Human Destructiveness and Authority: The Milgram Experiments and the Perpetration of Genocide

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HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS AND AUTHORITY:
THE MILGRAM EXPERIMENTS AND THE PERPETRATION OF GENOCIDE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Government
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

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Approved, November 1995

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to reconsider the experimental studies of obedience conducted by Stanley Milgram in the 1960's. The primary question that the author seeks to address concerns the extent to which authority--as operationalized in the experiments--is a significant motivating force for individuals who come to participate in overwhelming acts of human destructiveness.

The experiments are described, followed by a brief discussion of the social function of authority and of the possibility that the perpetrators of genocide might be motivated by "ordinary" factors, including the power of authority.

Next, the relationship between authority and ideological motives is discussed. It is argued that what Milgram has actually measured is the phenomenon of continuing obedience to an authority which has clearly exceeded the legitimacy provided by its ideological foundations. Additionally, in this section, the possibility and the implications of a totalitarian system are discussed.

In the third section, the relevance of authority for explaining the participation in genocide by bureaucrats is considered, and it is argued that the experiments reveal many of the key factors which ease the bureaucrat's role and which help to ensure the continuance of compliance when the administrative machinery of a state is turned toward the perpetration of genocide.

In the fourth section, attention is turned to those who participate in genocide in a more "direct" capacity. Christopher Browning's work is drawn from extensively, and it is concluded that while authority still plays a distinct and significant role, it is less important here than in the bureaucracy and that other factors need to be taken into account in order to understand the participation of these perpetrators.

The final section briefly considers the prospects for lessening the destructive effects of obedience to authority.
HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS AND AUTHORITY:

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Experiments

The experimental setup is by now reasonably familiar. A naïve subject, solicited from the general population of New Haven, is brought into the "elegant Interaction Laboratory at Yale University." He is drawn primarily by the lure of "$4.00 (plus 50c carfare)" and is told on arrival that he will be participating in a study of the effects of punishment on learning. The subject, actually participating in the now-famous series of obedience experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram in the 1960's, is probably at least mildly relieved when the other subject--actually a confederate of the experimenter--draws the role of the learner and is promptly strapped into an "electric chair" hooked to a realistic-looking shock generator in the next room.

The true subject is seated before the shock generator. The first part of his task is to read off word-pairs to be memorized by the learner. When the learner is subsequently quizzed the responses are signalled back via an electronic device. A wrong answer draws the punishment: an electric shock administered by the subject. In reality, there is no shock, but the subject has no reason to suspect this.\(^1\)

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\(^1\)Martin Orne and Charles Holland have sought to question the validity of the experiment by claiming that at least some subjects would have doubted that the shocks were real. This objection is discussed in the appendix.
At first the subject's task is simple and relatively untroubling. His relevant desires—to obey the experimenter and to "earn" the $4.50 already received—do not yet contradict his general desire to act in a morally appropriate fashion.

The shocks start at 15 volts and increase by 15 with each additional mistake by the learner. The subject does not suspect, at the start, that he will be asked to go all the way to the end of the control panel. He does not suspect that obedience will take him past the labels "SLIGHT SHOCK," "MODERATE SHOCK," and "STRONG SHOCK," past "INTENSE SHOCK," "EXTREME SHOCK" and even "DANGER: SEVERE SHOCK." Little does he know that he will be asked to administer, in the end, three doses of electric shock at 450 volts (under which he sees the ominous label "X X X") before anyone else will terminate the experiment.

Yet this is precisely what is demanded of the subject. And, of course, the real purpose of the experiment is to test whether he will obey. In this baseline condition, and to Milgram's astonishment, fully 65% remained obedient until the end despite the warning labels, despite the learner's pounding on the wall at 300 volts and despite the chilling lack of any feedback whatsoever from the learner (who is, remember, in another room) between 315 volts and the final 450 volt shocks.²

²My brief description of the base-line condition is drawn from Stanley Milgram, Obedience to Authority (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974), especially pages 14-20 and 32-5. After 315 volts the subject is told to treat the lack of response as an incorrect answer after a brief pause. The experiment is terminated after three "punishments" at the final, 450 volt level. It is worth noting that in this base-line condition there are 12 more shocks administered by an obedient subject after the last feedback from the victim. In this base-line condition and in all of Milgram's experimental variations discussed below the number of subjects used is 40.
The Social Function of Authority

Except for a sadistic "fringe," most of the subjects in Milgram's analysis seemed reluctant to do the things obedience required. Their physical revulsion to the task was clear. The tension that accompanied compliance was described most dramatically in Milgram's original 1963 report, wherein he records that

Subjects were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh.

Milgram emphasizes that this was the "characteristic rather than exceptional" response and that, further, 14 of the first 40 subjects were prone to nervous laughter. Most dramatically, Milgram reports that three of these first subjects suffered "full-blown, uncontrollable seizures."4

Nor did people act in ways that they would have deemed appropriate. In order to measure the gap between what people would expect to do in the experimental context and what they would actually do, Milgram asked 110 people what they would have done in the experimental setting. Of those surveyed—39 psychiatrists, 31 college students, and 40 middle-class adults—none predicted that they would exceed 300 volts.5

Yet, despite obvious physical revulsion and apparent moral opposition, in the baseline condition 65% were fully obedient. Further, as Philip Zimbardo notes in a brief

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3 In experiment 11, in which the subject was allowed to choose the shock level he wished to utilize, 2 of the 40 (5%) went to the level labelled "DANGER: SEVERE SHOCK" or beyond (Ibid., 61).

4 Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 67, no. 4 (1963): 375. A great deal of ethical criticism was levelled at Milgram's work based on this rather convincing account, which led some to fear that there might have been psychological damage to the subjects. It is perhaps for this reason that Milgram left this impressive description out of the 1974 monograph.

5 Milgram, Obedience to Authority, 27-9.
review of the Milgram experiments, even those subjects who were disobedient were limited by the bounds of acceptable behavior. They did not, Zimbardo writes, "go to his [the subject's] aid, denounce the researcher, [or] protest to higher authorities." Rather, after refusing to go on, they "waited to be dismissed by the authority."6 Why did subjects find it so difficult to disobey?

It is worthwhile to begin by asking where authority comes from and how it comes to bind us at all—a question with which Milgram begins his analysis, writing that

Obedience is as basic an element in the structure of social life as one can point to. Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living, and it is only the man dwelling in isolation who is not forced to respond, through defiance or submission, to the commands of others.7

The default response is submission, though, and while it is useful to make the distinction that Ervin Staub lays out, between pro-social values—such as an opposition to the infliction of suffering on innocent people—and the morality of "obligation, duty, and the necessity of living by rules,"8 it is important to see that obedience to authority, by itself, is also a pro-social value. It yields a mechanism for social interaction in a world in which people disagree and have conflicting desires.

The benefits of authority are so clear that one of the greatest thinkers of the Western tradition, Thomas Hobbes, went so far as to encourage near-absolute deference to the sovereign, basing his argument largely upon the claim that any damage done by

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7Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 1.

obedience to authority could not match the horrors of a war of all against all. While we may, living 50 years after the Holocaust, consider Hobbes to have seriously miscalculated the damage that could be done through strict obedience, the Hobbesian point cannot be lost entirely.

Thus we are presented with the dilemma of authority of which Milgram speaks. On the one hand, we feel compelled to act in accordance with the inner convictions that derive from the general norms of society, from personal reflection, or from our religious or moral training. On the other, we all implicitly recognize the socially destructive nature of disobedience. Disobedience risks destroying the laws which might, after all, say to us "We have given you birth, nurtured you, [and] educated you."10

On a day-to-day basis, no "reason" for obedience needs to be given or sought. On the contrary, it is disobedient acts which require explanation and justification. We learn the value of deference early and find it constantly reinforced--in the family and the schools, in the workplace and the military11--and yet in crucial moments we expect people to sit in judgment over even the leaders of the state. Is it reasonable? After all, Hitler was an elected leader, but was able to transform his position of (democratic) power into the most destructive position of authority in history.

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9 "The only way to erect such a common power, as may be able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort, as that by their own industry, and by the fruits of the earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly; is, to confer all their power and strength on one man, or upon one assembly of men." Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 132.


11 Milgram discusses the learning of deference to authority in Obedience to Authority, 135-8.
Hitler was able to do this in large part because the obedient Germans—or in any
event the great majority thereof—were rewarded for their trust. Staub writes that:

Once in power, the Nazis created order, stability, and material well-being. Germans who were not opponents or victims of the system lived increasingly comfortable, satisfied lives under the Nazis until the Second World War began.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, due to obedient behavior, society functions more smoothly, the habit of obedience is reinforced, and, generally, good things will come to those who obey. But what happens when this great power is abused?

\textit{Obedience and the Perpetration of Genocide}

Milgram believes that his experiments reveal one of the key processes by which individuals come to participate in the most astonishing and horrifying acts of human destructiveness. The claim has a certain \textit{prima facie} plausibility, and while it is plain that Nazi Germany (to use the most obvious example) was a sadist's paradise and that many of the SS agents in the death camps took up their roles by choice, it is also true that participation in the Holocaust extended to large numbers of "ordinary" German soldiers and bureaucrats who did not volunteer for the roles they would fill.\textsuperscript{13}

\footnote{Staub, 116.}

\footnote{Molly Harrower found that, by one test, even those in the upper echelons of the Nazi hierarchy might pass for "normal." Although she notes that we would like to believe that the perpetrators of genocide are "as different from normal people as a scorpion is different from a puppy," she presents evidence to the contrary. Harrower sent copies of the Rorschach test records of eight Nazi war criminals—Adolf Eichmann, Hjalmar Schacht, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Rudolf Hess, Constantin von Neurath, Hermann Goering, Albert Speer, and Baldur von Schirach—along with eight other records to ten Rorschach experts who had agreed to participate in the study. The experts were unaware that any of the records were from war criminals, and were far from suspecting it. On the contrary—in ranking the responses of the experts, Harrower sorted the sixteen records into four even groups. The Nazis were evenly spaced through the four groups, with two listed as having "superior personalities," two categorized as "normal," two as "less than adequate" and two as "impoverished." Molly Harrower, "Were Hitler's Henchmen Mad?" \textit{Psychology Today}, July 1976, 76-80.}
Nor can all of those involved in genocidal killings in Armenia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and unfortunately one must add the catch-all—et cetera—be construed as sadists and madmen. Perhaps the most frightening truth concerning participation in genocide is that "ordinary" soldiers and citizens have usually played a substantial role. What is more, it is not only the individuals who appear ordinary—rather, upon inspection, their motives often seem to be ordinary as well. They were invariably pushed by ideology—and, in some individuals, sadism—yet they were also driven by the search for status, job security and promotion, by the desire to conform and to fulfill their assigned roles, and by the general obligation to obey the voice of authority.

There are two "types" of perpetrators that one can study regarding most 20th century genocides: one can speak of the bureaucrats who arrange the technical details of systematic genocide and of the soldiers who actually participate in the killing or in subsidiary processes. I will deal with these two groups of perpetrators separately, as it seems reasonable to suppose that their motives may differ. First, however, I will consider the role of ideology and its interaction with the other forces which may motivate the perpetrators of genocide.
2. IDEOLOGY

No motives, ordinary though they may be, operate in a vacuum: there is a complicated interaction between ideology and all other reasons for action. While the perpetrators of a genocide may be, to a significant extent, moved by social forces, the desire for promotion, etc., they are, nonetheless, far more easily led to kill if a pretext is given and if the *zeitgeist* is amenable to the commands received. Soldiers inundated by the propaganda of racial purity and by the systematic denigration of the targeted group will need less "motives" of whatever variety to encourage their participation. Nazi soldiers who claimed not to hate Jews, and even to have Jewish friends, would undoubtedly have put up more resistance had the command been given to kill their "Aryan" neighbors.

*Staub's Warning*

Staub warns against attempting to glean too much from Milgram's work alone. He goes so far as to suggest that

Milgram's dramatic demonstration of the power of authority, although of great importance, may have slowed the development of a psychology of genocide, as others came to view obedience as the main source of human destructiveness.

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14Helen Fein observes that the exclusion of the victim from the "sanctified universe of obligation"—the "circle of people with reciprocal obligations to protect each other"—was a precondition of both the Armenian genocide and Holocaust. Helen Fein, *Accounting For Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization during the Holocaust*, (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 4-6.
While this does not comprise a critique of the experiments as such, it does caution us concerning the manner of their usage. It also gives us a reason to consider the interaction between authority and some of the other relevant forces.\textsuperscript{15}

Specifically, Staub writes that obedience is "not the true motive force for mass killing or genocide" and that "those who willingly accept the authority of leaders are likely to have also accepted their views and ideology."\textsuperscript{16} I think that Milgram's earliest critic, Diana Baumrind, was raising a similar point when she objected to Milgram's analogy to the Holocaust on the grounds that, in the Holocaust, each of the direct perpetrators was carefully led to believe that he was "acting rightly" as "an agent in a great cause."\textsuperscript{17}

Although Milgram discusses the need for the commands of an authority figure to mesh with both the "function of authority" and the "overarching ideology" involved,\textsuperscript{18} he does not fully develop the complex interrelationship between authority and ideology, nor does he consider certain important differences between the role of ideology in the experiment and its role in a genocidal context. I will attempt to fill these gaps in the analysis.

\textsuperscript{15}Staub, 29.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{18}Milgram, \textit{Obedience to Authority}, 141-3.
Authority and Ideology

Herbert Kelman writes that there are two means by which those in authority can compel others to obey. First, they can derive power from "an overriding obligation"--that is, by appealing to the values of loyalty and obedience as such. Second, they can "invoke a transcendent mission," such as racial purity or the creation of a master race. Thus, there is a sense in which it is incorrect to separate the effects of authority and those of ideology into two distinct categories since, in the real world, the manipulation of ideologies is one of the means by which authority figures induce compliance.

When people are asked by an authority figure to commit atrocities, the effort to redefine the meaning of the acts such that they no longer seem wrong almost inevitably follows. Thus, rather than simply killing many innocent people, the Nazi soldiers were told that they were helping to create a superior breed of humankind. They weren't murdering fellow-citizens, but instead were destroying "life without value" and enemies of the state besides.

A key difference thus emerges between authority as operationalized in the laboratory and authority as it operates in the world. Whereas the experiment seems clearly to exceed the bounds of its own justification--the desire to study the effects of punishment on learning--the Holocaust cannot be said to have overtaken the ideology of racial purity. In the real world, it is rare that an authority figure will give non-routine instructions without providing some attempts at justification. These attempts, as with the racial

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ideology of the Nazis, may seem entirely illegitimate to outsiders, and yet may be vital to the continuance of high rates of compliance.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus it could be said that Milgram is actually recording the phenomenon of continuing obedience to an authority figure that should have lost all legitimacy—even for those within the authority structure. Hence, while he doesn't make this entirely clear, his analysis is primarily focussed upon the first, non-ideological sense of authority which Kelman discusses.

Staub has accused Milgram and those who draw too uncritically from his work of failing to take the ideological bases of authority into account. This is a reasonable point: after all, the Milgram experiment almost directly invites us to consider the similarities between 1960's residents of Connecticut and Germans of the Nazi era. Its goal is to examine and highlight the short-term, "direct" powers of authority and obligation. If it does this too well, it risks concealing other important dimensions.

\textsuperscript{20}Milgram does stress the importance of science as a legitimating ideology (in \textit{Obedience to Authority}, 142-3), and it is important inasmuch as it both creates the authority relationship and gives a meaning to the situation which legitimizes the commands of the experimenter. Rather than simply shocking a person for saying the wrong words at the wrong time, the subject believes he is participating in an experiment which will yield valuable information about the relationship between punishment and learning. Nonetheless, the experiment quickly moves beyond what any reasonable person would say that science justifies.
The Power of Ideology

This is really where we should start an analysis of the reasons for participation in genocide. Before asking questions like "What social forces encourage ordinary men to participate in great evil?" we need to ask whether they perceive the acts they do as being evil. In the experiment, as discussed above, it seems unlikely that people regarded science as sufficient justification for risking the death of a fellow subject. In the Holocaust and in other instances of the systematic destruction of life, though, we need to at least consider the possibility that the killings failed to go against the consciences of the murderers.

Staub addresses this problem directly when he introduces the distinction between being "aware of the conflict" and choosing "without awareness or conscious deliberation." He gives as examples a society of headhunters whose behavior would be considered immoral by outsiders but not by the members of the society in question and groups which require males to kill "designated enemies," concluding that

To the extent that a group completely socializes its members into such conduct, we cannot expect them to have a separate perspective or to question its conduct on their own.

Staub brings up the point not to defend the Nazis but to get to the point of asking how we can get people to "stand apart" from the demands of authority in the future--to judge authority by standards external to it.21

Nonetheless, the nearness of Staub's discussion to Adolf Eichmann's claim that open disobedience in the Nazi regime was "unthinkable" is worth noting. Arendt reports

21Staub, 147-8.
that the strategy of the defense in the Eichmann trial was, in part, to raise a series of related questions:

"Don't you think that irrational motives are at the basis of the fate of [the Jewish] people? Beyond the understanding of a human being?" Is not there perhaps something like "the spirit of history, which brings history forward...without the influence of men?"\(^{22}\)

This "unthinkableness" of disobedience is clearly the aim of the sort of holistic structure of authority that comprises what is referred to as a totalitarian regime.

Such a regime uses its ability to manipulate the public mythos as an instrument of control, with the leaders attempting to impose an interpretation of the world consistent with the commands they make of others and designed to lessen the difficulties associated with carrying out those commands. Conceivably, if they were truly successful in the attempt to manipulate the public morality, the authority figures in such a regime could so completely dominate the interpretation of events as to make the recipient of orders fail to even consider the possibility that compliance might be morally wrong.

Whether the Nazi structure, or any other ideological structure that has existed was totalitarian is doubtful. Even in a regime like the Third Reich, it seems unlikely that a malevolent authority could, in the space of a decade, obliterate all traces of the pro-social values of the Western tradition. Moreover, there is plenty of evidence that the Nazis knew that what they were doing was wrong by the standards of contemporary Europe. As Anna Pawelczynska points out, the "adherents of the Nazi program of genocide erased and

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destroyed the traces of crimes they committed, thereby revealing an awareness of the criminal nature of their activity."\textsuperscript{23}

Further, there is the possibility, which Milgram raises, that an "innate" morality exists which cannot be wholly silenced. Milgram notes that we seem to have some internal mechanism which, generally, prevents us from harming others. Such an "inhibitory mechanism" would have obvious evolutionary advantages, and Milgram considers the question of its existence in us to be rhetorical, insisting that

we know that the impulse to gratify instincts destructive to others is checked by a part of our nature. Conscience or superego are the terms used to refer to this inhibitory system.\textsuperscript{24}

In the end it seems reasonable to conclude that ideology is not the whole story. While ideology always plays a role which--following Staub's advice--we should not overlook, other factors must play a role as well. Ideology interacts with other motives, including the non-ideological powers of authority, which can in turn be used to fill the gaps in an ideology which is less than totalitarian. Milgram has shown that even if some of the perpetrators of a genocide or other act of human destructiveness have doubts they might be behaviorally indistinguishable from true ideologues.


\textsuperscript{24}Milgram, \textit{Obedience to Authority}, 127. Nonetheless, the question of whether a strong, internally consistent structure of authority could come alarmingly close to silencing that part of our "nature" would also be rhetorical. Richard Rubenstein writes in \textit{The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future}, (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1978), 92, that

It is, of course, possible to reiterate traditional affirmations about the innate dignity of human beings, but the existence of bureaucratically administered societies of total domination \textit[i.e., Auschwitz\textsuperscript{2}] is the most compelling empirical refutation of all such claims.
Although we can't empirically separate the effects of ideology from those of authority and other social forces, we can still consider the ways in which these two forces interact in a complementary fashion and in which authority, separated from ideology, still exerts considerable pressure on those to whom its commands are directed. In the remainder of my essay I will focus upon the non-ideological factors promoting participation in genocide by bureaucrats and by perpetrators with a more direct role.
3. BUREAUCRACY AND GENOCIDE

The Banality of Bureaucrats

Bureaucracy is the prevailing form of authority structure utilized by the modern state, and understanding the role of the bureaucrat is crucial to understanding the perpetration of genocide by such a state. Although we may desire to understand what forces created Hitler or how he (and perhaps his closest colleagues) came to the decision to annihilate entire races of people, it is the participation by large numbers of people in the state administrative structure who were not plainly sadistic or insane that should concern us most.

After all, the existence of murderous, evil individuals is not a new phenomenon: it was not Hitler that made the Holocaust possible. Rather, it is the entirely new phenomenon of bureaucratic murder and the detailed administrative oversight of genocidal policy that is new and startling. To imagine that this sort of authority will not be used again in the perpetration of genocide now that the "efficiency" of killing by bureaucracy has been demonstrated would be extremely utopian.

Richard Rubenstein discusses the ways in which the Holocaust, as a systematic genocide was "only possible...when the project was taken out of the hands of bullies and hoodlums and delegated to bureaucrats."25 Without the involvement of bureaucracies,

25Rubenstein, 27. The quotation is italicized in the original.
neither the Holocaust nor the Armenian genocide could have gone so far beyond the level of pogroms and isolated massacres. Once the bureaucratic method was applied to destruction, however, a whole new form of terror was available to malevolent leaders everywhere. The best-known statement of the possibility that the perpetrators of genocide may have been ordinary men motivated by ordinary desires is probably Hannah Arendt's report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. It is particularly relevant to the question of the involvement of bureaucrats in the processes of human destructiveness.

_Eichmann in Jerusalem_ was published in 1963—the same year that Milgram released his first report on the laboratory studies on obedience. The book's provocative subtitle, "A Report on the Banality of Evil" sums up the equally provocative thesis of the work. Arendt challenges that Eichmann—the mid-level Nazi official in charge, among other things, of scheduling the trains that carried millions of Jews to their deaths—was more a "clown" than a "monster" and that he was, as his defense attorney insisted, motivated by the urges most readily associated with bureaucrats, and not mass-murderers. Rubenstein goes still further in suggesting that even Heinrich Himmler does "not seem to have been a sadist" but was _"the perfect bureaucrat."_

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26 While the Holocaust is the most obvious instance of a modern state turning its administrative apparatus toward destructive ends, several authors have noted (with Leo Kuper) that the Armenian genocide "was the precursor of the coldly calculated bureaucratic genocide." Leo Kuper, _Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century_ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 105. Michael Arlen writes that "the Turkish massacres and 'deportations' of the Armenians were the most notable early example of the employment of modern communications and technology in the acting out and realization of political violence." More specifically, he notes that improvements in administration and internal communications allowed the genocidal "net' to be widely cast and the casting of it to be part of a unified procedure." Michael J. Arlen, _Passage to Ararat_ (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975), 243-4.

27 Arendt, _Eichmann in Jerusalem_, 22-3, 49.

28 Rubenstein, 24.
Bureaucracy and Feelings of Responsibility

Milgram's explanation of the high rates of compliance found in the laboratory centers upon a cognitive shift which leaves the subject in what he calls an "agentic state." According to Milgram, when an individual enters a hierarchy he "no longer views himself as acting out of his own purposes but rather comes to see himself as an agent for executing the wishes of another person."\(^{29}\)

There are two primary aspects of bureaucratic systems which serve to eliminate individual feelings of moral responsibility. First, there is the hierarchical nature of such systems. Authority figures often have--or claim to have--special information which allows a better view of the "big picture": and questions of morality often seem to belong to a class of questions the answer to which requires a holistic, big picture point of view.

Accordingly, those in the lower echelons of an administrative system frequently claim that they are no more "responsible" for the moral consequences of their actions than a manual laborer would be responsible for a flaw in the engineer's blueprint. This shifting of responsibility upwards is not entirely unreasonable: after all, when we seek to prosecute a crime performed by a group of people we go after the leaders first and foremost, having no doubts about whom we consider to be most responsible. Nonetheless, the moral results

\(^{29}\text{Milgram, Obedience to Authority, 132-33. While Milgram's discussion of the factors which lead people to obey is generally good, I dislike the term "agentic state." If taken too literally the concept is misleading, inasmuch as it cultivates the impression that people either make a sudden shift to the agentic state and become uncritically obedient or fail to make this shift and retain their autonomy. Milgram clearly does not intend this simplistic interpretation. Rather, he discusses at some length both the subtle factors which characterize the agentic state, and which draw people in and bind them to this state, as well as the ways in which a person influenced by the pressures of the situation can nonetheless break free (Ibid., 143-164). Nonetheless, by grouping the various factors under a single heading he risks encouraging an overly dichotomous understanding of the ways in which authority influences behavior.}\)
of action cannot be completely concealed when the entire system is known to be applied to a genocidal process. The "following orders" defense--true though it may be--cannot be accepted in a world where the most substantive actions are done by bureaucrats. Holding bureaucrats responsible may be the key to making them feel responsible.\(^{30}\)

A second, closely-related way in which bureaucratic systems can take feelings of responsibility away from the individual is through the narrowing effects of the division of labor. Eichmann's job was (in part) to oversee the scheduling of trains. While Eichmann certainly knew where the trains were going--and the fate of their occupants--he could, in working through the specific technical problems involved, treat a train taking Jews to the death camps as any other train carrying object X to destination Y. What the trains actually carried and whether the Jews deserved to be killed was evidently not a problem that troubled Eichmann overly much.

Thus the division of labor is closely related to the general "dehumanization" which occurs in bureaucracies and which Rubenstein discusses. Rubenstein quotes Max Weber's observation that a perfected bureaucracy "succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation."\(^ {31}\) While it seems unlikely that all "emotional elements" have ever been eliminated from a genocidal bureaucracy--as mentioned above, ideological factors and the

\(^{30}\) There is also a tendency to shift responsibility "downward" through the hierarchy toward those who do the actual killing. The resulting dual movement of feelings of responsibility in both directions has the effect of creating what Bauman calls a system of "free-floating responsibility" in which each individual actor is able to shift blame to someone else. Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 163.

\(^{31}\) Rubenstein, 22.
devaluation of the victim always exist to ease the task—the role of dehumanization in making systematic genocide possible should not be overlooked.

A dramatic example of the shift of responsibility which can occur in a hierarchical setting, and of the tendency to narrowly focus on the job at hand is presented in one of the case studies Milgram includes in his book. He records the following report of a post-experimental conversation between a subject and his wife. The subject relates that:

I believe I conducted myself behaving and obediently, and carried on instructions as I always do. So I said to my wife, "Well here we are. And I think I did a good job." She said 'Suppose the man was dead?"

The subject's reply? "So he's dead. I did my job!" The issue for this would-be perpetrator was not whether the man had deserved what happened to him, and not whether science was sufficiently advanced, but only whether he had fulfilled the requirements of the task assigned to him.

Other Factors

Kelman discusses the ability of the bureaucrat to focus "on the details of his job rather than its meaning" and relates the ease with which this can be done to the physical distance between the actor and the victim. Milgram's proximity series directly measures this "tendency of the individual to become so absorbed in the technical aspects of the task that he loses sight of the broader consequences."

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32 Milgram, Obedience to Authority, 88.

33 Kelman, 46.

34 Milgram, Obedience to Authority, 7.
The proximity of the subject to the victim was the first variable that Milgram systematically altered in his general experimental schema. He found that simply bringing the victim into the room with the subject lowered the rate of full compliance from 62.5% in the relevant control condition to 40%. Requiring the subject to push the victim's hand onto the shock-plate to administer the shock lowered compliance to 30%.\(^{35}\) Apparently having the victim in the room made it more difficult to do harm to him: it is unfortunate that real-world bureaucrats don't have this problem.

Why does proximity have this impact? Milgram attributes his findings to several factors, among them the increase in empathic cues from the victim which causes his suffering to be less "abstract," the experienced unity of the act—in Kelman's terms, the all-too-clear "meaning" can no longer be readily separated from the "details" of the job—and the tendency to focus more narrowly on the experimenter when he is the only one in the room. This last tendency is tied to what Milgram later calls "tuning"—the tendency of the person being commanded to focus his attention upon the source of authority. As Milgram points out, in everyday life it is often useful to focus on the authority figure, who is in a position to "bestow benefits or inflict deprivations." This general tendency is evidently encouraged by an increase in the physical distance between an action and its consequences.\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\)Ibid., 32-35.

\(^{36}\)Ibid., 36-40, 144-5. This tendency to focus upon the technical side of things and on the voice of authority is not only the result of a bureaucratic structure and mentality. Though less than fully conscious, it can be a form of motivated behavior. People who find themselves assigned to unpleasant jobs may very well augment the automatic tendency to focus on the job at hand with a defensive tendency to turn attention away from the moral tension associated with compliance.
Finally, in support of several of the points already made, Milgram found that if the subject was moved into a more remote auxiliary role in the process—the administration of the learning test—and the job of administering the shock was given to a second confederate of the experimenter, compliance rose to 92.5%. It may be that in this situation the subject is better able to shift blame in both directions, as neither the source of the destructive orders nor the direct perpetrator. It may also simply reflect the importance of the separation of task from meaning for the bureaucrat and the increasing ease with which this can be done as the administrative structure becomes more complex.

To conclude, it would seem that authority as operationalized in the experiments is very relevant to understanding the use of bureaucracy in the perpetration of genocide. Several factors—the diminished feelings of responsibility, the effects of distance vs. proximity and of auxiliary vs. direct roles, the immersion in technical details, and the focusing of attention on the authority figure—which were tested or observed in the experiment would seem to help explain the ease with which bureaucrats can be (and have been) led to participate in processes of destruction. The next section of my paper will examine the relevance of the experiments to those who have a more direct role.

37Ibid., 11, 121-2.
4. PERPETRATORS IN THE FIELD

While it is one thing to suggest that bureaucrats involved in genocide might have motivations similar to the motivations of bureaucrats elsewhere, and that the processes of bureaucracy might help to blind them to the true implications of the task, it would seem to be quite another—and perhaps quite a stretch—to suggest that ordinary motives were involved for the more direct perpetrators of genocide.

After all, the SS who worked in the death camps of the Holocaust were, to a great extent, willing volunteers to their destructive roles, and it is hard to imagine a case in which those who are least adverse to killing innocent people would not be carefully positioned in the jobs that will require it. Nonetheless, at least in the Holocaust, there were a great number of soldiers who played a crucial auxiliary role in the field—and who at times even did the killing—who were in no way self-selected to the task. Christopher Browning has examined these soldiers in some depth.

Ordinary Men

Browning reports his findings in *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. In this work, Browning looks at the low-level draftees of Reserve Police Battalion 101 and at their involvement in the Final Solution. There was no self-selection to the task of killing Jews, as there was for SS agents: rather, they were
"average" Germans, drafted for service but deemed too old to be sent to the front. The author writes of his own study of the battalion:

Never before had I seen the monstrous deeds of the Holocaust so starkly juxtaposed with the human faces of the killers.

These middle-aged draftees who comprised the 101st would go on to shoot, by Browning's estimate, 38,000 Jews in Poland between July of 1942 and November of 1943, and to help to send some 45,200 others to an almost certain death over roughly the same period.38

While Browning's book has been criticized on methodological grounds,39 it is important not to overlook the somewhat crude "numerical" aspect: a group of middle-aged draftees are documented to have killed or helped to kill over 80,000. This much is indisputable and begs explanation. Browning points out that the average age in the 101st was thirty-nine and that "all went through their formative period in the pre-Nazi era" and as such had "known political standards and moral norms other than those of the Nazis."40 It is simply not believable that, on average, these men were sadists—at least not at the start.

If they were Nazi ideologues they were rather nervous ones by Browning's account. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that people who wanted the Jews dead might still experience


39The primary criticism centers upon Browning's use of testimony given by members of the battalion some twenty years after the fact to an investigator who was looking for grounds upon which to prosecute. The author is, however, well aware of this danger, noting that in the 125 cases from which he drew most of his data there was a "confusing array of perspectives and memories" which were far less than perfect in terms of internal consistency (Ibid., xvii-xix). As I note in the text, the broadest implications of the work seem clear and undeniable.

40Ibid., 48.
extreme physical revulsion at the point of actually doing the killing.\textsuperscript{41} Moreover, the hatred of Jews in the 1940's in Germany certainly played a substantial role which should not be denied, and while Browning at many points reports that men sought to avoid participation in the killing, he also records that, at one point, visiting entertainment troops, \textit{upon their own request}, were allowed to participate in the shooting.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{The Limited Role of Authority}

It is beyond doubt that many of the effects of authority on feelings of individual responsibility would still operate here. Orders were given by a "legitimate" military commander and the soldier, carefully trained to "tune" his perception towards the commanding officer, is rarely expected to decide whether a target is a legitimate military one or whether the victim is a true enemy of the state.

Nonetheless, Browning points out that while the job of the bureaucrat "could be performed without confronting the reality of mass-murder," "such a luxury...was not enjoyed by the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101."\textsuperscript{43} Their role was too direct to make use of some of the psychological defenses available to the bureaucrat. The "proximity" to the victim was often direct, and the "empathic cues," though they had a limited effect on behavior, must have been difficult to ignore. Browning records, as one example among

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{42}Browning, 110.
\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., 162.
\end{flushright}
many, that on the occasion of the battalion's initiation to the Final Solution, the task of the soldiers was to round up the 1,800 Jewish inhabitants of the Polish town of Józefów, to separate out the men of working age, and to shoot the remainder of the population: the elderly, the women and children.\textsuperscript{44}

What led these soldiers to comply despite the very direct role that was required of them? As Browning notes, authority alone can only do so much, and there are other social forces to be taken into account. In addition to ideology and the devaluation of the victim, which have been discussed above, Browning mentions the power of conformity and of role-playing, and the influence on some members of the battalion of career ambitions. He also notes that sadism and the differences between the abilities of different individuals to participate were readily exploited.\textsuperscript{45}

\textit{Conformity}

One of the most crucial differences between the bureaucrat and the more direct perpetrator of genocide is that whereas the former is often working alone in relative isolation, the latter are members of military units which have gone through training and possibly combat situations together. The strength of their bonds may be further augmented by their "shared responsibility for an act that they admit is criminal."\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 55.

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., 167-70, 176-86.

\textsuperscript{46}A possibility which is discussed in Bauman, 158.
While Browning discusses the role of conformity and attributes a great deal of explanatory power to it, he doesn't mention Asch's lab studies on conformity. Although Asch's work did not involve bringing ordinary people to harm others, his experiment does provide a convincing demonstration of the power of conformity. Moreover, Asch's discussion helps to clarify the ways in which the desire to conform influences action.

In the baseline condition of Asch's study, a subject is brought into a lab with eight fellow subjects. The task to be performed is "to match the length of a given line with one of three unequal lines." Answers are given orally and, unknown to the true subject, his eight fellow subjects, all of whom give their answers ahead of him, have been instructed to systematically and unanimously give incorrect answers at pre-established points in the experiment.\(^4\)\(^7\)

Asch found that the answers given by the naïve subject were dramatically influenced by those given by his peers. The number of critical errors rose from .008 in the control group to 3.84 (of 12 critical errors possible) in this baseline condition. Asch attributes these additional errors to three sources. First, there are "perceptual errors"—those in which people are unaware that they have been influenced by the group pressure. Second, there are distortions of judgment, wherein people are aware of the pressures of the group and submit because they feel they must be wrong. Finally, there are cases of

distorted action, wherein the subject still believes that his senses are not deceiving him, but is unwilling to contradict the group openly.\textsuperscript{48}

It seems reasonable to suppose that people "err" in the real world for the same types of reason. First, the perceptions of the moral implications of a situation may be distorted by soldiers engaged in genocidal slaughter. They may see others performing acts to which they would have ordinarily been opposed and, consequentially, see them as being less wrong (if one's friends and colleagues--undoubtedly "good people"--did it, wouldn't it seem less wrong?). Second, people may also suffer distortions of judgment. After seeing comrades engage in destructive acts they may come to question their own feelings of moral outrage or come to see their repulsion as a sign of their own "weakness." Finally, people may still believe in their own moral feelings and yet fail to act due to the intense difficulty of openly breaking with their comrades.

Milgram was deeply influenced by the Asch experiments. John Sabini reports that Milgram's original idea for using electric shock to test a subject's willingness to harm a fellow subject involved a variation of the Asch experiment wherein going along with the group's incorrect answer would involve allowing a fellow subject to receive a painful shock.\textsuperscript{49} This experiment was never run, but Milgram did run several studies involving the effects of additional subjects on obedience to authority. First, Milgram wanted to see whether two "co-subjects" would be able to take the place of the authority figure in the

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., 180-4.

experiment. In this trial, the experimenter explains that the three "teachers" get to choose what level of shock will be administered—but that the lowest shock level suggested will be the shock administered. Thus, while the two "other subjects" call for ever-increasing shock levels, the true subject—who is still in the position of administering the shock—can veto their suggestions by insisting on a lower level. In this experiment, 7 out of 40 subjects (17.5%) complied fully.\(^5\) While this is considerably lower than the rate of compliance associated with authority, it is far from insubstantial.

Second, Milgram sought to test the interaction between authority and conformity. The experimenter took his normal role, but again, two additional confederates were assigned to auxiliary roles. The true subject was again assigned to administer the shocks. In one trial, the two extra subjects complied with the experimenter, and obedience rose to 72.5% (compared to 65% in the relevant control condition). In the second trial the two peers rebelled, causing obedience to fall to a mere 10%.\(^5\) The implications of the latter finding will be discussed in my conclusion.

As Browning notes in relation to Milgram's experiments, the attempt to study conformity in the lab is limited by the fact that the subjects do not share "true comradely relations" but are only related by their recently-acquired status as subjects in a psychological experiment.\(^5\) Of course, the same could be said of the effort to study

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\(^5\)Milgram does not discuss this experiment in the monograph, but gives a full report in "Group Pressure and Action Against a Person," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 69, no. 2 (1964): 137-143.

\(^5\)Milgram reports on the second part of this experiment in *Obedience to Authority*, 116-121. Both trials are reported in his earlier article, "Liberating Effects of Group Pressure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1, no. 2 (1965): 127-134.

\(^5\)Browning, 175.
authority in the lab. The suddenness of the authority relationship studied therein is in sharp contradistinction to the more purposefully cultivated authority relationships found in the real world. Nonetheless, the fact that authority and conformity relationships that are so "weak" and newly created can hold subjects so tightly is precisely what is alarming about these studies.

Role-Playing and the Transformation of Ordinary Men

Like Milgram's work, Zimbardo's study of the influence of "role-playing" on behavior has been cited by many theorists, including Browning, as evidence that ordinary people can be brought to perform highly destructive acts with little coercion. Zimbardo also demonstrated that little is actually needed in the way of precise guidance. Most importantly, his experiments help to explain the apparent gap between the "normality" of the draftees and the sadism they often came to display.

In Zimbardo's study, the researchers created a simulated prison in the basement of a psychology building on the campus of Stanford University. After choosing from among the pool of volunteers--mainly college students--only those who were judged to be "emotionally stable, physically healthy, mature, law-abiding citizens," Zimbardo arbitrarily divided them into two groups, "prisoners" and "guards."53

Although neither group was trained or prepared for their role in any extensive fashion, both fell into the "normal" prison roles easily. Societal norms concerning prison

behavior and concerning hierarchical relationships were instrumental in the definition of the roles taken up, as were the expectations placed on the guards to maintain order. But the guards' desire to exercise the power they had been given over their fellow subjects (sadism) and the interaction between the two groups of subjects also helped to create the roles in question.

Zimbardo writes that "as the guards became more aggressive, prisoners became more passive" and that the participants began to believe in the roles to which they had been randomly assigned. He reports that the guards' need "to rule the obviously inferior and powerless inmates became a sufficient reason to support almost any further indignity of man against man." In the end, the brutality of the guards—matched by the depression and anxiety of the prisoners—caused the experiment, scheduled to last two weeks, to be terminated after six days. Several of the prisoners had been released even earlier for fear that they would suffer psychological harm if kept in the "prison."  

I think Zimbardo's research can go a long way toward bridging the gap between those who argue that the perpetrators of genocide are, at the beginning, "ordinary" and those who argue that the perpetrators are invariably sadistic and cruel. These two arguments may not be as directly at odds with each other as one might initially suppose. As Browning points out, the prison experiment seems to have demonstrated the ease with

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54 Ibid., 298-302.
which at least *some* "normal" people who show no overt signs of sadism can be led to enjoy the "newfound power to behave cruelly and arbitrarily."\(^5^\)

There is also the possibility that increasing brutality on the part of perpetrators is tied to the psychological need to cling to the devaluations of the victim and to the notion that the victim deserves what he is getting. Kelman goes so far as to suggest that while "sanctioned massacres certainly involve a considerable amount of hostility toward the victim," the "expressions of anger" entailed may "be viewed as outcomes rather than causes of violence" inasmuch as they "serve to provide the perpetrators with an explanation and rationalization for their violent actions." This leads Kelman to state that it is the loss of restraint, and not the desire to kill, that needs to be explained in any attempt to understand widespread participation in genocidal processes.\(^6^\)

*Getting People Started*

This loss of restraint can come gradually. Steven Gilbert notes that in the experiment, the gradual increase in shock levels--from a mild 15 volts to the potentially lethal 450 at the far end of the console--allows the "precedent" of an obedient response to be established before the ethical dilemma associated with hurting the learner presents itself. Gilbert writes that one effect of the gradated shocks is to avoid "a single, explicit

\(^{55}\) Browning, 168. Browning notes that about one-third of Zimbardo's "guards" seem to have become sadistic. The proportion in a more "intense" situation in the real would probably be higher. Arendt writes that the concentration camps "were turned into the 'drilling grounds,' on which perfectly normal men were trained to be full-fledged members of the SS." Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), 426.

\(^{56}\) Kelman, 37-8.
confrontation of values." Further, it allows the subject to focus on the fact that each shock is only 15 volts more than the previous, which, after all, the subject had been willing to inflict. Gilbert observes that one would expect disobedience to occur primarily when there is some sudden change in the situation, and notes that it is, in fact, the case that most disobedient subjects break off after receiving some new feedback from the learner.57

Similar processes occur in the real world, and it seems reasonable to suggest that for the direct perpetrators of genocide the most important function of authority as authority—that is, apart from the strength of ideology—is to get people started on what Staub calls the "continuum of destruction." Staub writes that "people learn and change by doing, by participation, as a consequence of their own actions."58 Thus, people who perform a relatively small, auxiliary act in a process of destruction will find it easy to progress to greater evils—a soldier who plays a small but increasing role in a genocidal process may find it hard to make a stand against further participation at any given point. Further, as Kelman notes, it may sometimes be the case that ideologies are taken up to justify actions already performed. Thus a soldier may come to believe in the "transcendent mission" behind a genocide—due in part to psychological self-defense mechanisms—as a result of playing a small, auxiliary role.

An authority figure might merely need to provide the spark which gets the process started, after which point the forces of conformity and role-playing can be counted upon


58 Staub, 17-18.
to run their course. While Milgram convincingly argues that the reason for compliance in the experimental setting, for most subjects, is not aggression but rather obedience, it is important to note that this does not preclude the possibility that in the real world perpetrators "learn" to enjoy their power over time.59 As Zimbardo demonstrated, people quickly grow accustomed to roles once they have entered them and can sometimes even be led to display latent capabilities for cruelty and sadism as a result. But before this can happen, and before the forces of conformity can begin to exert their pressure, the orders from an accepted authority figure are needed to set these various subsidiary processes in motion. The role of authority, while far from being the "whole story," is nonetheless essential.

59Milgram Obedience To Authority, 165-8.
5. REDUCING THE DESTRUCTIVE EFFECTS OF OBEDIENCE

My brief discussion in the introduction of the social function of obedience and of the general factors which work against disobedience should leave one somewhat pessimistic about the likelihood of mollifying the negative effects of obedience by reducing general levels of compliance. Commands are given and orders are followed as part of the daily routine. Without a strong sense of obligation to obey, communal life would be far more difficult, if not impossible.

In addition to being willing to cause the disruption of the social order which is inherent in disobedience, people who would disobey must also believe that they are in as good a position to judge the morality of the situation as is the authority figure. Military commanders are often the only ones able to judge whether a target is a legitimate military one, and, in the experiment, the scientist claims to know that no permanent harm will come to the learner.60

The "banality of evil" thesis put forth by Arendt and others brings one to the point of asking whether it is reasonable to expect the individual caught up in a whirl of social forces to resist them even when they lead to acts which seem, to outsiders, to be plainly wrong. It is interesting to note that the overall strategy of the defense in the Eichmann

60Ibid., 21. While this may have been reassuring to the subjects, though, it was not meant to be convincing and could not have been, given the dramatic anguished screams from the victim, his complaints of a heart condition, and his demands to be released from the chair into which he is strapped.
trial was to push this argument only a little bit further, and to suggest that "irrational motives...beyond the understanding of a human being" were at play and that Eichmann could not have been expected, from his desk-chair, to fight against the recalcitrant forces of history.61

Rather similar questions are raised by the Milgram experiment. People are found to be so profoundly affected by the situations in which they are placed that it needs be asked whether it is reasonable to expect them to resist those situational forces, even when there is no real doubt regarding the rightness of the act in question. We are left to wonder how and when, if at all, people can be expected to disobey the destructive commands of a malevolent authority.

Ervin Staub discusses one possibility. As mentioned previously, Staub distinguishes two types of moral values--personal or pro-social values "focussing on human welfare" and "rule-oriented morality stressing obligation, duty, and the necessity of living by rules." To ensure that individuals are able to make use of these pro-social values, Staub suggests that they explicitly be taught the values of "individual moral responsibility." He writes that:

To the extent that socialization clearly teaches this, it is reasonable to hold people responsible for their moral decisions and actions.

And so we have our first "solution." If we train people to view themselves as responsible agents and to make use of more "pro-social" values, they will be more inclined to do so.62

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But as a solution this is troubling. As we saw above, the general institutions of a society—whether authoritarian or democratic in nature—tend to push the citizen towards high levels of obedience. It is possible that a more active citizenry will exhibit less of the signs of the "authoritarian" personality, but the prospects for changing human nature are difficult and limited at best.63

The second possibility for reducing the dangers of authority attacks the problem from the "supply" side. As Milgram found, to command high levels of obedience it is necessary that authority come from an uncontested source. In experiment 15, two authorities were established who disagreed as to whether the experiment should continue. All subjects stopped within one shock-level of the impasse between the two authorities.64 It would seem, then, that people will take the opportunity given them by the disagreement between authorities to follow their inner convictions. Certainly, it would become much more difficult to pass blame to a superior for an acknowledged wrong in such a situation.

Conformity also interacts with obedience in a way that can cause decreases in the overall levels of obedience. In a variation of the obedience experiment (discussed above, page 30), Milgram found that if two "co-subjects"—actually confederates of the experimenter—refuse to proceed, then the percentage of subjects who remain fully

63 Nonetheless, it should be noted that one important and possibly effective way to get individuals to feel responsible for their acts is to hold them legally responsible. In particular, a bureaucrat who knows he might be put on trial for his acts might be less inclined to separate the act from its meaning and might think twice before involving himself in the processes of destruction.

64 Milgram, Obedience to Authority, 105-7.
compliant drops to 10%. The modal response (12 of 40 subjects) is to quit with the second "co-subject," at 210 volts.65

Further, conformity decreases dramatically in the face of dissent. In Asch's baseline condition (discussed above, page 28), the group facing the true subject was unanimous. When a lone dissenter was introduced, compliance with the majority's wrong answer declined from 32% to 5.5%.66 Similarly, in Browning's *Ordinary Men* we are told that after a first man took Trapp's offer to opt out of the killings at Józefów "some ten or twelve other men stepped forward as well."67

Thus, whereas democracy may fail to change human nature (regarding authority) to a significant degree, it may avert the hazards associated with obedience by fragmenting the voice of authority and of majority sentiment.68 James Madison wrote of the need to limit the ability of a majority faction to "sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens." He argued that republican government could be made to fragment authority in such a way that ambition could "be made to counteract ambition" and such that it would "render an unjust combination of a majority of the whole very improbable."69

65Ibid., 116-121.
66Asch, 186.
67Browning, 57.
68I am using the term democracy loosely. Obviously I don't mean democracy in the most literal sense at all, but rather a system, like ours, in which the voice of the majority is intentionally fragmented.
This solution, too, is not a cure-all for the problems caused by obedience to a malevolent authority. As Milgram points out, our democratically elected government imported and enslaved millions, destroyed native populations, interned Japanese Americans in the second World War, and dropped napalm on Vietnamese civilians. Further still, Staub's concept of "learning by doing" reminds us that the most appalling acts of human destructiveness begin small and build almost imperceptibly for those living within the system. Whether opposing voices will be raised is always questionable.

Moreover, this "solution" fails to give us a means to prevent genocide in the world at large. "Make sure you live in a thriving democracy" is not, generally, useful advice for a potential victim of genocide. Nonetheless, it may give useful advice to the international community in the face of an imminent genocide by one of its member states. In particular, radio broadcasts which "argue" the case against genocide and for the worth of human life might help to prevent a regime from becoming totalitarian.

Finally, vigilance is called for. We have seen—both experimentally and in the real world—what "ordinary men" can do and the ways in which "preliminary" activities in the destructive process can bring out the worst qualities in many people. Vigilance is needed on the part of the international community, which can best attempt to stop a genocide in the opening stages when perpetrators have not yet "committed" themselves to the processes and ideologies of destruction. But vigilance is required, also, on the part of individuals, and directed towards themselves as well as toward those around them. No-one is immune

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70 Milgram, Obedience to Authority, 179.
to the potentially destructive power of the social forces we encounter in everyday life, and it would be a mistake, in the end, to take the lessons that Milgram and others have taught as lessons only of what "those around us" can do.
APPENDIX

Martin Orne and Charles Holland have questioned whether the subjects in Milgram's experiments really believed that the learner was being shocked. They assert that at least some subjects come into the lab suspicious and trying to figure out what is "really" being tested. They also compare the subjects behavior to that of a magician's naïve audience member who willingly pulls the trip lever on a guillotine apparently poised to behead a fellow volunteer.\(^{71}\) This does not seem likely to me: unlike the magician's audience member, subjects do not enter the lab for the purpose of being deceived. Nonetheless, I will pass along several convincing bits of evidence that have been gathered to counter this objection more fully.

Milgram convincingly rebuts this argument (which he refers to as being "pathetically detached from reality"). He notes in his reply to Orne and Holland that "the occurrence of tension provided striking evidence of the subject's genuine involvement in the experimental conflict."\(^{72}\) This tension was discussed above (page 4) as evidence that the subjects found compliance difficult.


Further, Milgram presents the results of his post-experimental survey which revealed that 80.1% of his subjects reported either having "fully believed" the learner was being shocked (56.1%) or having believed that "the learner was probably getting the shocks" (24%). Milgram reports that using only data from people who, by their own admission, "fully believed" in the experimental pretext only "slightly reduced" levels of obedience—in experiment two (which differed from the original condition in the addition of vocal feedback) this control procedure reduces the rate of compliance from 62.5% to 60%.73

Finally, in an experiment designed to directly test the validity of Orne and Holland's objection, Charles Sheridan and Richard King, Jr. ran an experiment essentially equivalent to the Milgram paradigm with "a cute, fluffy puppy" substituted for the human victim and real shocks substituted for phony ones. The puppy was a more "authentic" victim, since it could not have been presumed to be acting when it exhibited "foot flexion and occasional barks" followed by "running and vocalization" and, at the highest voltages, "continuous barking and howling." The compliance rate for male subjects was similar to that found by Milgram, at 54%, and for female subjects, compliance was total.74

73Ibid., 141-2.


The substantially higher rate of compliance for female subjects is at odds with Milgram's experiment 8, which found that female subjects did not differ substantially from their male counterparts. (Milgram, Obedience to Authority, 62-3.)
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