

# The Psychology of Obedience and The Virtue of Disobedience



## **On the Virtue of Disobedience**

- “Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.” (Oscar Wilde)
- “If the machine of government is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law.” (Henry David Thoreau)
- “Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves.” (Henry David Thoreau)
- “Indeed, freedom and the capacity for disobedience are inseparable; hence any social, political, and religious system which proclaims freedom, yet stamps out disobedience, cannot speak the truth.” (Erich Fromm)
- “Civil disobedience becomes a sacred duty when the state becomes lawless or corrupt. And a citizen who barter with such a state shares in its corruption and lawlessness.” (Gandhi)
- “Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders...and millions have been killed because of this obedience...Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves... (and) the grand thieves are running the country. That's our problem.” (Howard Zinn)

## **Obedience Defined**

- “Obedience means doing things, not because of personal desire, wish, or motive, but because someone tells us to. It means doing what someone tells us to do, not because of a personal relationship, but because of a status relationship – a relationship of subordination to a superior status with the authority of command. When we do not wish to do what was commanded awareness of our obedience and our subordination is unavoidable. But obedience, more commonly, can be invisible or difficult to see – as when we have learned to wish and desire to do those things our status demands us to do and thus experience the status demand and commands as personal wishes or desires. Such invisible obedience can even seem compatible with

what commonly is thought of as "freedom". (Don Mixon, Obedience and Civilization)

### **On the Tendency to Obey**

- Certainly our animal heritage is important [in explaining obedience], as are the psychological consequences of the exceptional dependency of human children. Elias Canetti (1978) states that every obey command leaves behind a sting that “sinks deep into the person who has carried out the command and remains in him unchanged”. The most common way of getting rid of the sting is to give the same order to someone else. “What spurs man onto achievement is the deep urge to be rid of the command once laid upon them”. Thus commands recapitulate themselves: privates become corporals and pass on sting to other privates; children grow up and rid themselves of the sting left by the commands of their parents by repeating the commands to their own children. (Don Mixon, Obedience and Civilization)
- Initially, when Nazi leaders were captured and examined it was thought that psychological testing would show them to be aberrant monsters, psychotic sociopaths. But, instead, they were found to be essentially normal people. Most were articulate. They were men who were motivated by sincerely held beliefs, committed to doing their jobs well and motivated by a desire for professional advancement, respectful of authority and obedient to it, disciplined and willing to accommodate to experiences that habituated them to brutality. And most of the leaders were intelligent – in fact, they were highly intelligent. The human traits of obedience and of dedication to ideology and duty are frequently associated with fanaticism, but high intelligence should give us pause. (Steven Bartlett, The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil)
- Human obedience is much more widespread than we tend to recognize. It permeates many aspects of living; it enters into every choice we make when we comply with the wish that is not our own; it is so ubiquitous as to have become habitual and unconscious. People willingly allow their interpretation of the world to be influenced and often determined by those whom they see as legitimate authorities. In other words, people permit and perhaps prefer that authority provide them with definitions of what constitutes desirable action. (Steven Bartlett, The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil)

## **The Danger of Obedience**

- . . .mankind's urge to obey, is potentially lethal. Erich Fromm argued that obedience may plausibly lead to the end of human history. He observed that the majority of human beings have an emotional constitution unchanged from the Stone Age, yet they now live with the technical means at hand to bring about worldwide nuclear destruction. “If mankind commits suicide, it will be because people will obey those who command them to push the deadly buttons, because they will obey the archaic passions of fear, hate, and greed; because they will obey obsolete clichés of state sovereignty and national honor.” (Steven Bartlett, *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil*)
- “If we should all perish in a nuclear holocaust, it will not be because man was not capable of becoming human, or that he was inherently evil; it would be because the consensus of stupidity has prevented him from seeing reality and acting upon the truth.” (Erich Fromm, *The Erich Fromm Reader*)

## **Cognitive Biases and Obedience toward the State**

- Now suppose, hypothetically, that all governments were illegitimate and that no one was obligated to obey their commands (except where the command lined up with pre-existing moral requirements). The psychological and historical evidence cannot show whether this radical ethical hypothesis is true. But what the evidence does suggest is that if that hypothesis were true, it is quite likely that we would still by and large feel bound to obey our governments. That is likely, because even people who are subjected to the clearest examples of illegitimate power still typically feel bound to obey. And if we felt this requirement to obey, it is likely that this would lead us to think and say that we were obliged to obey and then – in the case of the more philosophically minded among us – to devise theories to explain why we have this obligation. Thus, the widespread belief in political authority does not provide strong evidence for the reality of political authority. Since that belief can be explained as the product of systematic bias. (Michael Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority*)

- This psychological principle [cognitive dissonance] generates a bias in favor of recognizing political authority. Almost all members of modern societies have frequently submitted to the demands of their governments, even when those demands required actions that they would otherwise be strongly disinclined to perform. . .How do we explain to ourselves why we obey? We could explain our behavior by citing fear of punishment, habit, the drive toward social conformity, or a general emotional drive to obey whoever holds power. But none of those explanations is emotionally satisfying. Much more pleasing is the explanation that we obey because we are conscientious and caring citizens, and we thus make great sacrifices to do our duty and serve our society. Philosophical accounts of political authority seem designed to bolster just that image. (Michael Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority*)
- Social proof convinces us that what others believe must be true. Status quo bias convinces us that what our society practices must be good. The most obvious and powerful demonstration of both forces is provided by the phenomenon of culture. Many of the world's cultures include beliefs and practices that strike us as bizarre, absurd, or horrible, such as the belief that air and moisture mated to create earth or the practice of cannibalism or human sacrifice. Yet the members of those societies generally embrace their cultures' beliefs and regard their cultures' practices as obviously correct. It would be missing the point to say, 'Well, people in other societies must be terribly benighted.' Outsiders would doubtless regard many of our culture's beliefs and practices as bizarre, absurd, or immoral (in some cases, rightly so). The conclusion to draw is that human beings have a powerful tendency to see the beliefs of their own society as obviously true and the practices of their own society as obviously right and good – regardless of what those beliefs and practices are. (Michael Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority*)
- “One species of cognitive illusion is of particular interest to us here: that of moral illusions. These are cases in which we have a systematic tendency to see something as right (or wrong) when in fact it is not. Throughout history, our forebears have been subject to widespread moral illusions – for instance, that women were inferior to men or that dark skinned people were inferior to light skinned ones. The suggestion that we are still subject to some moral illusions today should therefore surprise no one. We need to reflect on what moral illusions we might be subject to, keeping in mind that, by the nature of the case, they will not seem, on causal considerations, to be illusions.

- o “Overcoming an illusion often requires seeing why things might appear as they do even if the way they appear is false. For instance, in overcoming the belief that the sun orbits the earth, it is important to see why it would appear that way even if the sun was not moving but instead the earth was rotating. Likewise, in overcoming the illusion of political authority, it is important to see why it might seem to us that there is political authority, even if in fact no state has ever had genuine authority.” (Michael Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority*)