



#74 The Psychology of Obedience and The Virtue of Disobedience

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. . . The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.” (Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience)

These words, penned by Henry David Thoreau in his great work Civil Disobedience, express a sentiment that is all but lost on the majority of people today. In the private sphere, it is normal for people to use their conscience to evaluate the morality of an action, but when it comes to the things demanded of them by their government, unquestioned obedience, with little thought as to the right or wrong of the action, is the norm.

In this video we are going to examine the psychology of obedience, paying particular attention to why people obey those in power even if it means committing actions that in any other situation they would view as immoral. We will also examine disobedience and how it acts as a crucial counter-force to the rise of an oppressive government.

Obedience can be defined as performing an action not because of a personal desire or motive, but because one is commanded to do so by someone in a position of authority. Obedience can be extremely beneficial in certain circumstances, such as in the relationship between a child and parent, or in the adherence to laws which prevent aggressive actions such as assault, theft, or murder. However, in other cases obedience can result in the most brutal of outcomes:

“ . . . even a cursory glance at history”, wrote Arthur Koestler, “should convince one that individual crimes committed for selfish motives play a quite insignificant part in the human tragedy, compared to the numbers massacred in unselfish loyalty to one’s tribe, nation, dynasty, church, or political ideology. . .” (Arthur Koestler, Janus: A Summing Up)



What this sad fact of history suggests is that humans have a strong tendency to obey those in positions of power. Sigmund Freud recognized this stating that we should “never underestimate the power of the need to obey.” Like most of our defining characteristics, this need to obey, is in part instinctual. Stretching deep into our evolutionary past, many of the ancestors of homo sapiens organized themselves according to ranking systems or what are called dominance hierarchies. Survival in a dominance hierarchy requires the ability to make distinctions between rank and recognition of the permitted and forbidden actions based on one’s rank. Failure in either of these respects can lead to death or being cast out from one’s group and therefore those who display such traits are more likely to survive and pass on their genes.

But while the influence of dominance hierarchies in our evolutionary history can help explain the human tendency to obey, it does not fully explain why people obey even when the actions demanded of them are clearly immoral or to the detriment of their own survival. For example, looking back at the brutal reign of Stalin in Russia or the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, why did those who lived during these times remain obedient to the point of committing the most brutal of actions including the murder and torture of completely innocent people en masse?

It may be tempting to suggest that most people are complicit in tyranny due to fear. However, while this is true to a degree, fear alone cannot account for the fact that many people do not recognize or acknowledge the injustice of their own government even when they are living under tyranny. As Don Mixon in his book *Obedience and Civilization* explains:

“We may be genuinely puzzled as to how people could obey commands that seem both bloodthirsty and stupid. Puzzlement can vanish when we realize that in the eyes of their perpetrators the hideous crimes of history are not hideous crimes at all, but acts of loyalty, patriotism and duty. From the vantage point of the present we can see them as hideous crimes, but ordinarily from that same vantage point we cannot see the crimes of our own governments as hideous or even as crimes.” (Don Mixon, *Obedience and Civilization*)



Michael Huemer, in his book *The Problem of Political Authority*, suggests that the existence of certain cognitive biases can help account for this inability to recognize the injustice of one's own government. One of the most prevalent of these biases is the psychological phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance. As Huemer explains:

“According to [this] widely accepted theory...we experience an uncomfortable state, known as ‘cognitive dissonance’, when we have two or more cognitions that stand in conflict or tension with one another – and particularly when our behavior or other reactions appear to conflict with our self-image. We then tend to alter our beliefs or reactions to reduce the dissonance. For instance, a person who sees himself as compassionate yet finds himself inflicting pain on others will experience cognitive dissonance. He might reduce this dissonance by ceasing to inflict pain, changing his image of himself, or adopting auxiliary beliefs to explain why a compassionate person may inflict pain in this situation.” (Michael Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority*)

The existence of an oppressive government produces many situations where dissonance can arise as people are frequently required to take actions which conflict with their personal beliefs of right and wrong and their images of themselves as a good people. An extremely common trigger for dissonance in the modern day arises from the requirement to pay taxes to fund government activities which involve things that one views as unethical – examples could include the caging of drug users, the bailing out of crony-capitalists, the fighting of wars, or the mass surveillance of one's own citizenry.

In other words, paying taxes, along with the knowledge that this money is being used to fund programs and activities which one sees as immoral can generate cognitive dissonance. To deal with this dissonance some people will change their beliefs regarding the beneficence and necessity of a centralized state. But a more common way to quell this dissonance is to adopt justifications to excuse these government actions or to avoid sources of information which trigger awareness of the immorality stemming from their own government.

In addition to cognitive dissonance, another psychological bias which contributes to the human willingness to obey even a tyrannical government is the status quo



bias which is the “powerful tendency to see the beliefs of [one’s] own society as obviously true and the practices of [one’s] own society as obviously right and good – regardless of what those beliefs and practices are.” (Michael Huemer, The Problem of Political Authority)

The need to be accepted, the powerful drive to conform as well as heavy doses of indoctrination all promote the status quo bias. As Huemer explains:

“Government is an extremely prominent and fundamental feature of the structure of our society. We know that people tend to have a powerful bias in favor of the existing arrangements of their own societies. It therefore stands to reason that, whether or not any government were legitimate, most of us would have a strong tendency to believe that some governments are legitimate, especially our own and others like it.” (Michael Huemer, The Problem of Political Authority)

It is thus not surprising that so many people unquestioningly obey government commands, no matter how oppressive or tyrannical they become, when one accounts for the cognitive biases and evolved tendencies of man. In fact, Don Mixon went as far as to write:

“Obedience that occurs in a hierarchical social structure. ..needs no special explanation. However, disobedience in the same circumstances does need explaining.” (Don Mixon, Obedience and Civilization)

In the remainder of this video we will look at what promotes the likelihood of disobedience in response to tyranny. The first thing to note is that clearly people will not refuse to commit immoral acts unless they overcome the biases which promote unquestioned obedience to the state. Self-education and ridding oneself of the false beliefs that result from years of indoctrination and excessive propaganda is crucial. Only by doing this can we loosen the grip which pernicious ideologies have on our minds and instead, as Thoreau recommended, use our own conscience to evaluate the right or wrong of an action.

People are also more likely to disobey the tyrannical commands of those in power if they lose confidence in the capability of their rulers. This could potentially



happen if increasing numbers of people came to realize that societies are far too complex for centralized government control to be effective. However, loss in confidence is more likely to arise due to the sheer ineptitude of politicians which makes it increasingly difficult for people to place any faith in existing government institutions.

An additional factor, especially relevant these days, which impacts disobedience relates to the degree of surveillance in a society. In *Disobedience and Civilization* Don Mixon points out that mass surveillance greatly diminishes the likelihood of disobedience as it creates a situation analogous to that faced by a devout religious believer who censors his thoughts and behaviours due to the all-seeing eye of god:

“Gods, of course, are frequently described as being both omniscient and omnipotent. And it is not difficult to see why. If believers can be brought truly to believe that their God can see into their minds and hearts and to believe that He will punish them severely if He glimpses the slightest disloyalty, they may be persuaded to change their thinking and their feeling and become, internally and externally, more compliant and more obedient. For what must be overcome, the chief obstacle in the way of command hierarchies reaching their ideal typical form, is the human power to lie, pretend and assimilate. Citizens who have the ability to pretend loyalty and love while plotting disobedience and treason are serious threats to the security of any power that be. Only if people can be persuaded that their efforts to lie and pretend are rendered fruitless by an all-seeing eye, can . . . obedience become assured.” (Don Mixon, *Obedience and Civilization*)

Societies which accept the need for mass surveillance, or allow it to spread through non-action and compliance, are societies which become increasingly unable to resist tyranny. Totalitarian regimes of the 20th century clearly recognized this as they all instituted forms of mass surveillance on their citizenry. However, modern technology has created surveillance capabilities that dictators, such as Hitler and Stalin could only have dreamt of. As these technologies are put to use, a prison of the mind, so to speak, will be constructed. Realizing that so much of one's life is being monitored, the surveillance capabilities of



governments, like an all-seeing eye of god, will make thoughts and behaviors favoring compliance and conformity the norm.

While the tendency to obey is certainly a prominent feature of man, there are always a brave few who in the face of corrupt power are willing to stand up and refuse. Those with the courage to disobey are not only protectors of freedom but, as Erich Fromm suggested, individuals who move a society forward:

“Man has continued to evolve by acts of disobedience. Not only was his spiritual development possible only because there were men who dared to say no to the powers that be in the name of their conscience or their faith, but also his intellectual development was dependent on the capacity for being disobedient, disobedient to authorities who tried to muzzle new thoughts and to the authority of long-established opinions which declared a change to be nonsense.” (Erich Fromm, *On Disobedience and Other Essays*)