The Perils of Obedience

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1. Obedience is as basic an element in the structure of social life as one can point to. Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living, and it is only the person dwelling in isolation who is not forced to respond, with defiance or submission, to the commands of others. For many people, obedience is a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed a potent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct.

2. The dilemma inherent in submission to authority is ancient, as old as the story of Abraham,[1] and the question of whether one should obey when commands conflict with conscience has been argued by Plato, dramatized in *Antigone*,[2] and treated to philosophic analysis in almost every historical epoch. Conservative philosophers argue that the very fabric of society is threatened by disobedience, while humanists stress the primacy of the individual conscience.

3. The legal and philosophic aspects of obedience are of enormous import, but they say very little about how most people behave in concrete situations. I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of their victims, authority won out more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

4. In the basic experimental design, two people come to a psychology laboratory to take part in a study of 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. The learner is conducted into a room, seated in a kind of miniature electric chair; his arms are strapped to prevent excessive movement, and an electrode is attached to his wrist. He is told that he will be read lists of simple word pairs, and that he will then be tested on his ability to remember the second word of a pair when he hears the first one again. Whenever he makes an error, he will receive electric shocks of increasing intensity.

5. The real focus of the experiment is the teacher. After watching the learner being strapped into place, he is seated before an impressive shock generator. The instrument panel consists of thirty lever switches set in a horizontal line. Each switch is clearly labeled with a voltage designation ranging from 15 to 450 volts. The following designations are clearly indicated for groups of four switches, going from left to right: Slight Shock, Moderate Shock, Strong Shock, Very Strong Shock, Intense Shock, Extreme Intensity Shock, Danger: Severe Shock. (Two switches after this designation are simply marked XXX.)

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[1] The patriarch Abraham, commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac is ready to do so until an angel stays his hand.

[2] In Plato's *Apology* the philosopher Socrates both provokes and accepts the sentence of death, maintaining his allegiance to his conscience yet accepting the judgment of authority. The heroine of Sophocles' *Antigone* risks a death sentence in order to give her brother a proper burial.

6. When a switch is depressed, a pilot light corresponding to each switch is illuminated in bright red; an electric buzzing is heard; a blue light, labeled "voltage energizer," flashes; the dial on the voltage meter swings to the right; and various relay clicks sound off.
7. The upper left-hand corner of the generator is labeled SHOCK GENERATOR, TYPE ZLB, DYSON INSTRUMENT COMPANY, WALTHAM, MASS. OUTPUT 15 VOLTS-450 VOLTS.
8. Each subject is given a sample 45 volt shock from the generator before his run as teacher, and the jolt strengthens his belief in the authenticity of the machine.
9. The teacher is a genuinely naïve subject who has come to the laboratory for the experiment. The learner, or victim, is actually an actor who receives no shock at all. The point of the experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim.
10. Conflict arises when the man receiving the shock begins to show that he is experiencing discomfort. At 75 volts, he grunts; at 120 volts, he complains loudly; at 150, he demands to be released from the experiment. As the voltage increases, his protests become more vehement and emotional. At 285 volts, his response can be described only as an agonized scream. Soon thereafter, he makes no sound at all.
11. For the teacher, the situation quickly becomes one of gripping tension. It is not a game for him; conflict is intense and obvious. The manifest suffering of the learner presses him to quit; but each time he hesitates to administer a shock, the experimenter orders him to continue. To extricate himself from this plight, the subject must make a clear break with authority.[3]

    The subject, Gretchen Brand,[4] is an attractive thirty-one-year-old medical technician who works at the Yale Medical School. She had emigrated from Germany five years before.

12. On several occasions when the learner complains, she turns to the experimenter coolly and inquires, "Shall I continue?" She promptly returns to her task when the experiment asks her to do so. At the administration of 210 volts, she turns to the experimenter, remarking firmly, "Well, I'm sorry, I don't think we should continue."
13. EXPERIMENTER: The experiment requires that you go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly.
14. BRANDT: He has a heart condition, I'm sorry. He told you that before.
15. EXPERIMENTER: The shocks may be painful but they are not dangerous.
16. BRANDT: Well, I'm sorry, I think when shocks continue like this, they are dangerous. You ask him if he wants to get out. It's his free will.
17. EXPERIMENTER: It is absolutely essential that we continue…

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[3] "The ethical problems of carrying out an experiment of this sort are too complex to be dealt with here, but they receive extended treatment in the book from which this article is adapted"[Milgram's note]. The book is Obedience to Authority (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

[4] Names of the subjects described in this piece have been changed [Milgram's note].

18. BRANDT: I'd like you to ask him. We came here of our own free will. I don't want to be responsible if anything happens to him. I wouldn't like it for me either.
19. EXPERIMENTER: You have no other choice.
20. BRANDT: I think we are here on our own free will. I don't want to be responsible if anything happens to him. Please understand that.
21. She refuses to go further and the experiment is terminated.
22. The woman is firm and resolute throughout. She indicated in the interview that she was in no way tense or nervous, and this corresponds to her controlled appearance during the experiment. She feels that the last shock she administered to the learner was extremely painful and reiterates that she "did not want to be responsible for any harm to him."
23. The woman's straightforward, courteous behavior in the experiment, lack of tension, and total control of her own action seem to make disobedience a simple and rational deed. Her behavior is the very embodiment of what I envisioned would be true for almost all subjects.

24. Before the experiments, I sought predictions about the outcome from various kinds of people—psychiatrists, college sophomores, middle-class adults, graduate students and faculty in the behavioral sciences. With remarkable similarity, they predicted that virtually all subjects would refuse to obey the experimenter. The psychiatrists specifically predicted that most subjects would not go beyond 150 volts, when the victim makes his first explicit demand to be freed. They expected that only 4 percent would reach 300 volts, and that only a pathological fringe of about one in a thousand would administer the highest shock on the board.
25. These predictions were unequivocally wrong. Of the forty subjects in the first experiment, twenty-five obeyed the experimenter to the end, punishing the victim until they reached the most potent shock available on the generator. After 450 volts were administered three times, the experimenter calls a halt to the session. Many obedient subjects then heaved sighs of relief, mopped their brows, rubbed their fingers over their eyes, or nervously fumbled cigarettes. Others displayed only minimal signs of tension from beginning to end.
26. When the very first experiments were carried out, Yale undergraduates were used as subjects, and about 60 percent of them were fully obedient. A colleague of mine immediately dismissed these findings as having no relevance to "ordinary" people, asserting that Yale undergraduates are a highly aggressive, competitive bunch who step on each other's necks at the slightest provocation. He assured me that when "ordinary" people were tested, the results would be different. As we moved from the pilot studies to the regular experimental series, people drawn from every stratum of New Haven life came to be employed in the experiment: professionals, white-collar workers, unemployed persons, and industrial workers. *The experimental outcome was the same as we had observed among the students*.
27. Moreover, when the experiments were repeated in Princeton, Munich, Rome, South Africa, and Australia, the level of obedience was invariably somewhat *higher* than found in the

investigation reported in this article. Thus one scientist in Munich found 85 percent of his subjects obedient.

28. Fred Prozi's reactions, if somewhat more dramatic than most, illuminate the conflicts experienced by others in less visible form. About fifty years old and unemployed at the time of the experiment, he has a goodnatured, if slightly dissolute, appearance, and he strikes people as a rather ordinary fellow. He begins the session calmly but becomes tense as it proceeds. After delivering the 180-volt shock, he pivots around in his chair and, shaking his head, addresses the experimenter in agitated tones:
29. PROZI: I can't stand it. I'm not going to kill that man in there. You hear him hollering?
30. EXPERIMENTER: As I told you before, the shocks may be painful, but …
31. PROZI: But he's hollering. He can't stand it. What's going to happen to him?
32. EXPERIMENTER: (his voice is patient, matter-of-fact): The experiment requires that you continue teacher.
33. PROZI: Aaah, but, unh, I'm not going to get that man sick in there—know what I mean?
34. EXPERIMENTER: Whether the learner likes it or not, we must go on, through all the word pairs.
35. PROZI: I refuse to take the responsibility. He's in there hollering!
36. EXPERIMENTER: It's absolutely essential that you continue, Prozi.
37. PROZI: (indicating the unused questions): There's too many left here, I mean, Jeez, 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?
38. EXPERIMENTER: I'm responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue, please.
39. PROZI: 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!)
40. LEARNER: Let me out of here! My heart's bothering me! (Teacher looks at experimenter.)
41. EXPERIMENTER: Continue, please.
42. LEARNER (screaming): Let me out of here! You have no right to keep me here! Let me out of here, my heart's bothering me, let me out!
43. PROZI (shakes his head, pats the table nervously): You see, he's hollering. Hear that? Gee, I don't know.
44. EXPERIMENTER: The experiment requires…
45. PROZI: (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, at which Prozi, with evident relief, runs out of word-pair questions.)
46. 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.

47. PROZI: 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.
48. EXPERIMENTER: The experiment requires that you go on.
49. LEARNER: Ohhh. I refuse to answer anymore. (Shouting urgently now.) Let me out of here! You can't hold me here! Get me out. Get-me-out-of-here!
50. EXPERIMENTER: Continue. The next word is "Green." please.
51. PROZI: "Green—grass, hat, ink, apple." (Nothing happens. No answering buzz. Just gloomy silence.)
52. PROZI: I don't think he is going to answer.
53. 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.
54. PROZI: "Green—grass, hat, ink, apple." Answer, please. (more silence. Subject just sits there.)
55. EXPERIMENTER: Go on with the procedure, please.
56. PROZI: three hundred and fifteen volts. The answer is "ink." (Zzumph!)
57. LEARNER: Ohh. Ooohh.
58. PROZI (relieved to hear a response): Next one…
59. LEARNER: I absolutely refuse to answer.
60. PROZI: You've go to. You get a shock if you don't answer. (Experiment continues with the learner refusing to answer, and, finally, failing even to grunt or groan. At 375 volts, the subject stands up.)
61. PROZI: I think something's happening to that fellow in there. I don't get no answer. He was hollering at less voltage. Can't you check in and see if he's all right, please?
62. EXPERIMENTER (with same detached calm): Not once we've started. Please continue, Teacher.
63. PROZI (sits down, sighs deeply): "Cool—day, shade, water, paint." Answer, please. Are you all right in there? Are you all right?
64. EXPERIMENTER: Please continue, Teacher. Continue, please. (Subject pushes lever. ZZumph!)
65. PROZI: (Swiveling around in his chair): Something's happened to that man in there. (Swiveling back.) Next one. "low—dollar, necklace, moon, paint."" (Turning around again.) Something's happened to that man in there. You better check on him, sir. He won't answer or nothing.
66. EXPERIMENTER: Please continue, Teacher.
67. PROZI: You accept all the responsibility?

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

69. PROZI: That's that.

70. EXPERIMENTER: Continue using the 450 switch for each wrong answer. Continue, please.

71. PROZI: But I don't get anything!

72. EXPERIMENTER: Please continue. The next word is "white."

73. PROZI: Don't you thing you should look in on him, please?

74. EXPERIMENTER: Not once we've started the experiment.

75. PROZI: What if he's dead in there? (Gesture 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 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.

76. EXPERIMENTER: We must continue. Go on, please.

77. PROZI: You mean keep giving him what? Four-hundred-fifty volts, what he's got now?

78. EXPERIMENTER: That's correct. Continue. The next word is "white."

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

80. EXPERIMENTER: Excuse me, Teacher. We'll have to discontinue the experiment.

81. Morris Bravermen, another subject, is a thirty-nine-year-old social worker. He looks older that his years because of his bald head and serious demeanor. His brow is furrowed, as if all the world's burdens were carried on his face. He appears intelligent and concerned.

82. When the learner refuses to answer and the experimenter instructs Braverman to treat the absence of an answer as equivalent to a wrong answer, he takes his instructions to heart. Before administering 300 volts he asserts officiously to the victim, "Mr. Wallace, your silence has to be considered as a wrong answer." The he administers the shock. He offers halfheartedly to change places with the learner, then asks the experimenter. "Do I have to follow these instructions literally?" He is satisfied with experimenter's answer that he does. His very refined and authoritative manner of speaking is increasingly broken up by wheezing laughter.

83. The experimenter's notes on Mr. Braverman at the last few shocks are:

84. Almost breaking up now each time gives shock. Rubbing face to hide laughter.

85. *Squinting, trying to hide face with hand, still laughing.*

86. *Cannot control his laughter at this point no matter what he does.*

87. *Clenching fist, pushing it on to the table.*

88. In an interview after the session, Mr. Braverman summarizes the experiment with impressive fluency and intelligence. He feels the experiment may have been designed also to "test the effects on the teacher of being in an essentially sadistic role, as well as the reactions of a student to a learning situation that was authoritative and punitive." When asked how painful the last few shocks administered to the learner were, he indicates that the most extreme category on the scale is not adequate (it read EXTREMELY PAINFUL) and places his mark at the edge of the scale with an arrow carrying it beyond the scale.

89. It is almost impossible to convey the greatly relaxed, sedate quality of his conversation in the interview. In the most relaxed terms, he speaks about his severe inner tension.

90. EXPERIMENTER: At what point were you most tense or nervous?

91. MR. BRAVERMAN: Well, when he first began to cry out in pain, and I realized this was hurting him. This got worse when he just blocked and refused to answer. There was I. I'm a nice person, I think, hurting somebody, and caught up in what seemed a mad situation…and in the interest of science one goes through with it.

92. When the interviewer pursues the general question of tension, Mr. Braverman spontaneously mentions his laughter.

93. "My reactions were awfully peculiar. I don't know if you were watching me, but my reactions were giggly, and trying to stifle laughter. This isn't the way I usually am. This was a sheer reaction to a totally impossible situation. And my reaction was to the situation of having to hurt somebody. And being totally helpless and caught up in a set of circumstances where I just couldn't deviate and I couldn't try to help. This is what got me."

94. Mr. Braverman, like all subjects, was told the actual nature and purpose of the experiment, and a year later he affirmed in a questionnaire that he had learned something of personal importance: "What appalled me was that I could possess this capacity for obedience to a central idea, i.e., the value of a memory experiment, even after it became clear that continued adherence to this value was at the expense of violating another value, i.e., don't hurt someone who is helpless and not hurting you. As my wife said, 'You can call yourself Eichmann.' I hope I deal more effectively with any future conflicts of values I encounter."

95. One theoretical interpretation of this behavior holds that all people harbor deeply aggressive instincts continually pressing for expression, and that the experiment provides institutional justification for the release of these impulses. According to this view, if a person is placed in a situation in which he has complete power over another individual, whom he may punish as much as he likes, all that is sadistic and bestial in man comes to the fore. The impulse to shock the victim is seen to flow from the potent aggressive tendencies, which are part of the motivational life of the individual, and the experiment, because it provides social legitimacy, simply opens the door to their expression.

96. It becomes vital, therefore, to compare the subject's performance when he is under orders and when he is allowed to choose the shock level.

97. The procedure was identical to our standard experiment, except that the teacher was told that he was free to select any shock level on any of the trials. (The experimenter took pains to point out that the teacher could use the highest levels on the generator, the lowest, any in between, or any combination of levels.) Each subject proceeded for thirty critical trials. The learner's protest were coordinated to standard shock levels, his first grunt coming at 75 volts, his first vehement protest at 150 volts.

98. The average shock used during the thirty critical trials was less than 60 volts—lower than the point at which the victim showed the first signs of discomfort. Three of the forty subjects did not go beyond the very lowest level on the board, twenty-eight went no higher that 75 volts, and thirty-eight did not go beyond the first loud protest as 150 volts. Two subjects provided the exception, administering 325 volts and 450 volts, but the overall result was that the great majority of people delivered very low, usually painless, shocks when the choice was explicitly up to them.

99. This condition of the experiment undermines another commonly offered explanation of the subjects' behavior—that those who shocked the victim at the most severe levels came only from the sadistic fringe of society. If one considers that almost two-thirds of the participants fall into the category of "obedient" subjects, and that they represented ordinary people drawn from working, managerial, and professional classes, the argument becomes very shaky. Indeed, it is highly reminiscent of the issue that arose in connection with Hannah Arendt's 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt contended that the prosecution's effort to depict Eichmann as a sadistic monster was fundamentally wrong, that he came closer to being an uninspired bureaucrat who simply sat behind his desk and did his job. For asserting her views, Arendt became the object of considerable scorn, even calumny. Somehow, it was felt that the monstrous deed carried out by Eichmann required a brutal twisted personality, evil incarnate. After witnessing hundreds of ordinary persons submit to the authority of our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt's conception of the banality of evil comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation—an impression of his duties as a subject—and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies.

100. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.

101. Many of the people were in some sense against what they did to the learner, and many protested even while they obeyed. Some were totally convinced of the wrongness of their actions but could not bring themselves to make an open break with authority. They often derived satisfaction from their thoughts and felt that—within themselves, at least—they had been on the side of the angels. They tried to reduce the strain by obeying the experimenter but "only slightly." encouraging the learner, touching the generator switches gingerly. When

interviewed, such a subject would stress that he had "asserted my humanity" by administering the briefest shock possible. Handling the conflict in this manner was easier than defiance.

102. The situation was constructed so that there is no way the subject can stop shocking the learner without violating the experimenter's definitions of his own competence. The subject fears that he will appear arrogant, untoward, and rude if he breaks off. Although these inhibiting emotions appear small in scope alongside the violence being done to the learner, they suffuse the mind and feelings of the subject, who is miserable at the prospect of having to repudiate authority to his face. (When the experiment was altered so that the experimenter gave his instructions by telephone instead of in person, only a third as many people were fully obedient through 450 volts.) It is a curious thing that a measure of compassion on the part of the subject—an unwillingness to "hurt " the experimenter's feelings—is part of those binding forces inhibiting his disobedience. The withdrawal of such deference may be as painful to the subject as to the authority he defies.

103. The subjects do not derive satisfaction from inflicting pain, but they often like the feeling they get from pleasing the experimenter. They are proud of doing a good job, obeying the experimenter under difficult circumstances. While the subjects administered only mild shocks on their own initiative, one experimental variation showed that, under orders, 30 percent of them were willing to deliver 450 volts even when they had to forcibly push the learner's hand down on the electrode.

104. Bruno Batta is a thirty-seven-year-old welder who took part in the variation requiring the use of force. He was born in New Haven, his parents in Italy. He has a rough hewn face that conveys a conspicuous lack of alertness. He has some difficulty mastering the experimental procedures and needs to be corrected by the experimenter several times. He shows appreciation for the help and willingness to do what is required. After the 150 volt level, Batta has to force the learner's hand down on the shock place, since the learner himself refuses to touch it.

105. When the learner first complains, Mr. Batta pays no attention to him. His face remains impassive, as if to dissociate himself from the learner's disruptive behavior. When the experimenter instructs him to force the learner's hand down, he adopts a rigid, mechanical procedure. He tests the generator switch. When it fails to function, he immediately forces the learner's hand onto the shock plate. At the while he maintains the same rigid mask. The learner, seated alongside him, begs him to stop, but with robotic impassivity he continues the procedure.

106. What is extraordinary is his apparent total indifference to the learner; he hardly takes cognizance of hem as a human being. Meanwhile, he relates to the experimenter in a submissive and courteous fashion.

107. At the 330-volt level, the learner refuses not only to touch the shock plate but also to provide any answers. Annoyed, Batta turns to him, and chastises him: "You better answer and get it over with. We can't stay her all night." These are the only words he directs to the

learner in the course of an hour. Never again does he speak to hem. The scene is brutal and depressing, his hard, impassive face showing total indifference as he subdues the screaming learner and gives him shocks. He seems to derive no pleasure from the act itself, only quiet satisfaction at doing his job properly.

108. When he administers 450 volts, he turns to the experimenter and asks, "Where do we go from here, Professor?" His tone is deferential and expresses his willingness to be a cooperative subject, in contrast to the learner's obstinacy.

109. At the end of the session he tells the experimenter how honored he has been to help him, and in a moment of contrition, remarks, "Sir, sorry it couldn't have been a full experiment."

110. He has done his honest best. It is only the deficient behavior of the learner that has denied the experimenter full satisfaction.

111. The essence of obedience is that a person comes to see himself has the instrument for carrying out another persons wishes, and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift in viewpoint has occurred, all the essential features of obedience follow. The most far-reaching consequence is that a person feels responsible *to* the authority directing him but feels no responsibility *for* the content of the actions that the authority prescribes. Morality does not disappear—it acquires a radically different focus: the subordinate person feels shame or pride depending on how adequately he has performed the actions called for by authority.

112. Language provides numerous terms to pinpoint this type of morality: *loyalty*, *duty*, and *discipline* all are terms heavily saturated with moral meaning and refer to the degree to which a person fulfills his obligations to authority. They refer not to the "goodness" of the person per se but to the adequacy with which a subordinate fulfills his socially defined role. The most frequent defense of the individual who has performed a heinous act under the command of authority is that he has simply done his duty. In asserting this defense, the individual is not introducing an alibi concocted for the moment but is reporting honestly on the psychological attitude induced by submission to authority.

113. For a person to feel responsible for his actions, he must sense that the behavior has flowed from "the self." In the situation we have studied, subjects have precisely the opposite view of their actions—namely, they see them as originating in the motives of some other person. Subjects in the experiment frequently said, "If it were up to me, I would not have administered shocks to the learner."

114. Once authority has been isolated as the cause of the subject's behavior, it is legitimate to inquire into the necessary elements of authority and how it must be perceived in order to gain his compliance. We conducted some investigations into the kinds of changes that would cause the experimenter to lose his power and to be disobeyed by the subject. Some of the variations revealed that:

115. • *The experimenter's physical presence has a marked impact on his authority.* As cited earlier, obedience dropped off sharply when orders were given by telephone. The experimenter could often induce a disobedient subject to go on by returning to the laboratory.

116. • *Conflicting authority severely paralyzes action.* When two experimenters of equal status, both seated at the command desk, gave incompatible orders, no shocks were delivered past the point of their disagreement.

117. • *The rebellious action of others severely undermines authority.* In one variation, three teachers (two actors and a real subject) administered a test and shocks. When the two actors disobeyed the experimenter and refused to go beyond a certain shock level, thirty-six of forty subjects joined their disobedient peers and refused as well.

118. Although the experimenter's authority was fragile in some respects, it is also true that he had almost one of the tools used in ordinary command structures. For example, the experimenter did not threaten the subjects with punishment—such as the loss of income, community ostracism, or jail—for failure to obey. Neither could he offer incentives. Indeed, we should expect the experimenter's authority to be much less than that of someone like a general, since the experimenter has no power to enforce his imperatives, and since participation in a psychological experiment scarcely evokes the urgency and dedication found in warfare. Despite these limitations, he still managed to command a dismaying degree of obedience.

119. I will cite one final variation of the experiment that depicts a dilemma that is more common in everyday life. The subject was not order to pull the lever that shocked the victim, but merely to perform a subsidiary task (administering the word-pair test) while another person administered the shock. In this situation, thirty-seven of forty adults continued to the highest level on the shock generator. Predictably, they excused their behavior by saying that the responsibility belonged to the man who actually pulled the switch. This may illustrate a dangerously typical arrangement in a complex society: it is easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of action.

120. The problem of obedience is not wholly psychological. The form and shape of society and the way it is developing have much to do with it. There was a time, perhaps, when people were able to give a fully human response to any situation because they were fully absorbed in it as human beings. But as soon as there was a division of labor things changed. Beyond a certain point, the breaking up of a society into people carrying out narrow and very special jobs takes away from the human quality of work and life. A person does not get to see the whole situation but only a small part of it, and is thus unable to act without some kind of overall direction. He yields to authority but in doing so is alienated from his own actions.

121. Even Eichmann was sickened when he toured the concentration camps, but he had only to sit at a desk and shuffle papers. At the same time the man in the camp who actually dropped Cyclon-b into the gas chambers was able to justify *his* behavior on the ground that he was only following orders from above. Thus there is a fragmentation of the total human act; no one is confronted with the consequences of his decision to carry out the evil act. The person who assumes responsibility has evaporated. Perhaps this is the most common characteristic of socially organized evil in modern society.