

# PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

## **Session 9**

October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015



## Free Will: Milgram

In our past two classes, we considered how the *metaphysical* nature of our world impacts our *free will & moral responsibility*.

➤ Today, we turn our focus to the *social* nature of our world.

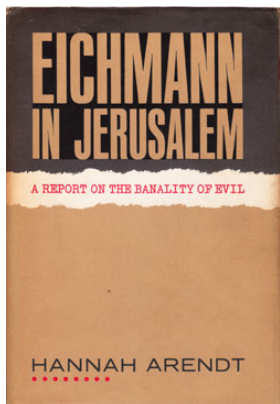
**Stanley Milgram** (1933-1984): American social psychologist

- Investigated ways in which our social surroundings influence our thoughts, feelings, and actions
- Especially interested in **obedience to authority**,
  - and how being under the command of authority figures can lead people to act in ways that they would not acted otherwise.
- He investigated this topic in order to shed light on *moral atrocities*, like those committed during the Holocaust.



– e.g., to explain “how the average, presumably normal, German citizen and his allies could be transformed into individuals who would readily perpetrate unimaginable acts of cruelty” (Blass 51: [bit.ly/1rpRZPh](http://bit.ly/1rpRZPh))

» Philosopher Hannah Arendt undertook a similar investigation in her 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*



Milgram conducted an experiment, which suggests that

- **our *tendency to obey authority* poses a challenge for the claim that we freely choose our actions, or are really in control of our behavior.**
  - We probably would like to think that our moral convictions are *never* swayed by the wishes or opinions of other people,
    - and that we always make choices that reflect those values.
      - But historical (and, as we'll see, experimental) analysis of human behavior indicates that our actions are often dependent on our social environment.
- It seems that we may be subject to **social determinism**,
  - where the social situation we find ourselves in plays a major role in influencing our behavior.
    - » “The person who, with inner conviction, loathes stealing, killing, and assault may find himself performing these acts with relative ease when commanded by authority.
    - » Behavior that is unthinkable in an individual who is acting on his own may be executed without hesitation when carried out under orders.” (xi)

He explains that **obedience poses a dilemma**,

- i.e., a situation where we seem to be *stuck between two undesirable alternatives*.

➤ **On the one hand**, it seems that obedience to authority is crucial to the functioning of cooperative society.



» “Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living,

- and it is only [a] man dwelling in isolation who is not forced to respond, through defiance or submission, to the commands of others.” (1)

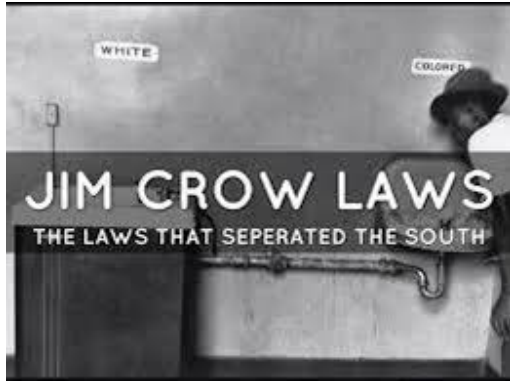
» “Obedience is the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose...the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority.” (ibid.)

» It also seems to be something we do instinctively:

- “...obedience may be a deeply ingrained behavior tendency,
- indeed, a prepotent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct.” (ibid.)



- ***On the other hand***, we must also recognize that obedience is *dangerous* to society.



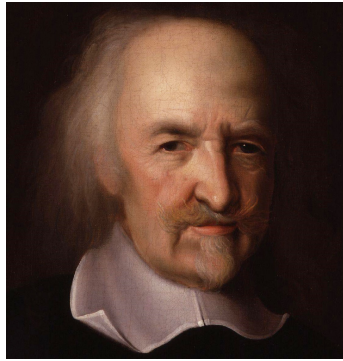
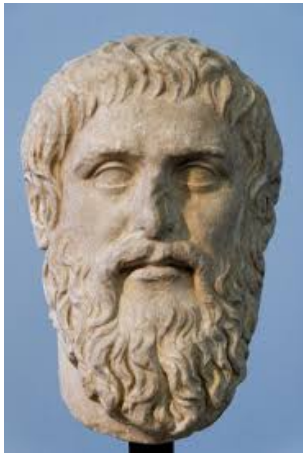
- “obedience to authority...takes on a new aspect when it serves a malevolent cause;
- Far from appearing as a virtue [which helps us all behave well], it is transformed into a heinous sin.” (2)
  - Laws don’t always ensure good behavior: they can also compel people to behave *immorally*.

So, the ***dilemma of obedience*** is that it’s a *necessary evil* of life in society.  
– we need it to act cooperatively, but it can be abused for immoral purposes.

- The **two alternatives** we have are these:
  - If society makes people obey authority,
    - individuals will act cooperatively – but may compromise their moral convictions by doing whatever they are told.
  - If a society doesn’t make people obey authority,
    - individuals seem to be free to act according to their moral convictions – but then they seem to have no reason to cooperate with one another.

Milgram notes that

- “the **moral question of whether one should obey when commands conflict with conscience . . .** [has been] treated to philosophical analysis in every historical epoch.” (2)



- “*Conservative philosophers* argue that the very fabric of society is threatened by disobedience,
  - » and **even when the act prescribed by authority is an evil one,**
  - » **it is better to carry out the act** than to wrench at the structure of authority.” (ibid.)



- “But *humanists* argue for the primacy of individual conscience in such matters,
  - » insisting that **the moral judgments of the individual must override authority** when the two are in conflict.” (ibid.)



In subjecting obedience to experimental analysis,

- Milgram had the “aim of understanding[,] rather than judging it from a moral standpoint” (xi)



– He explains that:

- » “It is one thing to talk in abstract terms about the respective rights of the individual and authority;
- » it is quite another to examine a moral choice in a real situation.” (xi)

**He wanted to investigate how real people handle the dilemma of obedience in his laboratory,**

- because abstract theories about how people *ought* to behave in difficult situations often do a poor job of predicting how people will actually behave.



- We tend to believe individuals will challenge authority when it contradicts their understanding of what is right and wrong.
- But when we look at what people actually do, we see it is commonplace for people to do the opposite of what we expect.
- **video:** [bit.ly/1KQJcCC](https://bit.ly/1KQJcCC) (trailer for *Compliance* (2012), a movie about the strip-search phone call scam)

Milgram discusses **two reasons why we obey authority:**

- **To be cooperative**, if one is willing to perform an action and is not being compelled;
- **Out of fear**, if one is being threatened with force or punishment as a consequence of disobedience.

In Milgram's study,

- the subjects are *never* threatened or forced to act in any particular way, and there is no punishment for disobedience.
  - This means that “whatever force authority exercises in this study is *based on powers that the subject in some manner ascribes to it*,” (xiii)
  - and not on any objective threat to the participants.

➤ **So, his study investigates how people are affected merely by the subjective *perception* that someone else has authority over them.**

- » Consider how just the *impression* that the phone scammer was a police officer was enough to persuade fast-food managers to comply with his orders.





Milgram wanted to “move from abstract discourse [about obedience] to the careful observation of concrete instances.” (2)

- The experiment is simple:
  - “A person comes to a psychological laboratory and is told to carry out a series of acts that come increasingly into conflict with conscience.
    - The **main question** is *how far the participant will comply with the experimenter’s instructions before refusing to carry out the actions required of him.*” (3)
  - Participants are told it’s a study on how punishment influences learning, so that their behavior in the experiment wouldn’t be swayed by awareness of its purpose.

- **video** [TRIGGER WARNING: Disturbing Content]: [bit.ly/ZN9IPz](https://bit.ly/ZN9IPz)





“For the subject, the situation is not a game; *conflict is intense and obvious.*”

- On the one hand, the manifest suffering of the learner presses him to quit.
  - On the other, the experimenter, a legitimate authority to whom the subject feels some commitment, enjoins him to continue.
- Each time the subject hesitates to administer shock, the experimenter orders him to continue.
    - To extricate himself from the situation, the subject must make a clear break with authority.
    - *The aim of this investigation was to find when and how people would defy authority in the face of a clear moral imperative.” (4)*

**“What is surprising is how far ordinary individuals will go in complying with the experimenter’s instructions.**

- Indeed, the results of the experiment are both surprising and dismaying.”
  - 60-65% of participants went to the highest level of the shock board,
  - and many more continued with the experiment after hearing the learner complain about the pain and ask to be let out.

➤ **But what does Milgram's experiment teach us about *real life*?**

- Sitting in a psychology lab is nothing like being under the command of a dictator or military commander.
- *We might question whether the experiment has any **ecological validity**,*
  - i.e, whether results gathered in an experiment can allow us to draw any conclusions about how people behave *outside* the laboratory.

Milgram explains:

- **“There are, of course, enormous differences** between carrying out the orders of a commanding officer during times of war and carrying out the orders of an experimenter.
- **Yet the essence of certain relationships remain:** *How does a man behave when he is told by a legitimate authority to act against a third individual?*
  - If anything, we may expect the experimenter's power to be considerably less than that of the general, since he has no power to enforce his imperatives,
  - And participation in a psychological experiment scarcely evokes the sense of urgency and dedication engendered by participation in war.” (4)

...Nevertheless, in the experiment ordinary people were quite prone to go to extremes to obey authority,

- even in a low-stakes laboratory situation involving the mere perception of authority.
  - **We ought to expect that people will be even *more* likely to obey authority in high-stakes, real-life conflicts:**
  - especially those involving threats of force or punishment for disobedience.

Another lesson of the experiment is that

- The high proportion of subjects who complied suggests that “those who shocked the victim at the most severe level” were ***not monsters*** at “the sadistic fringe of society.”

» Rather, they were just “**ordinary people** drawn from working, managerial, and professional classes.” (5)

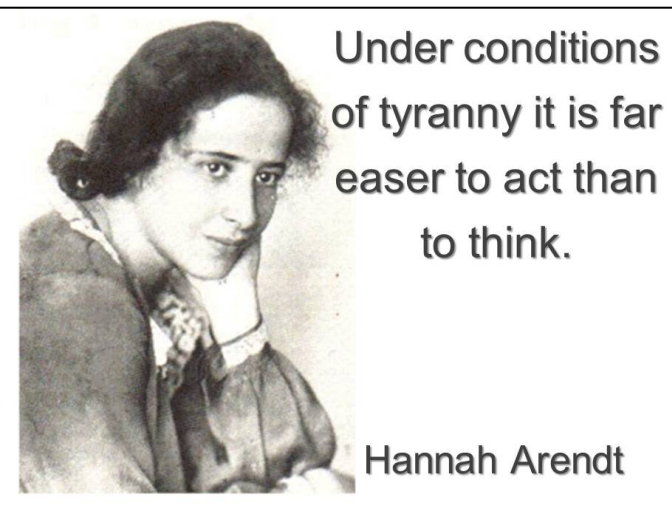
» Philosopher **Hannah Arendt** controversially argued that the Nazi leaders who carried out Hitler’s orders were also just ordinary people who fell prey to the abuse of obedience.

- She advised that we recognize ‘**the banality of evil**’:
- that evil is a very ordinary phenomenon that anyone is capable of.



Milgram concludes that “The *essence of obedience* consists in the fact that

- a person comes to view himself as an *instrument* for carrying out another person’s wishes,
  - and he **therefore no longer regards himself as *responsible* for his actions.**” (xii)



- This is exactly the same situation many people worry would follow from widespread belief in physical or theological determinism:
    - that we would see ourselves as mere pawns or puppets in the universe’s game.
  - but here, denying moral responsibility for one’s actions comes from a belief about our social world,
    - when we see ourselves as pawns in other human being’s plans.
- Once someone denies responsibility for their actions,
    - they undergo “an adjustment of thought,”
    - feel “the freedom to engage in cruel behavior,”
    - and will offer various “types of justification” for actions they would not ordinarily perform. (xii)

Milgram hypothesized that participants adopt **psychological strategies to cope** with the moral conflict they find themselves stuck in:

- They **remind themselves that they are not morally responsible** for the consequences of their actions, but rather that the authority is responsible.
- They **shift their moral concerns** away from their obligation *not to harm* the learner, and towards their obligation to fulfill the authority's expectations.
- “subjects **become immersed in the *procedures***” of the experiment, **instead of focusing on their *consequences***. (5)
  - The experiment made this easy by putting the victim out of the participant's sight, and making punishment involve the mere flip of a switch.
  - Perhaps we should worry that people are more likely to harm other people when they cannot see, hear, or otherwise witness the harm done,
  - or when harm can be done through indirect mechanisms.

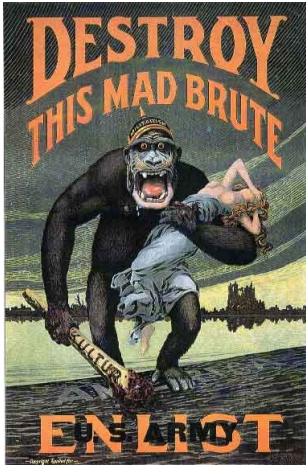


- » Military combat is becoming increasingly mechanized:
  - missile and drone strikes can happen from thousands of miles away at the push of a button.
- » Also, think about how the anonymity of the internet can enable cruelty and bullying we rarely see in face-to-face encounters.



## More psychological strategies used to cope with moral conflict:

- Participants **dehumanize the victim** (think of them as an inferior human being, or a subhuman animal) **to justify mistreating him/her.**



- » Interestingly, Milgram found that devaluing the victim not only *enabled* mistreatment in the first place,
- » but also arose “as a *consequence* of acting against him.” (10)
  - “Once having acted against the victim,
  - these subjects found it necessary to view him as an unworthy individual whose punishment was made inevitable by his own deficiencies of intellect and character.” (ibid.)

- Participants justified their actions by **viewing their actions as part of a force or mission much larger than themselves.**



- Subjects saw “their behavior in a larger context that is benevolent and useful to society – the pursuit of scientific truth.” (10)
- Similarly, people often justify war against other nations by claiming that it’s all for a *higher purpose*.
  - Milgram’s example: an American fighter pilot who justified bombing Vietnamese civilians by claiming his actions were for a noble cause

Milgram explains,

- “Many of the subjects, at the level of stated opinion, feel quite as strongly as any of us about the moral requirement of refraining from action against a helpless victim.
- They, too, in general terms know what ought to be done and can state their values when the occasion arises.
  - **This has little, if anything, to do with their actual behavior under the pressure of circumstances.” (6)**



This motivates a view of human behavior called *situationism*.

- According to this view, people don’t behave well or badly because they have good or bad moral character.
- Rather, anyone can be compelled to do good or harmful actions by the details of the situation they are in.
  - So, having good moral convictions may not be enough to prevent someone from behaving immorally:
  - “moral factors [in our decision-making] can get shunted aside with relative ease by a calculated restructuring of the informational and social field.” (7)

## What effect might situationism have on our sense of *free will*?



- Milgram’s experiment demonstrates that “values are not the only forces at work in an actual, ongoing situation.
- They are but one narrow band of causes in the total spectrum of forces impinging on a person.” (6)
  - So, **if situationism is true**,
    - then **our actions are often**, at least in part, **determined by social facts of the world**, like our role relative to positions of authority;
    - which means *we don’t have free will* over our actions, in the sense of our choices being the sole cause of our behavior.

## What can/should we do about this?

- ...learn more about how our social situations impact our actions?
- ...be careful about what situations we get ourselves into?
- ....try to avoid situations in which we are prone to doing the wrong thing?
- ...try to devise social structures that *don’t* abuse our tendency to obey authority?
- ...???

Milgram proposes that contemporary society in particular puts us morally dangerous situations,

- by making each of us see ourselves *not* as individuals who can make a difference,
- but rather as just one small cog in a great big social machine.



He explains,

- “it is psychologically easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of evil action but is far from the final consequences of the actions...
  - » ...[when] there is a fragmentation of the total human act;
  - » no one man decides to carry out the evil act and is confronted with its consequences.” (12)

Moral and immoral actions are committed not just by individuals, but also by societies.

- When actions are attributable to the society as a whole,
- responsibility for them is *diffused* over the whole group, and less strongly felt by individuals.
  - Nevertheless, we often attribute responsibility for communal actions to individual *scapegoats*.

So, the “problem of obedience” is partly a consequence of human psychology,

- but also has something to do with “the form and shape of society, and the way it is developing” (ibid.)
  - Whether or not we believe we are morally responsible depends *not only* whether we think we acted freely or exercised self-control,
  - *but also* on whether we think there are people who could or should be held responsible for the actions we undertake.

Perhaps we ought to think of moral responsibility as a social phenomenon,

- instead of something that just belongs to individuals.
- This has recently been suggested about school shootings:
  - *Is the shooter fully responsible for the action,*
  - *or are we all morally responsible for creating a culture that allows school shootings to happen?*



‘No Way To Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens

ROSEBURG, OR—In the hours following a violent rampage in southwestern Oregon in which a lone attacker killed 13 individuals and seriously injured 20...

THEONION.COM