

Milgram Revisited: Can we still use Milgram's 'Obedience to Authority' Experiments to Explain Mass Atrocities after the Opening of the Archives?

Review Essay

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Introduction

Milgram's 'obedience to authority experiments' are, together with Zimbardo's prison experiment, one of the most famous but also most controversial studies ever conducted.¹ Since its first publication in 1963, Milgram's research has drawn the attention not only of scholars but also of the media, and the experiment as well as the results have been widely debated and referenced, but also heavily criticized.² The 50th anniversary of his experiments and the opening of the Yale archives led to a new wave of publications and criticism.³ A lot of material on the Milgram experiments which until then had been hidden from scholarly and public scrutiny cast serious doubts on Milgram's actual findings and their relevance. Between 2011 and 2015, no fewer than four international peer-reviewed journals published a special issue on Milgram's experiments: *The Psychologist* in 2011, edited by Reicher and Haslam; *Theoretical & Applied Ethics* in 2013, edited by Herara; the *Journal of Social Issues* in 2014, edited by Reicher, Haslam and Miller; and *Theory & Psychology* in 2015, edited by Brannigan, Nicholson and Cherry. In addition, Gina Perry published a book on the Milgram experiments in 2012 entitled *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious*

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- 1 Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007).
- 2 One of the first to do so was Dianna Baumrind, 'Some Thoughts on Ethics of Research: After Reading Milgram's Behavioral Study of Obedience', *American Psychologist*, 19.6 (1964), 421-423.
- 3 See Stanley Milgram Papers, *Archives at Yale*, <<https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/12/resources/4865>> [accessed 24 February 2020]. The opening of the archives also led to new public interest, see the two recent films *Experimenter: The Stanley Milgram Story*, dir. by Michael Almereyda (Magnolia Pictures, 2015) and *Shock Room*, dir. by Kathryn Millard (Charlie Productions, 2015).

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Milgram Psychology Experiments. The aim of this review essay is to assess to what extent the opening of the archives and these publications shed new light on Milgram's experiments. The essay provides some information on Milgram and the experiment. It considers the initial criticism relating to the ethical dimension of Milgram's studies and then focuses on what was revealed after the opening of the archives. The following section addresses the question whether Milgram's experiments are in fact about obedience, while the last section asks whether Milgram's experiment can explain the Holocaust and other genocides.

Milgram: The Experimenter and the Experiment

Stanley Milgram was born in the United States in 1933. After graduating from high school – coincidentally the same school that Philip Zimbardo attended – Milgram went on to study political science and then obtained a PhD degree in psychology before going to work with Solomon Asch. The young and ambitious Milgram wanted to make a career of his own and to conduct experiments which would be more meaningful than 'assessing the lengths of lines'.⁴ Initially, he wanted to prove that people in the United States in the sixties were less conformist than those in Germany in the forties,⁵ but the ongoing trial of Adolf Eichmann in which Eichmann kept repeating that he was merely obeying orders intrigued him.⁶ The loss of family members in the purges and death camps of Nazi Germany during the Second World War explains his interest in both the trial and the Holocaust. Milgram's book suggests that he was disgusted by Eichmann's defence and that he wanted to prove that people don't just follow orders. His own findings, however, took him by surprise.

Although Milgram's experiment is widely known and referred to in every single social-psychology textbook, a brief summary is fitting. Milgram told his subjects that they were participating in a learning experiment designed to test to what extent pain, administered in the form of electric shocks as a punishment for making mistakes, would

4 See Gina Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments* (Victoria, Au.:The New Press, 2013), p. 28; Nestor J.C. Russell, 'Milgram's Obedience to Authority Experiments: Origins and Early Evolution', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50.1(2011), 140-164 (p. 147, pp. 149-150); Solomon E. Asch, 'Opinions and Social Pressure', *Scientific American*, 193(1955), 31-35.

5 Russell, p. 145.

6 The Eichmann trial was – unlike the earlier Nuremberg trials – a 'landmark in television history' which captured the attention of a wide audience. Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 209.

improve learning abilities. In reality, however, Milgram wanted to assess to what extent participants were prepared to give a fellow participant electric shocks when asked to do so. The participants had to start off by giving the learner an electric shock of 15 volts if they made an error learning word pairs. With each mistake the voltage increased a further 15 volts up until the maximum shock of 450 volts. Milgram conducted variations in the experiment and in some cases, the learner started to vehemently protest at being given shocks. Every time the participants wanted to quit, the experimenter used a series of standardized prods asking the participant to continue. The four prods were: (1) 'please continue;' (2) 'the experiment requires you to continue;' (3) 'It is essential that you continue' and (4) 'You have no other choice you must go on.' Unknown to the participants, the electric shocks were not real and the learner was an actor.⁷ As soon as the participants actually refused to continue or when they had used the 450 volt switch three times, the experiment was stopped.⁸

Before he actually conducted the experiment, Milgram believed that no one would reach 450 volts. Other experts he had asked predicted that: 'virtually all subjects will refuse to obey the experimenter; only pathological fringe, not exceeding one or two percent, was expected to proceed to the end of the shock board.'⁹ To his own astonishment, Milgram discovered in his first two tries that most of his participants did go to the end. He realized he was onto something significant and began to wonder what he could make people do.¹⁰ As of that moment, Milgram deliberately tried 'to create a context in which a majority of people would obey'.¹¹ He put great effort into the setup of his experiment, the shock machine, the choice of the actors as well as the script.¹² He thought carefully of a procedure to follow and took time to select the right people to assist in the experiment: a stern experimenter and the soft, kind learner impersonated by Jim Donough. When Milgram met him, he concluded that 'this man would be perfect as victim. He is mild

7 Most participants believed they were real though. See Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 49; Russel, p. 154.

8 All participants were male with the exception of one variation in which possible differences between male and female participants were assessed: no differences between the sexes were found.

9 Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p. 31.

10 Russell, p. 146.

11 Jolanda Jetten and Frank Mols, '50:50 Hindsight: Appreciating anew the Contributions of Milgram's Obedience Experiments', *Journal of Social Issues*, 70.3 (2014), 587-602 (p. 589); Russell, p. 150.

12 Stephen D. Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam, 'The Shock of the Old', *The Psychologist*, 24.9 (2011), 650-2 (p. 651).

and submissive, not at all academic.¹³ They also rehearsed a lot.¹⁴ Perry went through Milgram's notebooks and concluded: 'the set-up that he had created was carefully crafted to make it difficult for people to disobey.'¹⁵ Milgram, for instance, 'increased the number of switches from twelve to thirty, making the increments smaller.'¹⁶ This, as we shall see below, was likely to be one of the main reasons why he obtained the results he did. He also had to make sure that the participants actually believed that the learner was receiving real shocks.¹⁷ The shock machine looked real and impressive. Milgram was determined to make his mark and show the world the tremendous power of a social situation in which participants would obey and follow the demands of an authority.

All in all, Milgram conducted 40 versions and variations of his experiments, and the obedience rates varied enormously as an effect of the experimental variations. A total of 780 subjects participated in the experiments.¹⁸ The best-known variation and the one on which Milgram himself reported in his first publication is the so-called voice feedback in which 65% of the participants fully obeyed and gave the learner a shock of 450 volts.¹⁹ In a variation in which the subject had to push the hand of the learner onto a plate in order to make sure he would receive an electric shock, obedience dropped to 30%. In another variation, there were two rather than one experimenter and they disagreed, with one saying the experiment needs to continue and the other saying it needs to stop. In this case, all participants stopped. The main finding – and the figure that stood out – was, however, the 65% obedience rate.

Milgram had some trouble getting his first article on the experiments published but it eventually appeared in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* in 1963. In the article, Milgram drew a parallel with his experiments and the Holocaust and concluded that, probably, all of us could become perpetrators, and that the Holocaust could have happened anywhere: not because human beings were so evil but because they

¹³ Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Stanley Milgram, 'Behavioural Study of Obedience', *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67.4 (1963), 371–378.

obeyed and could come to obey evil leaders. In order to support his point he wrote:

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: 'Oh God, let's stop it.' And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end.²⁰

This passage shows why the experiment can be considered unethical, but it also shows the power of a social situation which can make individuals do things they would otherwise never do, namely give a fellow human being potentially lethal electric shocks.

Maybe the most compelling piece of evidence from Milgram's experiment is the film he made in which the struggle of several participants can be seen. The film is almost 45 minutes long. According to Perry, the aim of the film was to create: 'a visual document aimed at disarming critics and establishing the universality and profundity of Milgram's findings.'²¹ The film mainly focusses on the agonizing struggle of one of the subjects, Fred Prozi, who desperately wants to quit but nevertheless continues delivering the electric shocks up until the very end. Prozi is featured for a full 13 minutes, almost one third of the entire film. Milgram was very much aware of Prozi's powerful 'performance' and in his personal notes, called him 'brilliant' because of his 'complete abdication and excellent tension'.²²

Milgram rightly concluded that people were not intrinsically sadistic, but that 'something far more dangerous was revealed: the capacity for man to abandon his humanity, indeed, the inevitability that he does so, as he merges his unique personality into larger constitutional structures'.²³ This was an important finding, even though his theory about his subjects being reduced to an 'agentic state' is generally considered unconvincing. In his book published many year later (1974), Milgram drew many parallels between his subjects and Eichmann, and between

20 Milgram, 'Behavioural Study', p. 377.

21 Gina Perry, Seeing Is Believing: The Role of the Film *Obedience* in Shaping Perceptions of Milgram's Obedience to Authority Experiments, *Theory & Psychology*, 25.5 (2015), 622–38. Perry herself is very critical of the film and calls it: 'scientifically unconvincing, and an unreliable account of the Milgram's research' (p. 622).

22 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 284.

23 Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p. 188.

these experiments and the Holocaust. Milgram's experiment – just like Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment from 1971 – indeed seemed to show how easily people can be transformed from ordinary people into perpetrators. At the time, this was an innovative finding and 'revealed truths about human nature that most people did not want to acknowledge – that the capacity for evil resided in everyone and waited only for the right circumstances to make its appearance.'²⁴ This view countered the overriding view at the time that perpetrators were evil.²⁵

One of the first to respond critically to Milgram's research was Diana Baumrind in 1964. Her concerns related to the ethical dimensions of Milgram studies, and she was 'appalled at his deception and psychologically abusive treatment of participants'.²⁶ Baumrind argued that 'Milgram's subjects [...] were trapped by a trusted individual into committing an act that he would consider unworthy'.²⁷ Although the suffering of the subjects was real and genuine, the harsh critique was not always fair. Perlstadt concludes that: 'Milgram operated within the ethical guidelines that existed in the early 1960s. In fact, he was one of the first to publish his debriefing procedures and attempted to document whether or not his subjects experienced harmful after-effects'.²⁸ Baumrind's harsh criticism 'sparked an intense debate about the ethics of research with human subjects' and eventually led to establishing ethical guidelines which became institutionalized in 1973.²⁹

Baumrind was, however, not the only one to be critical. Milgram was also severely criticized by a newspaper, the *St Louis Post Dispatch*, on 2 November 1963, for conducting an experiment which was 'nothing but open-eyed torture'.³⁰ The next blow came when the National Science Fund decided not to fund further experiments by Milgram.³¹ When his temporary contract at Yale ended, Milgram was not offered a permanent position, probably because the criticism had damaged his reputation,

24 Ludy T. Benjamin and Jeffrey A. Simpson, 'The Power of the Situation: The Impact of Milgram's Obedience Studies on Personality and Social Psychology', *American Psychologist*, 64.1 (2009), 12–19 (p.12).

25 James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

26 Dianna Baumrind, 'When Subjects Become Objects: The Lies behind the Milgram Legend', *Theory & Psychology*, 25.5 (2015), 690–696 (p. 691).

27 Baumrind, 'Some Thoughts', p. 422.

28 Harry Perlstadt, 'Milgram's Obedience to Authority: Its Origins, Controversies and Replications', *Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, 2.2 (2013), 53–77 (p. 73).

29 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

31 Perry, 'Seeing Is Believing', p. 625.

and he had to look for another job which he eventually found. Milgram stayed in academia, but his later research never garnered as much popularity as his obedience experiments had. He died of cancer in 1984, aged 51.

Nevertheless, Milgram's legacy has persisted and his studies have been successfully replicated, in some cases with minor variations or with a different approach.³² His findings were generally confirmed.³³ In what is arguably the most notable replication, Milgram's obedience paradigm was used in the context of a French TV game show in 2010. This replication showed similar results to Milgram's – thus showing that his findings are far from outdated.³⁴

The Opening of the Archives: Shocking Revelations?

The opening of Yale's archive many years after Milgram's death made it possible for scholars to study the 'Stanley Milgram Papers', including all the notes and comments Milgram wrote down during the experiments, which had never been published before. These showed that Milgram himself had many doubts in the beginning but had pushed his doubts away. More troubling, however, is that the archives show, to use Nicholson's words, that: 'Milgram was not always forthcoming with the truth [...] and misrepresented several important facets of his research.'³⁵ Brannigan goes as far as to state that these new discoveries will 'fundamentally challenge the way scholars interpret Milgram and his experiments.'³⁶ But is this really the case?

The first troubling issue that was identified after the opening of the archives is that participants were not debriefed in the way Milgram

32 Thomas Blass, 'From New Haven to Santa Clara: A Historical Perspective on the Milgram Obedience Experiments', *American Psychologists*, 64.1 (2009), 37–45.

33 Blass; Jean-Léon Beauvois, Didier Courbet and Daniel Oberlé, 'The Prescriptive Power of the Television Host: A Transposition of Milgram's Obedience Paradigm to the Context of TV Game Show', *Revue Européenne de Psychologie Appliquée*, 62 (2012), 111–119 (p. 112), note that: 'Milgram's experiment was reproduced on more than 3000 persons, recruited from 12 different countries and every time, the same results were obtained'. See also Stephen Gibson, 'Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel & Zachary J. Goldberg (London: Routledge 2020), pp. 46–60 (p. 48).

34 David Chazan, 'Row over "Torture" on French TV', *BBC News*, 18 March 2010, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8573755.stm>> [accessed 2 April 2020].

35 Ian Nicholson, 'The Normalization of Torment: Producing and Managing Anguish in Milgram's "Obedience" Laboratory', *Theory and Psychology*, 25.5 (2015), 639–656 (p. 640).

36 Richard A. Griggs and George I. Whitehead III, 'Coverage of Recent Criticism of Milgram's Obedience Experiments in Introductory Social Psychology Textbooks', *Theory & Psychology*, 25.5 (2015), 564–580 (p. 565).

claimed. Perry concludes that Milgram failed to ‘dehoax’ ‘around 75 percent of his 780 subjects; some would wait months to learn the truth, others, almost a year’.³⁷ A former participant explains: ‘The experiment left such an effect on me that I spent the night in a cold sweat and nightmares because of the fear that I might have killed that man in the chair.’³⁸ Another said he checked the death notices in the papers for at least two weeks to see if he had caused a man’s death.³⁹ These findings are troubling. It seems that the experiment was far more unethical than had been assumed so far. We can only guess the reasons why Milgram failed to dehoax the participants. Pragmatically, in order to test many people, it is possible that he ‘didn’t want word to spread in the New Haven community about the real purpose of his research’.⁴⁰ His ambition might also have played a part. In an interview with Perry, Blass states: ‘I think, really, he was driven by the need to make a mark for himself. I believe that his ambition made him overlook or minimize the suffering of some of his subjects.’⁴¹

The opening of the archives also led to the discovery of a second problematic issue which casts doubts on Milgram’s methodological approach and consequently his findings. Analysis of the audio tapes makes it clear that the ‘experimenter didn’t always follow the controlled script for using the prods. He would parry participants’ protests, escalating the pressure by inventing coercive prods’.⁴² It even shows that the experimenter at times left the room, pretending he had a discussion with the learner.⁴³ The experimenter’s behaviour led Perry to conclude that ‘the slavish obedience to authority we have come to associate with Milgram’s experiments begins to sound much more like bullying and coercion when you listen to the material’.⁴⁴ From listening to the tapes, Perry concluded that the pressure in condition 20 was much higher than in the earlier experiments.⁴⁵ The experimenter didn’t stop at the 4th prod. Perry quotes Russel: Williams used ‘progressively more coercive [...] prods in trying to bring about what he sensed his boss

37 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 14.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

42 Griggs and Whitehead, p. 566.

43 Alexander S. Haslam and Stephen D. Reicher, ‘50 Years of “Obedience to Authority”: From Blind Conformity to Engaged Followership’, *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 13 (2017), 58–78 (p. 63).

44 Griggs and Whitehead, p. 566.

45 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 115.

desired.⁴⁶ Williams, the man who played the role of experimenter, kept track of the numbers of times he tried to convince a participant to continue. For one female participant this was 26 times.⁴⁷ As Perry puts it, Williams seems to have taken ‘a much more active role – certainly in the later experiments, where he made it increasingly difficult for people to disobey.’⁴⁸ This is clearly a troubling finding, as the prods were not standardized and there was more pressure on the subjects than Milgram had suggested.

The third problematic issue is that more participants than originally thought did not fully believe the shocks were real or at least had some doubts. This is slightly at odds with the first issue mentioned above which precisely shows that many subjects did believe the shocks were real and suffered as a result. The point, however, is that not *everyone* seems to have believed this. Perry suggests that only half of his participants fully believed the shocks were real and only one third among them obeyed.⁴⁹ Almost one quarter of the participants ‘had some doubts’ but nevertheless ‘believed the learner was probably getting shocked’.⁵⁰ Perry furthermore found that Milgram had asked one of his research assistants, Taketo Murata, to study the correlation between people who went to the end and those who believed the shocks were real. Murata found that ‘those who wrote that they fully believed the learner was receiving painful shocks gave lower levels of shock than those who said they thought that the learner was faking it’.⁵¹ ‘Milgram made a note on the bottom of Taketo’s analysis, arguing that the results couldn’t really be taken seriously because of course his subjects were more likely to say afterwards that they suspected or knew the experiment wasn’t real.’⁵² This might be true but we will never know for sure. Murata’s analysis might also suggest that, as Perry concluded: ‘the majority of Milgram’s subjects resisted orders when they truly believed they might be hurting someone.’⁵³ If true, this would indeed have a major impact on the

46 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 115; see also Haslam and Reicher, ‘50 Years’, p. 63.

47 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 116.

48 *Ibid.*, 118; see also Haslam and Reicher, ‘50 Years’, p. 63.

49 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, pp. 139–140.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

51 *Ibid.*, 140.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

outcome of Milgram's conclusions.⁵⁴ The findings from the archives disillusioned Perry:

[it] made me question the results Milgram claimed to have found. It made me realize how much we have trusted Milgram as the narrator of his research and how important it is to question the stories we've been told.⁵⁵

The revelations are indeed troubling. Nevertheless, 56.1% of the subjects fully believed the shocks were real, and 24.0% thought they were probably real – this is still over 80%, as opposed to only 2.4% who were convinced the shocks were not real.⁵⁶ If we took those who seriously doubted whether the shocks were real out of the experiment, still almost half of the people went through with giving shocks. Furthermore, many replications of Milgram's study have been conducted and these experiments show similar results.⁵⁷ We can thus conclude that although the number and percentage of people following through might be lower than Milgram suggested, he still demonstrated that a large number of people (probably about half) will follow through with the experimenter's demand. This is, in itself, a troubling and important finding.

In addition to the ethical issues (briefly discussed above) Milgram is criticized along two main lines which contradict each other. Some critics claim that his experiments are not about obedience at all, while others assert that his findings cannot explain mass atrocities because these atrocities were not committed out of obedience. These points of criticism will be discussed in the sections below.

Is Milgram's Experiment about Obedience?

Milgram himself believed that he had shown the power of obedience. The film made of the experiment was called *Obedience* and the full report on the experiment was published in 1974 in a book called *Obedience to Authority*. Some scholars, however, doubt whether Milgram's experiments were about obedience at all.⁵⁸ The strongest argument raised is that the

54 See also Griggs and Whitehead, p. 572.

55 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 12.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

57 See Blass; Beauvois and others.

58 See Nestar J.C. Russell and Robert J. Gregory, "Spinning an Organizational 'Web of Obligations'?" In Stanley Milgram's "Obedience" Experiments, *American Review of Public Administration*, 41:5 (2011), 495–518 (p. 497).

fourth prod ('You have no choice, you must continue') is the only clear order but also the least likely prod to be followed.⁵⁹ In his replication of Milgram's experiment, Burger realized 'that not a single participant continued after receiving prod 4'.⁶⁰ Some critics even suggest that this proves that people are inclined to disobey rather than obey.⁶¹ But is that indeed true? In deciding on this we must take into account, as Staub notes, that the fourth prod was only used when the subjects already seriously doubted whether they should continue.⁶² In fact, the style of the fourth prod actually requested obedience in a way that was, according to Staub 'rather absurd and resistance-generating'.⁶³ So if it wasn't about obedience, what could Milgram's experiment have been about? In the following subsection this question and the alternative explanations provided will be discussed.

Wanting to Do the Right Thing

Some scholars suggest that participants did not just follow orders but wanted to 'do the right thing'; wanted to do as was expected of them.⁶⁴ Others, and this would seem to support the same argument, stress that it has to do with misplaced trust.⁶⁵ Some scholars argue that the participants continued out of politeness, because they didn't want to

S. Alexander Haslam and others, 'Happy to Have Been of Service: The Yale Archives as a Window into the Engaged Followership of Participants in Milgram's Obedience Experiments', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 54.1(2014), 55-83; Haslam and Reicher, '50 Years: Gibson, Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments', p. 56.

59 Alexandra Craven and Jonathan Potter have insightfully distinguished between different types of directives. Directives are 'utterances designed to get someone to do something' but they can be formulated as a direct order, a request but also into more indirect forms or requests. This is all related to the entitlement of people making the requests and their orientation towards the contingencies on which the compliance with the directive may rest. Alexandra Craven and Jonathan Potter, 'Directives: Entitlement and Contingency in Action', *Discourse Studies*, 12.4(2010), 419-442 (p. 426). See also Jerry M. Burger, 'Replicating Milgram: Would People Still Obey Today?', *American Psychologist*, 64.1(2009), 1-11; Jerry M. Burger, 'Situational Features in Milgram's Experiment that Kept his Participants Shocking', *Journal of Social Issues*, 70.3 (2014), 489-500; Reicher and others, 'What Makes a Person a Perpetrator?', p. 399.

60 Griggs and Whitehead, p. 567.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 567.

62 Ervin Staub, 'Obeying, Joining, Following, Resisting, and other Processes in the Milgram Studies and in the Holocaust, and Other Genocides: Situations, Personality and Bystanders', *Journal of Social Issues*, 70.3 (2014), 501-514 (p. 506).

63 *Ibid.*

64 Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, pp. 159-160; Staub, 'Obeying, Joining', p. 506; S. Alexander Haslam and Stephen D. Reicher, 'Contesting the "Nature" of Conformity: What Milgram and Zimbardo's Studies Really Show', *PLoS Biology*, 10.11(2012) <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3502509>> [accessed 2 April 2020]; Jetten and Mols, p. 591.

65 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 60.

break the agreement they entered.⁶⁶ Others suggest that social identity theory provides an answer, whereby the subjects feel they share a social identity with the experimenter, a sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, or they did not want to go against the experimenter because it would make them feel awkward.⁶⁷ Others suggested that the subjects were motivated by an appeal to science.⁶⁸ All these points are valid, but the experiment also shows that as soon as participants were faced with a moral dilemma, many of them relied on the experimenter, a man in a position of authority, to decide what the right thing to do was. They placed their trust in his judgment. This shows, therefore, that it may not be (blind) obedience per se (just do as one is told) that made the participants comply. Rather, it is a form of submission or subordination, a phenomenon which Haslam and Reicher called ‘engaged followership’: ‘people are prepared to harm others because they identify with their leaders’ cause and believe their actions to be virtuous.’⁶⁹ This indeed seems to have been the case. The participants were stuck in a situation in which they let the experimenter decide for them: they thus conformed to his authority out of respect for his knowledge and followed his requests. Milgram himself concluded: ‘There is a propensity for people to accept definitions of action provided by a legitimate authority. That is, although the subject performs the action, he allows authority to define its meaning.’⁷⁰ In other words, authority figures can turn something bad (giving a fellow human being electric shocks) into something good (contributing to science).⁷¹ What this shows is that the participants did not blindly obey orders, but they let the experimenter define the situation by trusting him (the shocks may be painful but are not dangerous) rather than relying on their own knowledge (electric shocks are dangerous).

66 Staub, ‘Obeying, Joining’, p. 506.

67 Russel and Gregory, p. 500.

68 S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher and Megan E. Birney, ‘Nothing by Mere Authority: Evidence that in an Experimental Analogue of the Milgram Paradigm Participants are Motivated Not by Others but by Appeals to Science’, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70.3 (2014), 473–488.

69 Haslam and Reicher, ‘50 Years’, p. 59.

70 Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p. 145.

71 See Nestar Russell, ‘The Emergence of Milgram’s Bureaucratic Machine’, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70.3 (2014), 409–423 (p. 410).

Difficult New Task and Little Time to Think

According to Burger, the task given to the subjects in the Milgram experiment was more difficult than both Milgram and the participants had anticipated, and the combination of the novel situation and the urge to move on at a certain speed gave participants little time to think.⁷² Perry compared the experience with: 'stepping onto a fast-moving escalator.'⁷³ One of the participants seemed to confirm this by stating: 'I thought, I'm just going to go along with this thing. I don't know what's going on but let's get it over with.'⁷⁴ When a situation is new, people look at others for clues on how to behave. The other, in this case, was the experimenter. Burger notes that: 'The experimenter's influence came not from his position of authority, but because of his expertise.'⁷⁵ The point is that a position of authority is indeed not necessarily based on (formal) hierarchies but can also be based on (alleged) knowledge and expertise. In this case, the experimenter was assumed to be knowledgeable, an expert, and this made him into an authority.⁷⁶

Organizational Setting and Diffusion of Responsibility

Some scholars suggest that the organizational setting in which the participants were placed played a role. Russel and Gregory for instance argue that: 'Milgram's experiments have less to do with obedience to authority per se and more to do with how people resolve moral dilemmas confronting them in a structured organizational setting.'⁷⁷ This is indeed true: we are social beings and human conduct is primarily social in nature.⁷⁸ The difference between obedience and deviance

72 Jerry.M. Burger, 'Alive and Well after All These Years', *The Psychologist*, 24.9 (2011), 654–657.

73 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 42.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

75 Burger, 'Situational Features', p. 494.

76 In her discussion of the Milgram experiment, Perlstadt refers to an experiment in which school children had to assess the length of lines. Up to 89% of the school children changed their correct answer into a wrong answer after the experimenter, who was assumed to be very knowledgeable, asked: 'are you sure? Is it not the next line?' This clearly shows how susceptible children are to the influence of others especially if they are knowledgeable and thus in a position of authority (or vice versa). The same is likely to be true for adults. Perlstadt, p. 57.

77 Russel and Gregory, p. 495.

78 See Elliot Aronson, *The Social Animal* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2004); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 156.

is often the outcome of social interaction.⁷⁹ This is confirmed by the findings of Hollander, who analysed the transcripts of 117 sessions and found that the conversations often seemed like negotiations.⁸⁰ When confronted with unfamiliar situations or moral dilemmas, we often look at others for clues on how to behave. Human beings are driven by the desire to do the right thing, make sense of their lives, and to belong.⁸¹ A practical application of this is illustrated by Darley's and Latané's research on bystanders. They point to the so-called *bystander effect*, whereby the more people witness an emergency, the less likely they are to intervene. This is the case because people look at others to find clues on how to behave.⁸² In emergency situations, people would look at other bystanders. In organizational settings, however, it seems natural to find clues on how to behave by looking at 'the man in charge'. The additional advantage of looking at the person in charge is that this person also has a certain level of responsibility. The Milgram experiment showed that participants were bothered about their role and responsibility but felt relieved when the experimenter, the man in a position of authority, accepted full responsibility.

As we know from wider research, feeling a lack of responsibility leads to moral disengagement which makes it easier to hurt others.⁸³ Burger found evidence that those who expressed a sense of responsibility stopped at some point while others who didn't do so, continued.⁸⁴ The prods played an important role in the diffusion of responsibility.⁸⁵ Burger noted: 'Milgram created a situation in which his participants could easily deny or diffuse responsibility for hurting the learner.'⁸⁶ Burger did further research and concluded:

79 Andre Modigliani and Francois Rochat, 'The Role of Interaction Sequences and the Timing of Resistance in Shaping Obedience and Defiance to Authority', *Journal of Social Issues*, 51.3 (1995), 107–123. See also Mathew M. Hollander, 'The Repertoire of Resistance: Non-compliance with Directives in Milgram's 'Obedience' Experiments', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 54.3 (2015), 425–444.

80 Ibid.; Gibson, 'Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments'. According to Gibson, rhetoric also played a role: 'Obedience without Orders: Expanding Social Psychology's Conception of 'Obedience'', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 58.1 (2019), 241–257 (p. 247).

81 See Aronson; Haslam and Reicher, '50 Years'; Asch.

82 John M. Darley and Bibb Latané, 'Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8.4 (1968), 377–382.

83 Albert Bandura, 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3.3 (1999), 193–209.

84 Burger, 'Alive and Well', p. 656.

85 Haslam, Reicher and Birney.

86 Burger, 'Situational Features', p. 495.

Among those who had followed the instructions to the end, only 12,2% gave any indication that they felt some responsibility for the learner's fate. In contrast, 66,7% of those who had ended the procedure early expressed a sense of personal responsibility for what was happening to the learner.⁸⁷

This seems to indicate that being able to divert responsibility makes it easier to comply with requests to hurt a fellow human being. The experiment thus seemed to show that an authority figure almost naturally takes responsibility, and submissive subjects conveniently let them do so.

Small Increments and the Psychological Trap

Several scholars have argued that the way the procedure was set up, and especially the sequential nature of action, played a crucial role in the outcome of the experiment. The participant had to start with an acceptable moderate electric shock of 15 volts. With each mistake, the level of the shock was increased by 15 volts up to the totally unacceptable 450 volts. The crucial question, however, is: Where is the borderline? At what point does the shock level become unacceptable? Once the experiment started, the participants may have found it hard to realize what was going on and to take a clear stand by refusing to continue with the experiment. This was mainly due to the fact that the situation carried its own momentum. Russel and Gregory conclude that 'Milgram built an inherently bureaucratic structure – a "terrible machine" which gradually urged, pushed, prodded, then manipulated, lured and eventually tempted most participants into choosing harm to an innocent person'.⁸⁸ They furthermore state that: 'by the time these participants realized that they could not exit without a confrontation with the experimenter, they were at least half-way along the switchboard.'⁸⁹ Burger concludes: 'because of consistency needs and self-perception processes, each lever press made it easier for participants to press the next lever.'⁹⁰ This process can be compared with the foot-in-the-door-technique (once people comply with a small request they are more likely to comply to a large request) and the continuum of destructiveness as developed by Staub in which people learn by doing: each step

87 Ibid., p. 496. In a later replication of Milgram within the French TV show *The Game of Death*, researchers found similar results: 'obedient subjects attributed more responsibility to the producer than to themselves, whereas disobedient subjects did just the opposite': Beauvois and others, p. 116.

88 Russel and Gregory, p. 502.

89 Ibid., p. 509; see also Bauman, p. 157.

90 Burger, 'Situational Features', p. 492.

in the continuum of destructiveness makes the following step possible, even likely.⁹¹

Milgram himself was very much aware of the powerful force of the built-in sequential nature of the action and the psychological trap it entails: 'For if he breaks off, he must say to himself: "everything I have done to this point is bad, and I now acknowledge it by breaking off."⁹² Erdos agrees and explains why this can be seen as a psychological trap which spurs people to go on:

If subjects quit at any point up the line, they demonstrate that they could have disobeyed all along. They are trapped into obeying to the end if they are to deflect blame to the authority and persuade themselves that they are not responsible since they were following orders and had little control over the process.⁹³

Erdos consequently asserts that 'far from capturing the essence of obedience' the experiment highlighted the trap of self-deception. He concludes: 'This behaviour is fuelled more by inner than by outer forces. The influence of authority may have initiated it, but from then on it is significantly self-propelled.'⁹⁴ I fully agree. What likely played a role here is that the pressure to obey gets even stronger if arranged as an escalating commitment. The authority figure does play a crucial role in providing the participant with an excuse that is acceptable from his point of view at the beginning, and then in gradually pushing him to the end.

Not Blind Obedience

It was not blind obedience that Milgram measured or showed to exist but rather the tendency to go along with the experimenter because he was an authority figure in this particular context. Participants accepted the social definition of the situation as provided by the experimenter, precisely because he was in a position of authority and was supposed to know more than they did. The participants trusted the experimenter. We can thus conclude that the Milgram experiment is not about blind and unquestioning obedience to any order that is given, but that it rather shows how people in an authoritative position can make others

91 Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Russel and Gregory, p. 502.

92 Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p. 149.

93 Edward Erdos, 'The Milgram Trap', *Theoretical & Applied Ethics*, 2.2 (2013), 123-142 (p. 125).

94 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

do things they would otherwise not do. It is, in this sense, about 'the relationship of authority and subordination' as Bauman has already suggested.⁹⁵ It is not so much our response to orders but our response to authority that matters.⁹⁶ In line with this reasoning, Gibson concludes that we should redefine obedience as 'submission to the requirements of authority'⁹⁷ because there are 'more subtle ways in which authority operates, and in which obedience is enacted'.⁹⁸ We need to understand obedience in a 'complex socio-institutional context'.⁹⁹ In those situations, 'direct orders are not necessary for obedience, all that is needed is for the system to do its job – to persuade people that a certain thing needs to be done, and that they are the ones that need to do it.'¹⁰⁰

We trust authority figures because we rely on their knowledge and expertise, accept the definition of a situation as they provide it to us, and let ourselves be commanded by them, giving them full responsibility for our behaviour. We do so because we are raised to trust and follow authority figures and thus believe it is the right thing to do.¹⁰¹ Disobeying an authority figure seems awkward and makes us feel we are doing the wrong thing. Besides, it is easy to just follow others in situations in which we do not know what to do or in which (as was the case in Milgram's experiment) we are faced with a moral dilemma. If such an authority uses the power they have over others in such a way as to not confront them immediately with unacceptable demands (give someone a shock at the 450 volt level straightaway), that is, if the requests are more gradual, people will get caught up in a psychological trap. By using this gradual progression, people can end up following an authority up to the point at which they accept the unacceptable. In conclusion: Milgram's experiments are not about (blind) obedience per se but about how authorities can come to influence our behaviour by instilling a 'sense

95 Bauman, p. 153.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

97 Gibson, 'Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments', p. 56.

98 Gibson, 'Obedience without Orders', p. 246.

99 Gibson states that 'authority is built into the fabric of social relations in such a way that it no longer needs to be executed overtly, but rather so that people regulate themselves. [...] In Milgram's experiment, it is not simply the experimenter who constitutes the authority, but the wider system he inhabits, and of which he is a part'. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

101 Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1997), p. 266; Arthur G. Miller, 'The Explanatory Value of Milgram's Obedience Experiments: A Contemporary Appraisal', *Journal of Social Issues*, 70.3 (2014), 558–573.

of obligation' as Milgram himself concluded.¹⁰² This is acknowledged in the concept of 'crimes of obedience' as defined by Kelman and Hamilton.¹⁰³ A crime of obedience can be defined as 'an act performed in response to orders from authority that is considered illegal or immoral by the international community'.¹⁰⁴ Kelman and Hamilton also point out that subordinates do not need a direct order but often behave as they think is 'expected of them by their superiors'.¹⁰⁵ Milgram showed that there is a difference between *blind obedience to direct orders* and other variations of obedience which come down to *conformity to an authority's requests*.

Can Milgram's Findings Explain the Holocaust?

Milgram himself clearly believed that his experiments helped explain the Holocaust, and many scholars agree, including Arendt, Hilberg, Lifton, Kelman and Hamilton, Staub, Browning and Zimbardo, although they often add that other factors played a role too.¹⁰⁶ Other scholars are very critical, warn against drawing parallels or even conclude that 'Milgram's research has little, if anything, to say about the behaviour of the perpetrators of the Holocaust'.¹⁰⁷ But is that really the case? In this section I will go over these critics' principal arguments and discuss whether any have merit.

More Complex: Obedience Just One Factor

An argument many scholars put forward is that the Holocaust is far more complex than Milgram's experiment. Burger for instance notes: 'There is no logical reason why an explanation for a psychology experiment

102 Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p. 6. See also Ian Kershaw, *Working Towards the Führer: Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship*, ed. by Christian Leitz (London: Blackwell, 1999), p. 243.

103 Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 46.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

105 Kelman and Hamilton, p. 46.

106 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Books 1964); Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Kelman and Hamilton; Staub, *The Roots of Evil* and 'Obeying, Joining', p. 50; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992); Zimbardo.

107 Allan Fenigstein, 'Milgram's Shock Experiments and the Nazi Perpetrators: A Contrarian Perspective on the Role of Obedience Pressures during the Holocaust', *Theory & Psychology*, 25.5 (2015), 581–598. See also Augustine Brannigan, Ian Nicholson and Frances Cherry, 'Introduction to the Special Issue: Unplugging the Milgram Machine', *Theory & Psychology*, 25.5 (2015), 551–563; Burger, 'Situational Features'; Nicholson.

must also account for a complex phenomenon like the Holocaust.¹⁰⁸ Mastroianni concludes: ‘the idea that any of us could be transformed into *genocidaires* in a few hours in a social psychology laboratory is wrong.’¹⁰⁹ Undoubtedly, the Holocaust is far more complex and it cannot be explained by mere obedience. I would nevertheless argue that Milgram’s findings have not lost all merit. As already indicated above, much depends on how obedience is defined. If obedience is restrictively defined as ‘following direct orders’ (i.e. blind obedience), which suggests that the perpetrators were mere passive automatons, then this indeed does not help us any further in explaining the Holocaust.¹¹⁰ In my view, however, we should define obedience more broadly as subordination to an authority.

Milgram showed us how strong our natural tendency to follow an authority is, even when confronted with unethical demands which we do not like.¹¹¹ He showed us how difficult it is to go against an authority and how we can get caught up in a procedure or process.¹¹² To this extent, his findings remain crucial in understanding mass atrocities and we can give him credit for making us aware of one of the most important explanatory factors in an otherwise very complex situation.¹¹³ These findings are, however, just one piece of the puzzle, and I would like to stress that Milgram never suggested otherwise.

Little Pressure to Obey during Holocaust

Another argument often used is that during the Holocaust, obedience did not play an important role *because* there was very little pressure to obey.¹¹⁴ Some scholars note that the assumption that SS men who disobeyed orders were severely punished or killed is largely mistaken: ‘it was merely a matter of shame and disgrace for not measuring up the Nazi ideal.’¹¹⁵ This does not, though, mean that there was little pressure to obey. Firstly, although it might be true that, as Lewy suggests,

108 Burger, ‘Situational Features’, p. 498.

109 George R. Mastroianni, ‘Obedience in Perspective: Psychology and the Holocaust’, *Theory and Psychology*, 25.5 (2015), 657–669 (p. 668). See also Erdos, p. 137.

110 See also Staub, ‘Obeying, Joining’, p. 502.

111 Fred Prozi, the subject prominently featured in the documentary, is the best illustration of this.

112 Staub, *The Roots of Evil*; Kelman and Hamilton; Bauman; Baumeister; Guenter Lewy, *Perpetrators: The World of the Holocaust Killers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

113 Perry, *Behind the Shock Machine*, p. 280.

114 Fenigstein, pp. 581–585.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 593.

no SS officer was shot for disobeying an order to exterminate Jews, this does not mean that SS officers didn't believe that this was a serious possibility at the time.¹¹⁶ Besides, other punishments or demotions were a real possibility. Lewy, for instance, refers to the case of Klaus Hornig who refused to obey an order because, in his view, the order (to shoot Jews) violated international law as well as German law. Hornig was then charged with 'undermining morale because he had told his men of the illegality of shooting prisoners of war' and was sentenced to two and a half years imprisonment.¹¹⁷ This shows that there was a threat and people were punished for disobedience. Secondly, there was the social pressure to follow the commands of the authority. The sense of obligation and general duty to obey a higher-ranking officer, the pressure to defend one's country and to follow the leader, all put huge pressure on the lower ranking recruits to obey orders. Furthermore, SS soldiers had to give Hitler an oath in which they promised their loyalty. This oath by itself strongly inclined them to obey. In addition to the pressure of a possible punishment, the social and emotional pressure of not being a disgrace to either oneself (for violating the oath) or others (for 'being a coward') was tremendous.¹¹⁸

Some critics argue that because there was little pressure (which I disagree with), there was room for choice (which I partially agree with) and hence the behaviour should be attributed to other causes.¹¹⁹ However, the existence of other additional reasons to comply with authority does not mean that obedience, understood as the tendency to follow an authority figure, no longer played a role. Most scholars agree that obedience played an important role and that, as Lewy noted, the 'largest group participated because they had been ordered to do so' and wanted to do the right thing.¹²⁰ 'The right thing' was perceived as following the demands of an authority and going along with state policy. The genocide was not the result of spontaneous hate attacks (some of the early purges were) but was a well organized policy authorized by the state. Without the state, far fewer people would have gotten involved in the genocide. This shows that there was a strong pressure to go along with what people in a position of authority demanded, and that these people decided on the course of the events.

116 Lewy, p. 44. See also Baumeister, p. 323.

117 Lewy, p. 80.

118 See also Browning, p. 72.

119 See also Lewy, p. 45.

120 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Absent Moral Conflict and Willing Participants

A number of scholars argue that the moral conflict which is so visible within Milgram's participants was absent within the Holocaust.¹²¹ The fact that moral conflict is not clearly visible, however, doesn't mean it is not there. Research on perpetrators has consistently shown that most perpetrators find it hard to deal with their emotions at first, but then get accustomed to what they are doing and start justifying and rationalizing their behaviour.¹²² Kelman and Hamilton call this 'routinization' and Staub calls this phenomenon the 'continuum of destructiveness'.¹²³ Testimonies by perpetrators confirm the existence of these mechanisms and show that they gradually get used to carrying out extreme violence.¹²⁴ The crux here is that people change by doing.¹²⁵

Even fierce critics of Milgram acknowledge that perpetrators, such as the members of RPB 101, who were studied by Browning and Goldhagen, showed disgust but then qualified it as 'sheer physical revulsion'. They suggest that there was no 'ethical principle behind the revulsion'.¹²⁶ Yet the origin of the disgust is contested and may remain at the level of speculation, since the true source of 'animal pity' as Arendt called it, can be both: sheer physical revulsion or moral disgust.¹²⁷ But whatever the actual source of the disgust, it is acknowledged that many soldiers as well as perpetrators gradually morally disengage as they get used to what they are doing and become brutalized.¹²⁸ It is also known that at least some perpetrators suffer from nervous breakdowns,

121 Nicholson, p. 639; Fenigstein, pp. 588–590.

122 Andrés Valenzuela Morales and Mónica González, 'Confessions of a State Terrorist', *Harper's*, June 1985, <<https://harpers.org/archive/1985/06/confessions-of-a-state-terrorist>> [accessed 2 April 2020]; Lifton; Kelman and Hamilton; Alette Smeulers, 'Auschwitz and the Holocaust through the Eyes of the Perpetrators', *Driemaandelijks Tijdschrift van de Stichting Auschwitz*, 50 (1996), 23–55; Alette Smeulers, 'What Transforms Ordinary People into Gross Human Rights Violations?', in *Understanding Human Rights Violations: New Systematic Studies*, ed. by Sabine C. Carey and Steven C. Poe (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), pp. 239–256; Ditta M. Munch-Juriscic, 'Perpetrator Abhorrence: Disgust as a Stop Sign', *Metaphilosophy*, 45.2 (2014), 270–287; Staub, *The Roots of Evil*; Browning; Foster and others 2005.

123 Kelman and Hamilton; Staub, *The Roots of Evil*; see also Smeulers, 'Auschwitz and the Holocaust'; 'What Transforms'.

124 Valenzuela Morales and González; Rudolf Hoess, *Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolf Hoess* (New York: World, 1959); Don Foster, Paul Haupt and Maresa De Beer, *The Theatre of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict* (Cape Town: Institute of Justice and Reconciliation, 2005).

125 See Staub, *The Roots of Evil*; Smeulers, 'What Transforms'; Zimbardo.

126 Fenigstein, p. 591.

127 Munch-Juriscic.

128 Bandura.

nightmares and PTSD after the facts.¹²⁹ Perpetrators' trauma, however, is not something easily accepted or talked about.¹³⁰

Several scholars state that Nazi perpetrators believed that the killing was just and legitimate.¹³¹ Perpetrators have many different motives for committing mass atrocities amongst which are fear, greed and also ideology.¹³² A distinction needs to be made, however, between those who were convinced by a certain ideology and were keen followers of a man like Hitler, and those who were less enthusiastic but drawn into the violence (for instance, by following orders) and who started to embrace the existing ideology in order to rationalize and justify their own behaviour.¹³³ Human beings have a natural tendency to rationalize their own actions and to 'convince themselves (and others) that it [their behaviour] was a logical, reasonable thing to do'.¹³⁴ This is generally true but even more so when people do something wrong, when they commit a crime and certainly when they harm or kill a fellow human being. Trying to rationalize and justify our behaviour (often after the facts) is an attempt to soothe our conscience and to reduce cognitive dissonance.¹³⁵ Holding on to a belief or embracing an ideology can offer a means to cope and in extreme cases, to psychologically survive.¹³⁶ Within a genocidal regime like Nazi Germany, the whole state apparatus, the propaganda machine, the ideology, all were meant to make people believe that the genocide was an acceptable means to further German interests and to work for a better future.

129 See also the compelling evidence of this in the documentary *Four hours in My Lai*, dir. by Kevin Sim (ITV, 1989). Here, Vernado Simpson is a heavily traumatized Vietnam veteran who took part in the My Lai massacre. Smeulers 'What Transforms'; Janice T. Gibson and Mika Haritos-Fatouros, 'The Education of a Torturer', *Psychology Today*, 20.11 (1986), 56–58 (p. 58); Mika Haritos-Fatouros, *The Psychological Origins of Institutionalized Torture* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 62; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth: A Negro Psychoanalyst's Study of the Problems of Racism & Colonialism in the World Today* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 268; Foster and others.

130 Saira Mohamed, 'Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity', *Columbia Law Review*, 115.5 (2015), 1157–1216.

131 See, e.g., Fenigstein.

132 For typologies see Ronald D. Crelinsten, 'The World of Torture: A Constructed Reality', *Theoretical Criminology*, 7.3 (2003), 293–318; Manfred Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Alette Smeulers, 'Perpetrators of International Crimes: Towards a Typology', in *Supranational Criminology*, ed. by Alette Smeulers & Roelof Haveman (Antwerp: Intersenia 2008), pp. 233–265.

133 Smeulers, 'What Transforms'.

134 Aronson, p. 144.

135 Leon Festinger, *A Theory on Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanson: Row Peterson, 1957).

136 Daniel Goleman dubs this reaction appropriately as 'vital lies'. See Daniel Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).

Goldhagen suggests that Nazi Germany was a very anti-Semitic country before the Holocaust, but Lewy concludes that: 'prior to 1933, the Germans arguably were among the least anti-Semitic people in Europe, though hostility to the Jews has existed for centuries.'¹³⁷ Although some perpetrators were motivated by antisemitism, the fact that the extermination of Jews became state policy legitimized the killings.¹³⁸ Here the role of subordination to an authority is crucial. The willingness of the perpetrators to participate at a certain time does not prove that moral conflict has never been there, nor that they have been willing participants all along.

Tricked

Another argument used to criticise Milgram's experiment as having little value is that the subjects were tricked into believing they were contributing to science. Brannigan et al., for instance, note: 'What all of this testimony makes clear is that Milgram's research was a world away from the "real life" scenarios of unlawful killing that he claimed to be investigating.'¹³⁹ Brannigan et al. further note: 'Nazi killers were not working in the context of benign expectations associated with a "psychological experiment" [...]. [They] knew exactly what they were doing and many were glad to participate.'¹⁴⁰ Of course giving electric shocks in a laboratory environment in an experiment which didn't last long is a world away from a well-planned, well organized genocidal campaign which lasted several years and killed millions. The parallel mechanisms are however equally striking. First of all, the subjects in the Milgram experiment – at least in most variations – clearly heard the screams of the agonized learner and thus couldn't deny the pain he was in either. But even without hearing the screams it should have been clear to all subjects that the shocks were painful: it is common knowledge that electricity can be lethal. Besides, replications in which the subjects were clear about the damaging nature of their involvement showed that obedience did not drop, quite the contrary.¹⁴¹ Secondly, in

¹³⁷ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Lewy, p. 124.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹³⁹ Brannigan and others, p. 556.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 556. In a similar vein, see Nicholson, p. 653.

¹⁴¹ Wim H.J. Meeus and Quiten A.W. Raaijmakers, 'Administrative Obedience: Carrying out Orders to use Psychological Administrative Violence', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 16.4 (1986), 311–324.

the Milgram experiment the pain caused was justified by referring to the overriding higher goal (i.e. science). The parallel to Nazi Germany is once again striking: here too the killing itself wasn't seen as something glorious or even a goal in itself but rather as something which had to be done in order to achieve a higher and benign goal, namely to create a better world. Here too the killing was instrumental, or, to use Baumann's words: destruction as a means of creation.¹⁴²

The key question according to Nicholson is: 'How does it become 'normal' and 'ok' to torture or kill defenceless people?'¹⁴³ But here again Milgram himself provided the answer and should be given more credit. He showed how an authority can make us believe that what we are doing is okay and the right thing to do even if we hurt or kill others. Just as the experimenter in the Milgram experiment could make the subjects believe that the shocks were fine (despite everyone knowing that they are not), the Nazi leaders made many Germans believe that the Jews were to blame for all the misfortunes of the Germans after WWI and that in order to protect themselves and create a better world, they needed to get rid of them. The overarching goal (to create a better world) is used as a means to justify otherwise totally unacceptable behaviour. Once the end justifies the means, morality is reversed and harming or killing can be presented as a necessary means to achieve something important. This is illustrated by the infamous speech given in October 1943 by Himmler to officers commanding the infamous *Einsatzgruppen*, which killed many Jews:

Most of you know what it means when 100 corpses lie there, or 500 lie there, or 1000 lie there. To have gone through this and – apart from the exceptions caused by human weakness – to have remained decent, that has hardened us. That is a page of glory in our history never written and never to be written.¹⁴⁴

Again, I would argue that the parallel to Milgram, in which the subjects gave painful and potentially lethal shocks to a fellow human being in order to further science, is clear and very evident.

¹⁴² Bauman, p. 92.

¹⁴³ Nicholson.

¹⁴⁴ The original text was in German and reads as follows: 'Von allen, die so reden, hat keiner zugesehen, keiner hat es durchgestanden. Von Euch werden die meisten wissen, was es heißt, wenn 100 Leichen beisammen liegen, wenn 500 daliegen oder wenn 1000 daliegen. Dies durchgehalten zu haben, und dabei – abgesehen von Ausnahmen menschlicher Schwächen – anständig geblieben zu sein, das hat uns hart gemacht. Dies ist ein niemals geschriebenes und niemals zu schreibendes Ruhmesblatt unserer Geschichte.' Qtd. in Herbert Jäger, *Makrokriminalität* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1962), p. 82.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the outcome of Milgram's experiment should be used with more care than was the case before the files were opened. Obedience rates are slightly lower than as presented by Milgram. Nevertheless, these rates are still high. Perry, despite being disillusioned by Milgram, ascertains after analysing all data that: '43,6% of Milgram's participants went to maximum voltage.'¹⁴⁵ This remains a significant number. Secondly, we can conclude that Milgram's experiments are not about *blind* obedience but rather about how an authority can ensure subjects follow up on his or her requests, about how authorities can make us believe that it is legitimate to do something which we under other circumstances believe to be wrong. This finding helps us understand the Holocaust and other periods of mass atrocities, not because obedience is the only explanation, nor because we are passive automatons, but because we have a natural tendency to trust an authority and follow up on his or her requests. Many critics seem to imply that Milgram and other scholars who also argue that obedience and conformity play an important role, such as Arendt and Browning, are suggesting that the perpetrators were 'mechanically carrying out the murderous commands of their leaders'.¹⁴⁶ Yet this is inaccurate.¹⁴⁷ Perpetrators might have participated for many different reasons but it is still the context shaped by authority figures that provided them with opportunity, motive, and a sense of entitlement. Authorities can make people believe that within a certain context hurting or even killing people is the right thing. This is precisely what Milgram showed us and the reason why his research is so crucial in understanding mass atrocities such as the Holocaust.

¹⁴⁵ Perry, 'Seeing is Believing', p. 624.

¹⁴⁶ See Fenigstein, p. 592.

¹⁴⁷ See also Richard Overy, "Ordinary men," *Extraordinary Circumstances: Historians, Social Psychology, and the Holocaust*, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70.3 (2014), 515–30.

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