

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Excerpts from "The Perils of Obedience"

By Stanley Milgram  
1974

*In 1963, Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments to examine humans' obedience to authority. The experiments included a participant who was assigned to be the teacher and an actor who was assigned to be the learner. The participant, unaware that the learner was a paid actor, was asked to administer a shock to the learner every time he got a question wrong. However, instead of testing the learner's memory, as the participant had been told they were doing, experimenters were testing the participant's willingness to obey a command. In 1974, Milgram published *The Perils of Obedience*, a summary of his experiments.*

### Part 1: The Findings

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

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 experimenter 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."



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**Experimenter:** The experiment requires that you go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly.

**Brandt:** He has a heart condition, I'm sorry. He told you that before.

- [5] **Experimenter:** The shocks may be painful but they're not dangerous.

**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.

**Experimenter:** It is absolutely essential that we continue...

**Brandt:** I'd like you to ask him. We came here of our free will. If he wants to continue, I'll go ahead. He told you he had a heart condition. I'm sorry. I don't want to be responsible for anything happening to him. I wouldn't like it for me either.

**Experimenter:** You have no other choice.

[10] **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.

She refuses to go further and the experiment is terminated.

The woman is firm and resolute<sup>1</sup> throughout. She indicates 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.”

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.

### ***An unexpected outcome***

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 the subjects would refuse to obey the experimenter. The psychiatrist, specifically, predicted that most subjects would not go beyond 150 volts, when the victim makes his first explicit<sup>2</sup> demand to be freed. They expected that only 4 percent would reach 300 volts, and that only a pathological<sup>3</sup> fringe of about one in a thousand would administer the highest shock on the board.

[15] These predictions were unequivocally<sup>4</sup> wrong. Of the forty subjects in the first experiment, twenty-five obeyed the orders of 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 called 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.

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 on the slightest provocation. He assured me that when “ordinary” people were tested, the results would be quite different. As we moved from the pilot studies to the regular experimental series, people drawn from every stratum<sup>5</sup> 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.

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.

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1. **Resolute (adjective):** determined and unwavering
  2. **Explicit (adjective):** stated clearly and leaving no room for doubt or confusion
  3. involving or caused by physical or mental disease
  4. **Unequivocal (adjective):** leaving no doubt
  5. a class people are assigned to according to their social status, income, or education

Fred Prozi's reactions, if 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 good-natured, if slightly dissolute,<sup>6</sup> 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 the chair and, shaking his head, addresses the experimenter in agitated tones:

**Prozi:** I can't stand it I'm not going to kill that man in there. You hear him hollering?

[20] **Experimenter:** As I told you before, the shocks may be painful, but...

**Prozi:** But he's hollering. He can't stand it. What's going to happen to him?

**Experimenter** (his voice is patient, matter-of fact): The experiment requires that you continue, Teacher.

**Prozi:** Aah, but, unh, I'm not going to get that man sick in there — know what I mean?

**Experimenter:** Whether the learner likes it or not, we must go on, through all the word pairs.

[25] **Prozi:** I refuse to take the responsibility. He's in there hollering.

**Experimenter:** It's absolutely essential that you continue, Prozi.

**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?

**Experimenter:** I'm responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue, please.

**Prozi:** All right. (Consults list of words.) The next one's "Slow — walk, truck, dance, music." Answer please. (A wstrebuzzing sound indicates the learner has signaled his answer.) Wrong. A hundred and ninety-five volts. "Dance." (Zzumph!)

[30] **Learner** (yelling): Let me out of here. My heart's bothering me. (Teacher looks at experimenter.)

**Experimenter:** Continue, please.

**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!

**Prozi** (shakes head, pats the table nervously): You see he's hollering. Hear that? Gee, I don't know.

**Experimenter:** The experiment requires...

[35] **Prozi** (interrupting): I know it does, sir, but I mean — hunh! He doesn'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 point Prozi, with evident relief, runs out of word-pair questions.)

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6. lacking restraint

**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.

**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.

**Experimenter:** The experiment requires that you go on.

**Learner:** Ohhh. I absolutely 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!

[40] **Experimenter:** Continue. The next word is "green," please.

**Prozi:** "Green — Grass, hat, ink, apple." (Nothing happens. No answering buzz. Just gloomy silence.)

**Prozi:** I don't think he is going to answer.

**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.

**Prozi:** "Green — grass, hat, ink, apple." Answer, please. (More silence. Subject just sits there.)

[45] **Experimenter:** Go on with the procedure, please.

**Prozi:** Three hundred and fifteen volts. The answer is "ink." (Zzumph!)

**Learner:** Ohh. Ooohh.

**Prozi:** (relieved to hear a response). Next one...

**Learner:** I absolutely refuse to answer.

[50] **Prozi:** You got to. You get a shock if you don't answer. (Experiment continues with learner refusing to answer, and, finally failing even to grunt or groan. At 375 volts, the subject stands up.)

**Prozi:** I think something's happened 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?

**Experimenter** (with same detached calm): Not once we've started. Please continue, Teacher.

**Prozi** (sits down, sighs deeply): "Cool day, shade, water, paint." Answer please. Are you all right in there? Are you all right?

**Experimenter:** Please continue, Teacher. Continue, please. (Subject pushes lever. Zzumph!)

[55] **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 in on him, sir. He won't answer or nothing.

**Experimenter:** Continue. Go on, please.

**Prozi:** You accept all responsibility?

**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 to 450 volts.)

**Prozi:** That's that.

[60] **Experimenter:** Continue using the 450 switch for each wrong answer. Continue, please.

**Prozi:** But I don't get anything!

**Experimenter:** Please continue. The next word is "white."

**Prozi:** Don't you think you should look in on him, please?

**Experimenter:** Not once we've started the experiment.

[65] **Prozi:** What if he's dead in there? (Gestures 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.

**Experimenter:** We must continue. Go on, please.

**Prozi:** You mean keep giving that? Four-hundred-fifty volts, what he's got now?

**Experimenter:** That's correct. Continue. The next word is "white."

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

[70] **Experimenter:** Excuse me, Teacher. We'll have to discontinue the experiment.

## Part 2: The Essence of Obedience

The essence of obedience is that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred, all of the essential features of obedience follow. The most far-reaching consequence is that the 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<sup>7</sup> person feels shame or pride depending on how adequately he has performed the actions called for by authority.

Language provides numerous terms to pinpoint this type of morality: loyalty, duty, discipline are all 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<sup>8</sup> act under 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.

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.”

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:

- [75] *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.

*Conflicting authority severely paralyzes actions* — 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.

*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.

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7. lower in rank or position

8. **Heinous (adjective):** shockingly evil or wicked

Although the experimenter's authority was fragile in some respects, it is also true that he had almost none of the tools used in ordinary command structures. For example, the experimenter did not threaten the subjects with punishment — such as loss of income, community ostracism,<sup>9</sup> 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,<sup>10</sup> and since participation in a psychological experiment scarcely evokes the sense of urgency and dedication found in warfare. Despite these limitations, he still managed to command a dismaying degree of obedience.

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9. **Ostracism (noun):** exclusion from a society or group  
10. a command or order

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What does Milgram claim he discovered in the experiment?
  - A. Many participants would obey an authority figure who directed them to do harm another person.
  - B. Participants were so upset that the majority refused to continue to give shocks.
  - C. Experimenters refused to trick participants, and the experiment was a failure.
  - D. Wealthy people are more vulnerable to orders from an authority figure.
  
2. Why does Milgram include a transcript of Gretchen Brandt's interactions with the experimenters?
  - A. To provide readers with an example of the kind of behavior he expected from experiment subjects
  - B. To suggest the strength of a person's moral beliefs varies depending on where they come from
  - C. To prove that anyone is capable of breaking their moral code if commanded to do so by an authority figure
  - D. To emphasize that participants that Milgram selected had stronger morals than the average individual
  
3. In Part 1, how does paragraph 17 contribute to the development of ideas of the passage?
  - A. It suggests that participants that Milgram selected had stronger morals than the average individual.
  - B. It proves that anyone is capable of breaking their moral code if commanded to do so by an authority figure.
  - C. It suggests that the strength of a person's moral beliefs varies depending on where they come from.
  - D. It emphasizes that the results of Milgram's first experiments didn't reflect the extent to which people would obey.
  
4. Which statement best describes the concept of obedience as Milgram would define it?
  - A. When an individual is obedient they feel personally responsible and responsible to authority for the actions they've been asked to perform.
  - B. Obedience is a state that causes people to feel responsible for the actions they've been asked to perform, but they feel no responsibility to person in authority.
  - C. When an individual is obedient they feel responsible to a person in authority, but not responsible for the actions they've been asked to perform.
  - D. Obedience is a state that causes people to become immoral and disrespectful.
  
5. What conclusions does Milgram draw from the results of the varied experiments?
  - A. The experimenters' authority was fragile, and their power was limited.
  - B. The experimenters' authority was fragile, but the subjects still obeyed.
  - C. The experimenters' authority was fragile, and this was not expected.
  - D. The experimenters' authority was fragile, but more tests are needed.



6. Which of the following describes Milgram's purpose in Excerpt 2?
- A. to determine the best ways to break or weaken the influence of authority figures
  - B. to encourage participants in his study to rethink their sense of responsibility
  - C. to explain the results of his experiments and draw conclusions about human behavior
  - D. to explore some of the obstacles and drawbacks he encountered in his experiments

7. In paragraphs 1-70, Stanley Milgram made specific choices to present evidence from his obedience experiments in a certain way. Explain those choices and their effects.

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8. What details does Milgram use to draw connections between obedience, authority and responsibility in the "Essence of Obedience"?

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