Conscience and Authority

Developed by Manuel Velasquez, Claire Andre, Thomas Shanks, S.J., and Michael J. Meyer

Since the Nazi atrocities toward the Jews were discovered at the end of the World War II, people have wondered how so many could have engaged in such obviously unconscionable behaviors. The death camps in which Jews were systematically tortured and killed were efficiently organized and managed by well-trained administrative personnel. These administrators were not extraordinarily vicious savages running amuck. On the contrary, the Germans who ran the death camps seemed to be ordinary "decent" citizens, with consciences no different from those of any of us. How could they have blinded themselves to the clear injustice of what they were doing? More generally, what motivates the unethical acts of ordinarily decent people?

Perhaps one of the most fascinating experiments ever conducted to investigate this moral question is known as the Milgram experiment, after Stanley Milgram, the psychologist who devised the experiment. Subjects in his experiment were told that they were going to take part in exercises designed to test other people's abilities to learn. They were seated at a mock "shock generator" with thirty switches marked from 15 volts ("slight shock") to 450 volts ("danger--severe shock"). Through a small glass window they could see the "learner" in the adjoining room strapped to a chair with electrodes on his or her wrists. The subject was told he or she was to test the other person's ability to memorize lists of words, and to administer a "shock" when the learner made the mistake, increasing the intensity each time. As the intensity of the "shocks" grew, and the learner pretended to cry out in more and more pain, eventually fainting, the experimenter told the subjects they had to continue administering the shocks. Astonishingly, although the subjects grew nervous and agitated, more than two-thirds administered the highest level of shocks to the learners when ordered to do so by the experimenter. Milgram concluded that when people are ordered to do something by someone they view in authority, most will obey even when doing so violates their consciences.

In view of the Milgram experiments, the Nazi crimes are not difficult to understand. Milgram himself suggested that one of the major factors accounting for the Holocaust was the ready propensity of human beings to obey authorities even when obedience is wrong. Indeed, although Milgram's experiment has been repeated dozens of times with many different groups of people, the results are always the same: most people will obey external authority over the dictates of conscience.

Although Milgram's findings are disturbing, more recent research has suggested that obedience to authority over conscience is not inevitable. Indeed, the research of Steven Sherman, also a psychologist, suggests that education can strengthen the power of conscience over authority. Sherman had a colleague contact several people by telephone, ostensibly to "poll" them on their opinions. The "pollster" asked them what they would do if they were ever ordered to perform a certain act that was morally or socially undesirable, and spent some time discussing the issues with them. Several weeks after the contact was made, these same people were actually asked to carry out that act. Surprisingly, two thirds refused to obey the order, a sharp contrast to Milgram's finding that two thirds of those ordered to act against their conscience would normally obey.

The implication of the Sherman experiment is that if people reflect on a moral issue before they are involved in it, they are more likely to behave in accordance with their consciences when that issue faces them in real life. Moral reflection and discussion of the kind found in the best types of moral education substantially enhance the ethical quality of a person's future choices.

This article appeared originally in Issues in Ethics V1 N2 (Winter 1988)

Issues in Ethics - V. 8, N. 1 Winter 1997