight to alternative interpretations of that influence—and fails to set up his experiments in a way that could distinguish between his theory and rival ones. One might have hoped that a scientist so adept at tricking his subjects as to the nature of the experiment would at least have considered more seriously the possibility that he himself did not fully understand what was going on.

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