

MILGRAM, METHOD AND MORALITY

By

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1. The Milgram Experiments

In the early 1960s, Stanley Milgram, a social psychologist at Yale, recruited a set of experimental subjects, by advertising in the New Haven papers. They came from all walks of life, though in the first series of experiments all of them were male². The subjects were promised a modest fee (\$4.00 - not a princely sum even in those days) plus a 50c carfare. It is important to remember what a modest fee this was. It was the sort of sum most of Milgram's subjects could have returned without a qualm. (It is not as if they were coerced by economic necessity into carrying on with the experiment to the bitter end.) The experiment was officially about learning and memory. Each recruit was introduced to another man, ostensibly a recruit like himself, but in fact an accomplice of the experimenter. One of them was to be a 'learner', the other a 'teacher', the roles to be determined by lot. In fact the procedure was rigged so that the real recruit always ended up as the 'teacher'. The 'learner' was wired up to a fake electric chair and set to perform a series of mnemonic tasks. He soon began to make 'mistakes'. Every time the 'learner' made a mistake, the 'teacher' was supposed to deliver an 'electric shock'. These were increased in power as the number of errors increased. The teacher experienced a real shock at the outset just so as he would know how the lowest intensity felt - unpleasant but not really painful. A man in a white coat stood behind the teacher allegedly monitoring the progress of the learner, but in fact monitoring the supposed teacher. The learner had been rehearsed to simulate pain and distress as the 'shocks' increased in intensity. There were a number of variations on the basic experimental theme. We shall concentrate on three. In Experiment 1 (Remote-Victim), the victim was in another room and was inaudible to the teacher until he began to bang on the wall. In Experiment 2 (Voice-Feedback), the

¹ We would like to thank those who have commented on earlier drafts or discussed these matters with us, in particular, C.A Pigden, Alan Musgrave, Barbara Nicholas and Michael Platow

² However the experiments have been replicated with women and with much the same results.

'learner' was again in another room, but clearly audible. He protested, begged for mercy, and gave vent to 'agonized screams'. In Experiment 5 (carried out in the basement rather than the elegant setting of the Yale Interaction Laboratory) the learner was in another room, but again clearly 'audible' to the 'teacher'. However the graduated series of screams and protests were 'emitted' by a prerecorded tape - presumably so as to ensure uniformity of stimulus for the 'teachers'. But the real difference was in the base-line. At the outset, the 'learner' mentioned that he had a mild heart condition - which 'he' complained of more vociferously as the shocks became more severe. After 350 volts, the 'learner' - or rather the tape - lapsed into silence, giving the distinct impression that the 'learner' was either dead or unconscious. If the 'teacher' hesitated, the man in the white coat instructed him to go on using a graduated series of 'prods'. ('Please continue', 'The experiment requires that you continue', 'It is absolutely essential that you continue', and 'You have no other choice, you must go on.')

If the teacher worried about the health of his victim, the experimenter denied that the 'learner' was coming to any real harm. (The phrase used was 'no tissue damage'.) Each experiment was run with a sample of forty³.

The fake shocks of the experiment were as nothing to the real shock of the results. Between 65 and 62.5% of 'teachers' would keep on shocking their 'learners' to the point of 'collapse' and beyond - they would push on up to the maximum of 450 volts (the trial shock they had received was a mere 45)⁴. Thus *prima facie* it would seem that 65% of the inhabitants of New Haven - or at any rate 65% of the sample - were prepared to torture a fellow human being to the point of collapse and perhaps death, simply on the say so of a man in a white coat. They would continue to obey someone who had nothing to justify his

³ See Stanley Milgram (1963) 'Behavioral study of obedience', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, pp. 371-8, Stanley Milgram (1974) *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York, Harper and Row) and Arthur G. Miller (1986) *The Obedience Experiments: A Case Study of Controversy in Social Science* (New York, Praeger) particularly chs. 1-3. Other relevant papers by Milgram are Stanley Milgram (1964) Issues in the study of obedience: a reply to Baumrind, *American Psychologist* 19, Stanley Milgram (1965) 'Some Conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority', *Human Relations* 18, Stanley Milgram (1972) Interpreting obedience: error and evidence: reply to Orne and Holland, in A.G. Miller (ed.) *The Social Psychology of Psychological Research*. All these papers are reprinted in Stanley Milgram (1977) *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* (Reading Mass., Addison-Wesley), all references to these reprints.

⁴ To be precise the figures were Experiment 1, 65%, Experiment 2, 62.5% and Experiment 5, 65%. In other words the added detail of the victims alleged heart condition made no significant difference

presumed authority but a commanding demeanour and the scientist's ceremonial garb. How much more likely would they be to obey someone with *real* authority or *real* coercive power! It is worth noting too that the 'learner' was in no way dehumanized or vilified. So far as the 'teachers' were concerned he was just another volunteer. If people were prepared to torture an experimental volunteer *just like themselves*, how much *more* likely would they be to torture a yid, a gook, a commie, or a kulak! (Critics of the 'ecological validity' of the experiments, who stress that in real-world situations the victims of torture or genocide are typically dehumanized, apparently miss this simple point.⁵) Some critics have tried to explain away Milgram's results by citing the special prestige which science enjoys in our society (or perhaps which it used to enjoy in the early sixties). 'Considering that science is widely regarded as the highest value,' writes Erich Fromm, 'it is very difficult for the average person to believe that what science commands could be wrong or immoral. If the Lord had not told Abraham not to kill his son, Abraham would have done it, like millions of parents who practiced child sacrifice in history. For the believer, neither God nor his modern equivalent, Science can command anything that is wrong.'⁶ Fromm, we think, exaggerates the prestige of Science. Ever since *Frankenstein* (if not before) the idea has been in the air that There Are Some Things Man Is Not Meant To Know, and that consequently both science and scientists can sin. Mad Scientists, who represent the dark side of the scientific force, were a common theme in popular culture throughout the fifties

⁵ See the criticisms of F.R. Miale and M. Selzer (1975) *The Nuremburg Mind: the Psychology of the Nazi Leaders* (New York, Quadrangle), and Diana Baumrind (1964) 'Some thoughts on the ethics of research: after reading Milgram's 'Behavioral study of obedience'', *American Psychologist* 26, pp. 421-3, cited in Miller (1986) pp. 90 & 207-8. See also Miller's response p. 210.

⁶ E. Fromm (1973) *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett). p. 74, cited in Miller (1986) p. 214.

and the sixties.⁷ But however that may be, the real life authorities which command people to commit atrocities *also* enjoy a high degree of prestige. They represent the Vanguard of the Proletariat, the Leadership of the Master Race or even the Will of God. Now, if Milgram's subjects were representative of humanity at large (and the experiments have been replicated in Australia, Germany and even Jordan) then the gap between any of us and the inquisitors, secret policemen and war criminals that we profess to abhor may not be as great as we like to believe. The experiments purport to tell us that we too are likely to comply with authority even if its orders are manifestly wrong - and wrong in terms of the moralities we all profess to believe.

But Milgram's experiments have been subject to severe criticisms, moral, methodological and methodologico-moral. Some say they were unsound while others insist they were unethical. Either they do not prove what they purport to prove or they should not have been conducted in the first place. The most subtle criticism is due to Steven Patten. He poses a dilemma. If the experiments were moral then they do not prove that Milgram's subjects were immorally obedient. But if the subjects were immorally obedient then the experiments too were immoral. Either the experiments were morally wrong or they were scientifically useless.

Our aim in this paper is to vindicate the Milgram experiments against both the moral and the methodological criticisms. Milgram was right to carry them out, and they do they carry grim implications about the human tendency to obey. However we should stress

⁷ It was a common theme in fifties popular culture that some scientists make rather too much of a virtue of scientific detachment. Witness the rantings of innumerable mad scientists in bad SF movies. For example:

Mad Scientist: The scientific mind demands patience. I have discovered that you have none.

Sane Assistant: I have a conscience.

Mad Scientist: There is no room in science for such a word.

The Gamma People 1956.

The protagonist in this little scene is admittedly 'mad' but by the early sixties people were at least prepared for the idea that some scientists might be a little lacking in ordinary human feeling. Perhaps the 'experimenter' in Milgram's set-up agreed with the villain in *The Lady and the Monster* 1943: 'When you try to solve the mysteries of nature, it doesn't matter whether you experiment with guinea pigs or human beings'. See N. Gaiman. and K. Newman (eds.) (1985) *Ghastly Beyond Belief* (London, Arrow Books), pp 288-295 for many more such gems.

that the moral rationale we provide for Milgram's experiments may not be one he was aware of. Thus our argument may vindicate the morality of Milgram's methods but not his moral character. (Human decency requires not only that you do the right thing but that you do it for the right reasons.) Furthermore, our chief concern is with the validity of the experiments rather than the morality of Milgram's methods. Some commentators seem determined to shroud Milgram's results in a fog of moral scruple. But the fact (if it is a fact) that he was wrong to conduct the experiments does not disprove his conclusions. Immoral experiments can be scientifically sound. And their results can even be valuable. We shall concentrate on Milgram's philosophical critics Patten (1977a) and (1977b) and Bok (1978). But the philosophers are partially reliant on a trio of psychologists. Patten's methodological objections are based on those of Orne and Holland (1968) and Bok's moral critique is partly derived from that of Baumrind (1964).⁸

But first a useful bit of jargon. When assessing the validity of an experiment, psychologists are accustomed to distinguish between *internal*, *external* and *ecological* validity. *Internal* validity is the extent to which the conclusions arrived at are true of the subjects within the experimental situation. Fairly obviously this is a basic desideratum. *External* validity is the extent to which the conclusions remain true when different subjects and methods are used. This too is an obvious desideratum. If Milgram's results could not be replicated they could be dismissed as the products of a peculiar and perverse experimental set-up. *Ecological* validity is the extent to which the conclusions of an experiment can be generalized to the world outside the lab. Milgram's experiments would lack ecological validity if immoral obedience proved to be a freak laboratory effect that did not occur except in artificial experimental settings. Obviously if Milgram's experiments were ecologically invalid they are rather less interesting. The fact (if it be a fact) that Milgram could induce immoral obedience in the academies of Connecticut is of little concern unless it helps to explain the bureaucracies of terror and the tendency of conscripts

⁸ See Steven Patten (1977a) The case that Milgram makes, *Philosophical Review* vol. 86, pp 350--64, Steven Patten (1977b) Milgram's shocking experiments, *Philosophy*, vol. 52, pp 425-40, Sissela Bok (1978) *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Brighton, Harvester), Baumrind (1964) and Martin T. Orne and Charles H. Holland, (1968) 'The ecological validity of laboratory deceptions' *International Journal of Psychiatry* 6, reprinted in A. Miller (ed.) (1972) *The Social Psychology of Psychological Research*, (New York, The Free Press).

to obey unpopular juntas.

2. Patten's Methodological Objections

Patten (1977b) claims that probably most of the subjects were not taken in by the experiment and were just going along for the ride. In other words the experiments were not internally valid. He thinks that Milgram's subjects should have inferred that the experiment was a set-up because even though the organizer *told* them he was looking at teaching by peers, they were not required to do anything different from what he could have done himself - the fact that they were peers did not seem to play a part in the transaction. We have two objections to this argument. (i) Patten overrates the critical faculties of the average citizen when asked to participate in a scientific experiment. The average citizen need not believe that all psychological experiments have an intuitively clear rationale. Hence the lack of such a rationale need not induce scepticism. An educated and sceptical minority may suspect that some psychologists aren't all that smart, and that some of their experiments are badly designed. (Patten can hardly deny this possibility since *he* thinks the *real* - as opposed to the *fake* - Milgram experiments were badly designed, both morally and scientifically. Yet they are much lauded as paradigms of social scientific method.) The bulk of the populace, however, will think that psychologists are clever - so clever, indeed, that their experimental reasoning need not be evident to ordinary mortals. (An attitude especially likely in the science-worshipping sixties, when even *mad* scientists were popularly supposed to be supposed to be brilliant.) Either way, the oddity - even the stupidity - of the fake experiments need not lead the subjects to suspect chicanery. (Patten's objection, if we may say so, is very much that of a *philosopher*. Philosophers on the whole expect the world to make sense and are annoyed and surprised when it does not. It is by no means clear that other people are such cognitive optimists.) Even the *cruelty* of the alleged experiments need not have alerted them to the fraud. After all, many psychological experiments *are* cruel, though the cruelty is usually confined to animals. And this is (and was) widely known⁹. (ii) But is the rationale of the fake experiment as transparently awful as Patten suggests? We think not. The peculiarities of the teacher surely have an impact on the learning process. And it might turn out that the *status* of the

⁹ See footnote [7] above.

teacher (vis-a-vis the learner) was particularly important. If you wanted to look at the single independent variable of the teacher's perceived status, it would be vital to eliminate other correlated variables such as personal style and ease of interaction. You might say that the effect of pure unmixed teacher status, shorn of its usual accompaniments, is a silly thing to test for. Perhaps it is. But we are willing to bet that there are plenty of quite genuine experiments testing for variables that seem at least as silly. Now, if the method of the *fake* experiments was moderately plausible, the method of the *real* experiments is vindicated. At least we have no special reason to think that Milgram did not succeed in deceiving most of his subjects.

In fact, there is evidence a-plenty that Milgram *did* succeed in his deceptions. First there is the distress of his subjects (a distress which Patten makes much of in a different connection). Why did they protest, why did they 'sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan and dig their fingernails into their flesh'¹⁰, if they did not believe they were inflicting real pain? These reactions would be a bit extreme if they simply supposed themselves to be taking part in a charade. Patten replies that these extreme reactions are *compatible* with disbelief, so long as the subjects retained some suspicion that the suffering was real. Compatible they may be, but they are not what one would expect.

Secondly there is the response to a question administered immediately after the experiments: "How painful to the learner were the last few shocks you administered to him?". Using a fourteen point scale, the mean response of the obedient subjects was 11.36, suggesting that most of them considered the shocks to quite severe. 'Is this good evidence that the hoax was accepted by the subjects?' asks Patten. 'Not a word of it'. For the question presupposes that the learner was receiving some shocks. We must admit that the question was badly designed. Hence the subjects' responses do not provide *conclusive* evidence of belief. But they do provide evidence, and even *good* evidence, that the hoax was a success. For the obvious thing to do if you were not taken in, would be to say so, or to give zero or a very low rating in estimating the learner's supposed pain. That most of the subjects did *not* do this, suggests that they were indeed fooled.

¹⁰ See Milgram (1963), quoted in Miller (1986) p. 11.

Thirdly there is the evidence of the follow-up questionnaire sent to the subjects a year or so after the original experiment. This asks explicitly whether they believed the victim was being shocked. 47.9% of *obedient* subjects (i.e. subjects who had an ample motive to rationalize their dubious behaviour as due to a robust scepticism) said that they ‘fully believed’ the learner was ‘receiving painful shocks’, whilst a further 25.9% said that though they ‘had some doubts’ they ‘believed that the learner was *probably* getting the shocks’. Patten attempts to quibble this result away, by pointing out that the 25.9% with slight qualms might have been acting on their qualms rather than what they believed to be likely. But this hypothesis does not call into question the internal validity of the experiment. For these faintly doubting Thomases would still have been causing what they believed to be painful shocks in the faint hope that things were not as they seemed - and they would have been doing so in obedience to authority. And this is still a case of immoral obedience. (Consider an obedient G.P.U. interrogator who thinks his victims are probably innocent but carries on in the hope that they are guilty. Of course, in this case the agent is self-deceived whereas Milgram’s faintly doubting Thomases were right in their suspicions. But in both cases the agents are doing what they believe to be wrong, hoping all the while that they are mistaken. And they are doing this in obedience to orders.) Patten also suggests that obedient subjects ‘might be reluctant to reveal their true state of mind and admit that they were not deceived for fear of spoiling an expensive and time-consuming experiment’. (p. 432). This is indeed possible. It is likewise possible that some people will resort to any hypothesis, no matter how far-fetched, to fend off conclusions that they don’t like.

But Patten mentions two facts which *do* restrict the generality of Milgram’s conclusions. First, some, at least, of Milgram’s subjects *did* suspect that the experiment was a fake. According to Milgram’s statistics, 19.9% claimed to see through the deception or entertained serious doubts. Although we resist the inflation of this figure attempted by Patten, we must concede that the reactions of *some* subjects may have been distorted by the suspicion of fakery, and hence, must be discounted. So far as these ‘suspicious’ subjects were concerned, the experiments were not ‘internally valid’ since Milgram

probably did not succeed in inducing the right beliefs. This restricts but does not destroy the ecological validity of the experiments. In estimating the proportion of the populace who are prone to immoral obedience, we must ignore those subjects who obeyed but later professed disbelief.

Second, Patten cites evidence that Milgram's sample was biased. Experimental volunteers, he suggests, are an abnormally subservient group. Patten writes "volunteers tend to be more submissive than persons who do not volunteer, a greater need for social approval seems to rule their actions. ... the experimenter in the obedience experiments ... is seen to represent a large and pervasive social interest, one who mirrors the 'larger institutional structures'". (Patten (1977b) p. 437.) Patten concludes 'it would be highly plausible to assume ... that this strong need for social approval which is peculiar to volunteers may have made them particularly susceptible to the demands of authority'. This is not a criticism of the internal or even the external validity of the experiments (since similar results could be expected with a similar set of volunteer subjects). But it does call the ecological validity of the experiments into question. We cannot assume that about 65% of us are dangerously prone to obedience if Milgram's sample is unrepresentative.

Perhaps not. But if you go back to the papers Patten cites, they do not suggest that a large downward revision of the 65% figure would be in order. (i) To begin with 'volunteers' or 'potential volunteers' do not comprise a clearly defined class. As Rosenthal (1965) pp. 389-90¹¹ points out, rates of volunteering at a large university can vary from 10 to 100%. To generalize about the peculiarities of volunteers as a class is therefore a rash move, since the class has such vague and fluctuating boundaries. (ii) Even if we assume that there is a well-defined class of potential volunteers distinguished by a strong yen for approval, Patten is still not out of the woods. For the *size* of this class is crucial to his argument. If half of us are potential volunteers, this suggests that 65% of that half (32.5% of the total) plus an unknown fraction of the non-volunteers will be likely to obey an immoral authority. And this would not be good news from Patten's point of view. Patten therefore needs to argue not only that potential volunteers are peculiar but that there aren't

¹¹ Robert Rosenthal (1965) 'The volunteer subject', *Human Relations*, vol. 18, pp. 389-406.

many of them. Moreover the peculiarity must be quite pronounced. In McDavid's (1965) study (expressly cited by Patten) volunteers scored on average about 10% higher than non-volunteers on a scale designed to test for approval-seeking.¹² Let us put aside any doubts we may have about McDavid's questionnaire (Does it distinguish the desire to be thought well of from the desire to think well of oneself?) and take this figure at face value. The desire for approval is on average 10% stronger among volunteers than non-volunteers. But 10% isn't all that much. Volunteers are more eager for approval than most but not spectacularly so. (The mean for gratis volunteers on McDavid's scale is 63%. But the mean for *all* subjects is 57.10% with a standard deviation of 9.98.) Volunteers are not (as Patten seems to suggest) a collection of pathological sycophants. Let us assume that the desire for approval is strongly correlated with the tendency to obey. (An assumption for which we have no evidence.) To make the thing absurdly specific, let us suppose that for every percentage point above the average that you score on McDavid's scale, you are on average 1% more likely to 'go all the way' and administer the maximum of shocks (a generous concession to Patten). This would make Milgram's subjects more obedient than an unbiased sample but not so much more that we could all afford to relax. In generalizing to the populace at large we could only knock off about 10%, leaving 55% of us dangerously prone to immoral obedience. To make a real dent in this figure, we would have to suppose that for every point above the average that you scored on McDavid's scale, you were 2% more likely to obey. And even this would leave the obedient in a large minority. (iii) Studies comparing volunteers and non-volunteers must subject both groups to the same procedures. This requires a 'captive audience', a set of people who must submit to the researcher's demands willy-nilly. In effect, this confines the researcher to students. Rosenthal complains that the science of human behaviour too often turns out to be the science of sophomore behaviour. But sophomore volunteers may be rather different from non-sophomores. In fact, there is a marked difference between sophomore volunteers and Milgram's subjects that may bear on Patten's 'plausible assumption'. Volunteering confers kudos *within* the university. It is the sort of thing you might do if you wanted to be (and to be seen to be) a 'good student'. Thus the volunteer student may well be especially

¹² John W. McDavid (1965) Approval-seeking motivation and the volunteer subject, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 2, no.1, pp. 115-117.

eager to please. (We stress the ‘may’ here - this is all highly speculative.) But Milgram’s subjects stepped *outside* their own social worlds to take part in his experiments. The decision to do so would not have brought them much credit within those worlds. A bank-teller for example would not have gained many moral brownie points within the bank by serving as a subject in Milgram’s lab. The desire to be approved of was therefore less likely to be a motive in the decision to volunteer. In which case, it is rash to assume that this desire was unusually strong in Milgram’s subjects simply because they made that decision.

What general conclusion follow? If we take the 65% of obedient subjects and subtract the 26.2% of the obedient (i.e. 16.9% of the total) who expressed serious doubts about the experiment (a generous concession in view of the powerful reasons for obedient subjects to lie about their beliefs), then we are left with 48% of the sample as potential torturers. Let us suppose that experimental volunteers as a group are unusually compliant and allow a further 10% bias when generalizing to the populace at large. (This is an arbitrary - indeed an absurdly arbitrary - concession but the above arguments suggest that it errs on the side of generosity.) We are still left with approximately 38% of the population dangerously prone to obey a vicious authority. A large minority is better than a large majority. We are each of us *less* likely to obey than the experiments initially suggest. Still a 38% chance of immoral obedience is not something we can afford to shrug off.

Patten subjects Milgram to a peculiarly savage critical scrutiny. Every gap between evidence and conclusions is seized upon and magnified. (‘I have no wish to be difficult’, he declares at one stage. Oh no?) Indeed, one sometimes gets the impression that for conclusions such as Milgram’s nothing less than deductive entailment would do. No experimental reasoning can meet such standards. Why then is Milgram singled out? Partly because Patten finds his conclusions unpalatable. Milgram, says Patten, claims to provide evidence ‘for a Hobbesian view of human nature’. This is, of course, a mistake. The view suggested by Milgram’s experiments is almost the reverse of Hobbes’. Hobbesian men are vigorous, ruthless and vainglorious egoists who require an absolute sovereign to keep them in line. Milgram’s subjects, by contrast, can be cajoled into

obedience by a man in a white coat. The experiments are silent about whether they are egoists, though the evidence suggests a reluctance to inflict pain and hence some degree of fellow-feeling. What Patten means to say, no doubt, is that Milgram provides evidence for a *nasty* picture of human nature. This is true, but we need to be clear about what this nastiness consists in. People are not cruel, according to Milgram, but they *are* exceedingly malleable and can easily be coerced or cajoled into committing what appear to be cruel acts. And this is nasty enough. But of course, the nastiness of Milgram's picture is not a decisive objection. What Patten must argue, if he is to justify his hyper-critical methods, is that the picture is *implausible*. Now, if Milgram's conclusions were really *bizarre*, utterly at odds with everything else we knew, they might have to be rejected. However convincing Milgram's methods there would have to be a flaw in them somewhere. And if Patten's hyper-skepticism were required to find this out, so much the better for hyper-skepticism. But it is our contention that Milgram's results are independently plausible. They should not have come as a surprise.

3. Milgram, Arendt and Solzhenitsyn.

Milgram was an admirer of Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*¹³ and seems to have thought that his own results confirmed her speculative analysis. Adolf Eichmann was a lieutenant colonel in the SS responsible for rounding up Jews and transporting them to the death camps. He was thus the logistics chief for the Nazi genocide. He escaped to Buenos Aires after the War but was kidnapped by Mossad and tried in Jerusalem. Hannah Arendt covered the trial for the *New Yorker*. She subsequently published her articles in book form.

Arendt had been led to expect a sadistic monster motivated by cruelty and a hatred for Jews. Instead she found a mere functionary who had carried out orders with punctilious efficiency. She came to feel that his plea - in effect 'I was only obeying orders'- was *true*. (Of course, the fact that the Eichmann's excuse was true did not make it a *good*

¹³ Hannah Arendt(1963) *Eichmann in Jerusalem; A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, Faber).

excuse - a distinction missed by some of Arendt's critics¹⁴. Consider: 'She was sexily dressed and hanging around in a singles bar.' If true, this might excuse an unwelcome sexual advance. It would not excuse a rape.) Eichmann *was* only obeying orders in the sense that the desire to obey was his dominant motive. Arendt therefore proposed a distinction between 'banal' and 'radical' evil. It is vicious and twisted characters such as Hitler who initiate terror and genocide. These people are 'radically' evil. But such monsters are in short supply. There are not enough of them to staff the machinery of terror. Thus the 'radically' evil require 'banal' subordinates if they are to put their plans into action. These subordinates are unimaginative and unfeeling people who cooperate in evil deeds out of conformism rather than malice. Their moral obtuseness allows them to conceal from themselves the full horror of what they are doing. Their conscience such as it is, is an official conscience, which takes the ideology of authority on trust. It is certainly not the kind of thing that could mesh with compassion to produce a moral revolt. 'The problem with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal' (Arendt (1963) p. 276).

We do not claim that Milgram's experiments confirm Arendt's account of Eichmann. At best they provide a possibility proof. *Sometimes* 'normal' people, who are not particularly cruel, can be brought to perform cruel acts in obedience to authority. So *maybe* Eichmann could perform acts of monstrous cruelty without being monstrously cruel. He *may* just have been obeying orders. But that is about as far as it goes. Milgram's subjects tortured their victim with an authority figure standing at their shoulders. Eichmann exercised wide powers of discretion and acted on his own initiative. He was a big wheel, not a small cog, in the Nazi machine. Thus his case is very different from theirs.

¹⁴ See for instance Barbara Tuchman (1966) *The final solution: review of Justice in Jerusalem* by Gideon Hausner, *New York Times Book Review*, reprinted in Barbara Tuchman (1981) *Practicing History* (New York, Knopf.) p. 121. 'That he was just an ordinary man, a 'banal' figure, was, of course, precisely Eichmann's defence, his assumed pose, desperately maintained throughout his investigation and trial. It was the crux of his lawyer's plea. Hannah Arendt's acceptance of it at face value suggests either a remarkable naivete or else a conscious desire to support Eichmann's defence, which is even more remarkable.' This is a singularly vicious slur given that Arendt was not only herself a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany but had given a considerable part of her life to working for refugee organizations. For more on the controversy see Derwent May (1986) *Hannah Arendt* (Harmondsworth, Penguin).

But we *do* claim that Arendt's historical arguments confirm Milgram's results. The bureaucracies of terror are often very large. Many thousands must have been employed in the Nazi genocide industry and millions more fought on the Eastern front where German brutality inflicted a total of twenty million deaths. Millions must have been employed by Stalin's secret police or in the administration of his prison empire in the East. The figure of twenty million people killed, starved or worked to death at the hands of this huge apparatus is probably a conservative estimate. Robert Conquest argues that 14.5 million died during the 'liquidation of the kulaks' and the ensuing terror-famine in the Ukraine alone¹⁵. But our focus, for the moment, is not on the victims but on the perpetrators. In 1935 there were an estimated 5 million prisoners in the camps. (Conquest (1986) pp 306 & 305.) Running a prison is a labour-intensive business, especially a prison that extends across two continents. At least a million, perhaps more, must have been employed to keep the victims in order and to shunt them from A to B. Many more must have been employed in shovelling human beings into the maw of this gigantic machine. And as for those who connived at the process in one way or another - well it is probable that *most* people in Nazi and Stalinist society were in some degree guilty. Now the question is: *what were the agents of genocide and terror like?* Some, no doubt, were sadistic to begin with, but *all of them?* Were the majority people who were not initially vicious but became accomplices out of deference and perhaps fear? Or is it, as Miale and Selzer suggest, that 'in a wicked world people with a penchant for wickedness will freely indulge it'? (Miale and Selzer (1975) quote in Miller (1986) p. 207.) One or the other must be true or these huge organizations would have run out of recruits. Either there is a large minority (at least) of 'obedient' people who can easily be led into evil or there is a large minority of *vicious* people who only await the right circumstances to display their true natures. We don't need a Milgram to provide evidence for a nasty view of human nature - history provides evidence enough. The only question is: *which* nasty view should we adopt? So far as humanity is concerned, the first is the more cheerful option since it suggests that the truly vicious are in a small minority. But so far as the individual is concerned, the second is less

¹⁵ Robert Conquest(1986) *The Harvest of Sorrow* (London, Hutchinson).

distressing even though it is the more ‘Hobbesian’ of the two¹⁶. After all, we know (don’t we?) that *we* do not delight in pain. But we don’t know we would not have obeyed Milgram’s experimenter if we had been put to the test.

In *The Gulag Archipelago*¹⁷ Solzhenitsyn devotes a chapter to the ‘Bluecaps’: the Soviet secret police.

‘Their branch of the service requires only that they carry out orders exactly and be impervious to suffering - and that is what they are ... They understood that the cases were fabricated, yet they kept on working year after year. How could they? Either they forced themselves *not to think* (and this, in itself, means the ruin of a human being) or simply accepted that this was the way it had to be and that the person who gave them their orders was always right... But didn't the Nazis too, it comes to mind, argue in the same way?

(Solzhenitsyn (1974) p. 145.)

If we translate Solzhenitsyn into Arendt’s terminology he would probably agree that the evil of the average Chekist was ‘banal’, at least to begin with. (Though later the exhilaration of power would impart to his evil a more radical tinge.) This leads him to remark “And just so we don't go around flaunting too proudly the white mantle of the just, let everyone ask himself 'If my life had turned out differently, might I myself have become just such an executioner?' ... It's a dreadful question if one answers it honestly." Indeed it is. Which is why some people prefer to evade the question by denying all kinship with the executioner.

4. Milgram’s Methods: the Moral Critique.

So much for the validity of Milgram’s experiments. We move on to the morality of his

¹⁶ We should stress, however that it is not as Hobbesian as all that, since Hobbesian egoists are ruthless rather than cruel.

¹⁷ Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1974) *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 1, trans. T. Whitney (Sydney, Collins/Harvill.)

methods. And here his opponents have much to complain of. Milgram's subjects were lied to and tricked. As a result they suffered psychological pain. Lying and trickery are usually wrong, all the more so when they result in psychological suffering. However interesting they may be, Milgram should not have conducted the experiments in the first place. Or at least he should have broken them off once the pattern of reluctant and pained obedience began to emerge.

There is a straightforward utilitarian response to this challenge. Milgram's results are so interesting and important as to outweigh the suffering caused. Humanity benefits at the expense of New Haven. The psychological discomfort of Milgram's subjects is a small price to pay for what we learn.

There are two problems with this.

(i) Consequences are not the only things that matter. Milgram's experiments look embarrassingly like the sacrifice of Roman gladiators to the pleasure of the bloodthirsty crowd. This is a well-known conundrum for utilitarianism since if the example is properly set up - if social harmony is otherwise impossible, for instance - then the sacrifice of the gladiators is *required*. (Social peace and the crowd's gruesome satisfactions outweigh the sufferings of the gladiators.) Milgram's subjects look uncannily like gladiatorial victims, though in this case they are sacrificed for the sake of spiritual enlightenment rather than pleasure and social harmony. Now if the sacrifice of the gladiators is *wrong* (because the rights of minorities should not be sacrificed to majorities) the 'sacrifice' of Milgram's subjects is similarly suspect. Robust utilitarians will reject this argument since it rests on anti-utilitarian intuitions. But it remains a worry for the rest of us. Mistreating minorities for the sake of scientific progress, *using* human beings as mere guinea-pigs, seems wrong, (even if the guinea pigs are subsequently offered counselling). It would be different, perhaps, if the guinea-pigs were *volunteers*. But the volunteers would have to know what they were letting themselves in for. And this is impossible in experiments which rely on deception. Thus the scientific merits of Milgram's findings do not excuse his conduct.

(ii) Even from a utilitarian point of view it is dangerous to admit Milgram's excuse.

For what piece of lying research could *not* be excused on the grounds of scientific utility? (We do not mean that such excuses would be *valid*, merely that they would be *plausible* and that it would be impossible to distinguish between the two.) Moreover, lying research cannot be publicly discussed (except in the broadest outline). Otherwise the lies would not be believed. It is therefore difficult to subject it to democratic control. Decision-making on such research tends to be confined to the social scientific élite. It is dangerous to accord such power to any group. The classical utilitarians argued that the public were better judges of the public interest than powerful élites with an axe to grind. This is the utilitarian argument for democracy. By the same token, the individual is usually a better judge of what is in his or her own interests than an experimenter with a reputation to make. This is the utilitarian argument for informed consent in scientific research. But consent to lying research is necessarily uninformed. Thus it breaches rules for which there are good utilitarian arguments.

Finally there are sound utilitarian reasons for a general (though not an absolute) prohibition on lying. (Lying undermines trust and social cohesion and deprives people of useful information.) If any group were allowed to flout this prohibition at will, respect for the rule might decline throughout society. The costs could be severe.

So even if utilitarianism is true, the utilitarian defence of Milgram is suspect. We must find some other argument to get him off the hook. Moreover the argument must be tailored to this particular case. We don't want to confer a blanket license to lie on social scientists in general. This brings to the arguments of Sissela Bok, some of whose criticisms we have echoed already.

5. Bok on Lying

Bok has general objections to lying which are applied in her critique of Milgram. She starts off with the observation that knowledge is power. The truth does indeed make you free since it provides a basis for rational decision-making. The less relevant information you possess, the more likely you are to go astray in your purposes. *Disinformation*

therefore induces *powerlessness*. It puts the disinformed person in the power of others. This objection to lying is not merely utilitarian (liars acquire power which they misuse; they undermine trust etc. etc.) Rather by acquiring power over others through lying, the liar undermines their freedom. He manifests a disrespect for them as rational and autonomous agents, treating them as means rather than ends. Their purposes, and their capacities to *form* purposes, become mere instruments for the liar's designs not constraints on the designs he can adopt. (Bok (1978) pp 19-20.) Bok's critique of lying, therefore, is based on broadly Kantian premises. The fundamental value is respect for persons. To disrespect someone is the fundamental sin. (From now on we will avail ourselves of American argot and use 'disrespect' as a verb.) But a respect for persons does not entail a respect for the categorical imperative. Bok regards Kant's absolute prohibition on lying as absurd.

We are inclined to agree that persons should be respected (though it is very hard to spell out what this means in practice). To vindicate Milgram therefore we must show that he did not disrespect his subjects (or at least that he need not have done so). In other words we shall try to construct a broadly Kantian defence for his conduct. But at first sight this looks like a tall order. After all, Milgram's experiments *did* redistribute power from the lied to, to the liar. The whole point of the experiment was to put the subjects in Milgram's power so that their reactions could be assessed. For the moment their rational autonomy was reduced. Milgram, it seems, committed a Kantian harm.

6. Bok and the Debriefing Defence

'*For the moment*' - that is an important qualification. For Milgram's lies were *temporary*. The deception was not sustained. After twenty minutes it was reversed. Milgram did not leave his students in the belief that they had tortured someone, nor did he try to blackmail them with the evidence of what they had done. On the contrary, he debriefed them and even offered counselling. They did not remain under his control. The redistribution of power was not permanent.

Now, *temporary* lies are perhaps less objectionable than those that last. If the

victims' autonomy is speedily restored, they sustain no long-term damage. It may be that Milgram did not accord his subjects quite the respect they deserved as autonomous agents. But he did not treat them as mere instruments either. They were ends as well as means for him. It would have been different if they had committed some irrevocable act whilst under the influence of deceit. (If Iago had 'debriefed' Othello after the murder of Desdemona this would not have reduced his offence!) But the actions of Milgram's subjects were merely apparent since the sufferings of the 'learner' were unreal. All they really did was turn a dial. Since they did no harm to the learner, no moral harm was done to them. At least, if a Kantian injury was inflicted, it was not of a lasting kind.

Bok is not so easily appeased. She raises two objections ultimately derived from Diana Baumrind (1964). First the subjects may sustain enduring psychological damage, since the things they find out about themselves are hard to live with. What could be more distressing than the knowledge that you are a potential torturer? Secondly subjects may suffer from the discovery 'that authority figures can resort to such devious tactics'. (Bok (1978) p. 191.) The experiment destroys their faith not only in themselves but in the authorities that guide them.

By answering Bok's objections we hope to vindicate Milgram's methods. We take them in reverse order.

7. The Loss of Trust

Suppose the experiments *do* induce a general scepticism about the claims of authority. The subjects learn that society's leaders sometimes lie. It is difficult to see why this should count as *harm*. True, it may be initially upsetting, but since political leaders and authorities often *do* lie, this is surely something you are better off knowing. If we add in the debriefing process, the experiment redistributes power in the subjects' *favour*. By becoming less of a dupe, the subject is more his own master (or mistress). His rational autonomy is not merely restored - it is enhanced. Of course, things could be otherwise. If society were in fact led by a race of George Washingtons who could not tell a lie,

Milgram's experiments would have produced a false belief, or at least an ungrounded suspicion; a lack of trust in the genuinely trust-worthy. But this is not the case. Authorities *do* lie - a proposition amply documented by Bok herself. As to the *angst*: truth, even if painful, is usually to be preferred to cozy illusions - a thesis with which Bok would again have to agree. With luck, Milgram's subjects will have had a short sharp lesson in the need for scepticism and critical thought. And if they failed to benefit this was hardly his fault.

8. Self Knowledge and Psychological Harm

Bok's first objection takes us to the heart of the matter. Can lies be legitimate when they yield self-knowledge even when self-knowledge is painful? Our answer is *yes*. Not all psychological pains are harms, or if they are, they may comprise parts of beneficial packages.

Consider the case of David and Nathan. David has cuckolded Uriah, one of his faithful henchmen (despite a plenitude of wives and concubines of his own). To avoid being found out, he engineers Uriah's death by placing him in the forefront of battle. Nathan the prophet comes to David, and tells him of a rich man, well endowed with flocks and herds, who steals his poor neighbour's single sheep to make a ritual sacrifice. The story is a fiction: there is no such man. Nevertheless, "David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan ... 'the man who hath done this thing shall surely die' ... And Nathan said unto David 'Thou art the man'." (II *Samuel* 2. 11-12.) Now, we do not take the Book of Samuel as an infallible guide to conduct. Nevertheless it seems to us that Nathan, as God's representative is doing the right thing. Yet trickery and deceit are undoubtedly involved. Nathan temporarily deceives David in order to bring home to him an important truth about himself. There was no man who had been wronged in the way Nathan suggests. What's more, the process causes David considerable distress. It reveals a facet of his character he would rather have left hidden. Nathan is guilty of 'Milgram's sin' if sin it be. The original deceit is the equivalent of the experiment; Nathan's 'Thou art the man' the equivalent of debriefing. But painful as David's debriefing is, Nathan is doing him a favour. By forcing self-knowledge upon him, Nathan opens the way for repentance,

reform and reconciliation with God.

The parallel with Milgram is obvious. By deceiving his subjects into acting out the role of a torturer and then debriefing them, Milgram says to these people who are, no doubt, professed foes of torture, 'Thou art the man - You too are capable of this brutality in deference to orders!' The knowledge is perhaps painful and difficult to live with - but it confers a benefit. Like the self-knowledge Nathan enforces on David, it opens the way for soul-searching and reform. If you don't know you are a potential torturer, you have no means of ceasing to be one. If you don't know you are sick, you can't seek a cure.

Thus Milgram's lies can be given both a utilitarian and a Kantian justification. Take utilitarianism first. For the individual, participation in the experiment diminishes the likelihood of future immoral obedience. And on any but the crudest hedonistic view, this is a gain for the *subject*. It is not just that they pay the price in suffering for *our* spiritual enlightenment. They pay a price, true, but they get something out of it *themselves*; namely the chance to become better people. Nor is the standard of betterness alien to their own scheme of preferences, since hardly anyone thinks extreme suggestibility and a propensity to torture the innocent are Good Things. But the collective benefits are bigger. If we hear about the experiments and take their lessons to heart, we learn that we too might be dangerously prone to immoral obedience. This gives us the chance to become otherwise, to cultivate less authoritarian personalities and institutions. The probability of future inhumanities, or at least of bureaucratized evil, is diminished.

Now for the Kantians. Remember that the general objection to lying, was that it puts the lied to in the liar's power, violating their rational autonomy. But Milgram, after briefly assuming power, relinquishes it in the act of debriefing and thereby *empowers* his subjects. By inducing - indeed, *enforcing* - self-knowledge, and hence the ability to change, he *enhances* his subject's autonomy as rational agents. It is true Milgram reduces their autonomy first, which is, in itself, regrettable. But set in the larger context this does not imply any disrespect for that autonomy. With a lie he leads them to the truth, but a truth that can make them free. Now if, as a result of the experiment, you wind up more free

than you were before, and if in your brief period of unfreedom you did nothing *really* which violated your personal norms, you have no Kantian gripe (at least no respect-for-persons gripe) against Milgram. If you *did* sustain a Kantian injury through being deceived, it was wiped out by the subsequent gain in autonomy. As for the psychological sufferings involved, the Kantian won't take these very seriously. They were what you deserved for being that sort of person. Now if no real or lasting moral damage befalls his subjects, Milgram's experiments are clearly a Good Thing from the Kantian perspective. For most of us, they confer a public benefit - liberating self-knowledge - without the psychic costs that accrue to his subjects.

Thus we have a utilitarian rationale for Milgram's experiments which does not resolve itself into the dangerous argument from the general utility of science. The subjects are not sacrificed for the sake of the greater good - they too derive some advantage. We also have a Kantian justification. (Though not of course one that Kant would have approved given his pathological aversion to lying.)

9. Uncertainty, Risk and Moral Recklessness

But a problem remains. Granted that the results of the experiments were *in fact* happy, wasn't Milgram taking an unwarranted risk with the lives of his subjects? He did not know, at least to begin with, what the results of participation in his experiment would be. But he knew his subjects would experience an unpleasant twenty minutes with possible long-term effects, the full extent of which he could not predict.

We have implicitly answered this already. There are three major alternatives which shade into one another.

(i) The subject rebels early on. In this case no harm is done and he is not required to change his character. He acquires gratifying self-knowledge - that he will resist an evil authority. He may also have developed an increased distrust of powers that be. But we have rebutted the charge that this is a harm.

(ii) The subject rebels half-way through. In this case there is room for improvement in the subject's character but the self-knowledge induced is not *too* painful. He knows he can eventually detect immoral commands and resist them too. But both his courage and his moral vision could do with fine-tuning.

(iii) The subject goes the whole hog and delivers what he believes to be dangerous shocks. Hence there is a double dose of suffering; distress *during* the experiment as the subject shocks the victim and distress *afterwards* at the character defects the experiments reveal. But as we have argued, these psychic pains are swallowed up by the moral benefits. So *whatever* happens Milgram remains morally unscathed.

One niggling worry remains. Could the experiments have resulted in mental illness or even a guilt-induced suicide? Not likely. There is no evidence that such 'traumatic experiences' in adult life lead to such problems. And it is only this vanishingly small risk that lends colour to the charge of moral recklessness. Apart from this, Milgram is in the clear.

10. Some Objections

Barbara Nicholas concedes that we have just about managed to get Milgram off the hook¹⁸ Yet our argument rests on the assumption that Milgram has a right to inflict enlightenment on his subjects. But unlike Nathan in the story, he is not a messenger from God. Does he have the *authority* to enforce self-knowledge? Do his subjects concede him this right when they take the money and enter the lab?

Perhaps they do. It is not clear why people volunteer for psychological experiments. But one reason may be a vague (and usually vain) desire for self-knowledge. It is may be therefore that in inflicting self-knowledge on his subjects Milgram was not exceeding the terms of the implicit contract. Perhaps this is why so many of them said afterwards that

¹⁸ In discussion. We are very grateful for her astute criticisms.

they were glad to have taken part. (See Milgram (1964) (1977) p. 141.)

But our real response is a robust assertion of Millian values. In a liberal society nobody has the right to take themselves out of the debate. Freedom is the right to criticize anyone, and that can mean forcing them to face up to unpleasant facts about themselves. To be sure, this freedom may have to be exercised with tact and discretion. There can be a fine line between a frank exercise in civic criticism and incitement to riot. And persistent criticism can amount to harassment and persecution. So the right to criticize and thus to inflict enlightenment is not absolute. Nevertheless, nobody has the right *not* to be criticized or *not* to have self-knowledge imposed upon them, even if the process is painful. And to this our opponents would have to agree. Take Patten for instance. Apart from the fact that his articles are written with a certain asperity, the burden of his argument is this: either Milgram's life's work is worthless or he is a callous and manipulative brute without his subjects' saving excuse of orders from on high. If Milgram read this and rejected the accusation, he would have suffered somewhat. But if he read and believed, his distress would have been acute. Patten did not think this a reason to hold his hand. Milgram had no right *not* to be disturbed.

But (persists Nicholas) it does not follow from the fact that nobody has the right not to be enlightened, that Milgram has the right to inflict enlightenment. Indeed it does not. But our argument is that in a liberal society *everyone* possesses this right. You do not have to be a messenger from God to play the part of Nathan - or for that matter of Patten. We admit that a Millian Utopia can be an uncomfortable place, since nobody is safe from affronts to their self-esteem. But in this we are content to be Puritans.

Nicholas's next question is more damaging. Would a modern ethics committee sanction Milgram's experiments? We think not. Moreover, they would be right not to do so. For an ethics committee must operate within clear and simple guidelines. And such guidelines must in general exclude deceit. The fact that we can concoct a rather elaborate *post hoc* justification for Milgram's experiments does not mean that a set of guidelines could be constructed that was sufficiently clear and firm to exclude most cases of

experimental deception whilst making an exception for Milgram. A usable set of guidelines could not 'foresee' this particular exception to the rule and would therefore have to condemn it. This leads to a somewhat anomalous result. Milgram was right to conduct his experiments. But it would have been better if there had been a code of conduct in force which would have prohibited them. But this is no more odd than the idea that it may sometimes be right to break laws which it is also right to enforce.

11. Patten Again

In his (1977a) Patten develops an ingenious argument to block Milgram's conclusions. It is essential to Milgram's case that the apparent actions of his 'obedient' subjects were *wrong*. If not, the experiments are of little interest. But Milgram is also concerned to vindicate the morality of his own methods. Patten suggests that the two aims are incompatible. For any moral defense of Milgram's actions can be adapted to defend his subjects. Thus if Milgram contends that the short-term suffering of his subjects led to no long-term harm, they can lay claim to the same belief about the sufferings of the learner. So either the experiments were morally tainted or they were devoid of scientific value. If Milgram was a decent chap so were his subjects and no unsettling conclusions concerning human nature can be drawn.

If we *had* to choose between the morality of Milgram's methods and the validity of his results, it is the results we would go for. Whether or not Milgram did the right thing is comparatively unimportant. Whether we are the potential dupes and tools of tyranny is rather more momentous. And Milgram's experiments provide evidence for this. To reject these results as incompatible with Milgram's personal honour would be absurd. Maybe Milgram should not have conducted his experiments. But given that he did we would be foolish not to learn from them.

But we don't have to make the choice. All we need to eliminate the dilemma are some morally salient differences between Milgram's methods and the apparent actions of his subjects; defences available to him but not to them. And even without the arguments

advanced above, these are not hard to come by. Thus Milgram had no evidence that his subjects would endure long-term psychological damage (as indeed they did not). His subjects had ample evidence that the learner was in danger: the voltage markings (severe electric shocks are well known to be bad for you), the learner's anguished cries and his yelps about a heart-condition. At least one of them thought the learner might be dead. (See Milgram (1974) p. 88.) If Patten suggests (like Don Mixon (1989))¹⁹ that the subjects believed the experimenter's assurances that there was 'no tissue damage', we reply a) that the evidence is largely to the contrary; and b) that such credulousness towards an authority's transparent lies is itself a moral defect, indeed part of the syndrome of immoral obedience. (Imagine a real life situation. A G.P.U. interrogator has just administered a beating. The prisoner can't get up. A novice interrogator respectfully asks whether the beating wasn't a bit *too* severe - won't the prisoner have trouble surviving in the camps? 'Oh don't worry about that' says the senior man. 'These zeks have tough hides. He'll get over it'. The novice is reassured.) Besides, the belief that no permanent harm is being done, that there is 'no tissue damage', would not excuse the apparent action even if it were true. For we are not normally allowed to inflict physical *pain* on an innocent person without his or her consent whether or not there is any permanent harm done. And if tissue damage is a moot point from the subjects' point of view, the evidence for the pain is fairly clear. Of course, there are exceptions to the principle that we should not inflict physical pain on the innocent without their consent. But the situation in hand, where the pain is inflicted for the supposed good of science, not for the good of the subject, is not one of them. And though we have spoken of Milgram *inflicting* suffering on his subjects, this is not strictly correct. He *causes* psychological pain, but *unlike* his subjects he does not administer it directly. Rather, he creates a situation where if *they act in a certain way*, they will bring suffering *on themselves*. But they can swiftly end the pain by refusing to cooperate. For them, there is always a way out. It is otherwise with their victim, the supposed learner. He is not acting in a way that he finds painful to contemplate. Pain is being meted out to him by someone *else*. Nor can he escape the situation - he is physically *strapped down*. His tormenters can complain of being manipulated: *he* is coerced. (In fact had their actions been real they would have been guilty before the law of assault.)

¹⁹ Don Mixon. (1989) *Obedience and Civilization* (London and Winchester, Pluto).

Patten might reply that a lie can diminish liberty. It can cut off options binding someone to a situation as securely as a physical chain. True enough. But in the experimental set up there is no lie that performs *this* role, tying the subjects to the experimental task in the way the learner is tied to the chair. What binds the obedient subjects to the painful situation is their own authoritarian cast of mind. If Milgram had issued a lying threat to keep them in their places things would have been different. But he did not. Finally we can cite our own justifications of Milgram's conduct. Unpleasant as the experiments may be, they alert the subjects to dangerous defects in their characters. Potentially, at least, this self-knowledge is liberating since it opens the way for reform. No moral benefits are to be derived from electric shocks.

We thus have *three* justifications of Milgram's methods which cannot be deployed by his subjects. Patten's argument collapses.

Before we leave Patten, we would like to comment briefly on the issue of authority. Patten makes much of the distinction between command and expert-command authority; the authority of a commanding officer and the authority (within a circumscribed area) of a surgeon or a piano teacher. Belief in expert-command authority so far from being culpable is a precondition for a rational existence. Milgram's subjects perhaps deferred to the experimenters 'expertise'. This does not indicate a vicious and servile tendency to obey *command* authorities. And it is the orders of *these* authorities that issue in atrocities. We have two comments to make. (i) The line between command and expert authority is blurred. This is partly because command authorities often justify their status with claims to expertise - moral scientific, political or other. (Why are 'our betters' better than us? Partly because they are better informed.) Also expert authorities often exceed the ambit of their expertise. They lay claim to more authority than their expertise warrants. Thus commanders pose as experts and experts aspire to command. Either way a certain healthy scepticism about the commands (and the status) of alleged experts is in order, if not a moral must. (Especially as even *bona fide* experts who do *not* exceed their ambit can make *mistakes*.) (ii) Such scepticism is especially necessary when what the 'expert' commands is clearly wrong. Genuine expert authority is limited in scope and exercised for

the good of the expert's client or clients. (Doctor's orders are obeyed for the sake of the patient and so on.) Now the learner in Milgram's experiment is not supposed to be the experimenter's patient or client but a civilian volunteer like the teachers themselves. The experiment is not conducted for his sake but for the sake of science. Even the experimenter doesn't pretend that the electric shocks are doing him *good*, only that they are *not* doing him any *harm*. What possible expertise could justify such treatment? After all, the torturing of a bound and helpless victim is just about the paradigm of wickedness in our society. An expert who commands such things is either a fraud or is going well beyond what his expertise could license. His authority therefore is *command* authority though backed by fraudulent expertise. To obey such an authority or to believe such claims is itself a moral defect.