

Critical Analysis and Milgram's Response

Obedience to Authority and the obedience experiments that produced Stanley Milgram's famous book have produced almost equal amounts of surprise, curiosity and criticism. The criticism of social psychologist John Darley and playwright Dannie Abse are each representative of the general criticism Milgram has received; Darley focuses on whether the study has any relevance to real world events (such as the Holocaust), and Abse focuses on justification of the experiment, i.e. was the study worth doing in spite of the deception employed and its potential harm to the subjects. To Milgram, this criticism demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the goals and implications of the obedience study, to which he has responded by restating the goal of the experiment and explaining its beneficial effects upon the subjects. However, Milgram's response to Abse-style criticism is weak, and illuminates his obstinacy in defending his experiments.

John Darley's criticism focuses on how the findings of the obedience experiments are applied to historical or real-world situations. He points out many ways in which the behavior of the obedience subjects in Milgram's study differs drastically from the behavior of many others who commit atrocities: Nazi doctors or concentration camp executioners, for instance (Darley 133-134). However, since Darley's criticism focuses on the behavioral differences between the obedience study and historical events, Milgram responds in a strong, convincing way. Referring to the process of comparing laboratory studies with real-world situations, Milgram writes, "The problem of generalizing from one to the other does not consist of point-for-point comparison between one and the other... but depends on whether one has reached a correct theoretical understanding of the

relevant process” (Milgram 175). With this in mind, it becomes apparent that the behavior of laboratory subjects may be very different from that of people who have committed atrocities without disqualifying the generalizations that can be formed from the experiment. Behavioral analysis is the sort of “point-for-point” comparison to which Milgram refers. Milgram also writes:

Is the obedience observed in the laboratory in any way comparable to that seen in Nazi Germany? (Is a match flame comparable to the Chicago fire of 1898?) The answer must be that while there are enormous differences of circumstance and scope, a common psychological process is centrally involved in both events. (175)

The commonality Milgram is interested in is a “psychological process.” To find this commonality is the goal of the obedience experiments. Darley does not argue in his criticism that the psychological process with, for instance, Nazi doctors was different than that of obedient subjects; he argues that their behavior differs. Darley has misunderstood the goals and implications of the experiment and Milgram would respond, as he does in the recent quotation, by restating the goal of the experiment.

Milgram responds to Dannie Abse’s criticism in a similar fashion, attempting to restate the purpose of the experiment so as to justify what Abse would consider outright deception. Milgram writes, “As a dramatist, you surely understand that illusion may serve a revelatory function, and indeed, the very possibility of theater is founded on the benign use of contrivance” (198). Milgram’s response is an attempt to redefine the situation not as one of coercion and deception, but of illusion and revelation. The language Milgram employs redefines the role of the subject not as a guinea pig, but as a part of an artistic

demonstration. Indeed, the objection against deception or, to use Milgram's language, "illusion", is a moral one. Milgram seeks to justify his means by writing:

Misinformation is employed in the experiment; illusion is used when necessary in order to set the stage for the revelation of certain difficult-to-get-at truths; and these procedures are justified for one reason only: they are, in the end, accepted and endorsed by those who are exposed to them.

(198)

Milgram explains the situation this way: the illusion is necessary to arrive at a conclusion full of truth and understanding otherwise impossible to reach. One should note that Milgram is referring to post-experimental interviews and questionnaires when he speaks of acceptance and endorsement, and that Milgram's justification for the experiment hinges upon them and the supposed approval that subjects have following the experiment.

Although Milgram makes it appear that Abse's criticism misunderstands the goal of the experiment and the damage done to Milgram's subjects, in actuality, Milgram himself was unaware of the possible consequences of the experiment or any long term damage he potentially might inflict. He also fails to take into account the elements that might corrupt the usefulness of his post-experimental findings. For instance, following the experiment, almost all subjects have undergone some amount of stress, some a great deal. Also, some may feel embarrassed about their conduct, or feel obliged under the continued presence of authority to render information they perceive the interviewer desires. All these are factors that Milgram fails to adequately explain. Also, Milgram neglects to mention in the previous quotation how vague the post-experimental

questionnaires are. The following is Milgram account of one seemingly extraordinary subject who continued the experiment as far as possible. Milgram writes:

In a questionnaire returned by Mr. Batta several months later, he informs us that ... he fully believed the learner was getting painful shocks, and that the experiment has not bothered him at all. He believes more experiments of this sort should be carried out, and he answers "yes" to our question of whether he has learned something of personal value. But he does not tell us what. (78)

Though Mr. Batta appears to be an unusual sort of participant in the study, this passage illustrates the unreliability of the post-experiment questionnaires. Mr. Batta's affirmative answer casts doubt on the value of such an answer, if only that it demonstrates how vague the questionnaires were. Also, Mr. Batta exemplifies obedience to authority; how reliable is the information he gives to that same authority with regards to his personal thoughts? Milgram even goes so far as to end the passage with a cryptic "he does not tell us what," further underscoring the vague nature of the answer.

Thus, Abse's criticism is convincing in that Milgram's justification for continuing the experiment was not as bullet-proof as one might suppose. Milgram writes, "The central moral justification for allowing a procedure of the sort used in my experiment is that it is judged acceptable by those who have taken part in it" (199). This argument does not explain why the experiment was conducted in the first place. Milgram freely admits that the results of the experiment were not predicted by any involved (194). Thus, the deception could not have been justified by foreknowledge that subjects would eventually approve of being deceived, misled, and coerced. Milgram also writes to Abse, "I grant

there is an important difference in that those exposed to your theatrical illusions expect to confront them, while my subjects are not forewarned” (199). This difference is not trivial, and it is disingenuous to justify this deception *ex post facto*. Milgram, then, fails to adequately answer Abse’s criticism.

While Milgram has a strong defense against Darley’s criticism, he has an extremely weak defense against Abse’s criticism and ethical concerns in general. Now we can begin to see that Milgram was, perhaps, overconfident in implementing this experiment. He had a strong conclusion in mind for the experiment and was very shocked by the results himself. He was not about to abandon the experiment when the possibility of stress and emotional damage to subjects became increasingly apparent, and he even dismissed these concerns. It then appears as a likely conclusion that Milgram was overconfident in his obedience experiment in such a way as to disregard the possible harm done to the test subjects.

I hereby reaffirm the Lawrence University Honor Code.

Works Cited

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