

7

SHOCKING SUBJECTS:
MILGRAM'S NIGHTMARE AND
THE QUESTION OF EVIL



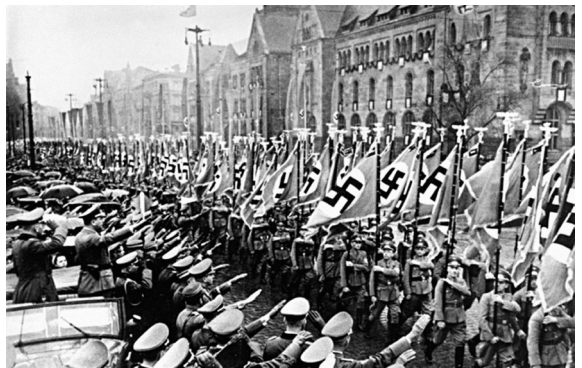
Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil¹⁸⁷

Exodus

Back before the holy cross called me to the cloth, back when the melodies of my *Bar Mitzvah* were still ringing in my ears, I would listen keenly to the *chochemim* debating at synagogue. Whatever the service, whatever the topic, there was always some little old lady throwing her hands in the air with the same question on her lips: “*What about the question of evil?*” It’s all very well to live and let live, but what about those who want you to die? What about the Hitlers of this world?

The Jewish answer is simple. Evil, or rather sin, is that which scripture prohibits. Exactly what is prohibited is the subject of centuries of lively debate, but the basics are laid down in *The Old Testament* and developed

in *The Talmud*. Subsequent religions of the book simplified the question of evil in two main ways. Firstly, the devil was cobbled together from bits of pagan gods, and evil gained a personality. Secondly, a man was chosen to be the infallible mouthpiece of God. Evil became whatever the imam or Pope decreed was wrong.



According to John Paul II, condoms were “intrinsically evil”,¹⁸⁸ so observant Catholics with sexually transmitted diseases were forced to be either disobedient or sexually frustrated, as is, I trust, the man who made this stupid pronouncement in the first place. Fortunately, God changed his mind and made an even more infallible decree via the next Pope, that condoms are “a lesser evil” if used by men with AIDS.¹⁸⁹ Most people in the industrialised world ignore this old Vatican relic, of course, but to hundreds of millions in the developing world, his word is as good as the Word of God. Old-skool Protestants, however, and members of the Eastern Orthodox Church traditionally believe that the Pope represents not God but Satan, that he is, in fact, the Antichrist. He is certainly more dangerous than a bit of rubber, but a person is far too complicated to be described in a word. Perhaps it is more charitable to think of him as an extremely officious civil servant.

When I was sixteen, a drunk driver killed my friend and made another impotent, only months after he had lost his virginity. I decided at this point that God himself, if he existed, was evil, but I later revised my position. We were given the free will to drink excessively and drive outrageously, and also to avoid cars if we are worried about accidents. The driver was not evil; he was unskilful. Many Buddhist schools hold that there is no evil, only unskilful action which causes suffering. Karma is neither yours nor mine; it is shared, like our air. It is not sentimental, but neither is it malicious. The wheel of karma rolls on, cutting tracks in the landscape, rolling over the toes of whoever happens to be standing in the way. It keeps you on your toes so the toes aren't yours.

The Buddhist dodge is brilliant, but it hinges upon a world in which everything is suffering. This is the first Noble Truth, the first thing the Buddha said after his enlightenment. According to some Japanese Buddhists, his dying words were the opposite: “what a sweet thing is life!” Suffering and sweetness are inseparable; the one creates the other, as a beautiful lotus grows on filthy water. When a bushman suffers at the claws of a hungry lion, his flesh feeds lion cubs, and his tribe will take more care in the future. A picked pocket or a decayed tooth demands attention, and makes the victim conscious of overlooked things. Cursing the thief or labelling the bacteria ‘evil’ doesn't help; that's what you get for not brushing your teeth. You will learn to pay attention, even if it takes 10,000 years of toothache in *samsara*.

The Taoist answer is, of course, a story. Once upon a time in China, a man's horse ran away. His neighbours commiserated with him over his rotten luck. “Maybe,” he said, “but who knows if it is good or bad?” The horse returned the following day with a herd of wild horses, which he took as his property, and his neighbours congratulated him on his excellent luck. “Who knows?” he replied, sagely stroking his wispy beard. His luck changed again when his son broke a leg breaking in one of the horses, but he had his one-liner ready for his grave-faced neighbours. The following day, the emperor

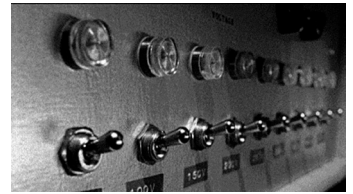
SHOCKING SUBJECTS



rode through, conscripting young men for a campaign, but his son was unfit for service. “What great luck!” cried his neighbours, who were slow on the uptake. “Who knows?”

So what about the Hitlers of this world, and what about the Nazis who followed him? This was a loaded question in 1961, during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the mild-looking, pen-pushing architect of the Holocaust. Stanley Milgram went looking for an answer to the question of evil in the social sciences, and unearthed some shocking truths. His basic experiment begins with subjects drawing lots to decide who will be the ‘teacher’ and who the ‘learner’. The teacher then watches as the learner is strapped into a chair with electrodes attached to him, and then the teacher is taken to an adjacent room and seated in front of a machine labelled ‘Shock Generator’. He is told to read a memory test to the learner through a microphone and punish errors with increasing electric shocks, using switches graded from 15- to 450-volts. Before the experiment begins, the technician gives the teacher a 45-volt shock as a taster.

When the first mistake is made, the teacher flips the first switch, labelled “slight shock”. The machine buzzes, lights flash, and the voltage meter swings. The experiment continues, and shocks increase until the twentieth error and the 300-volt “very strong shock”, after which the learner pounds on the wall. If the teacher expresses concern, the technician explains that although the shocks can be extremely painful, they cause no permanent tissue damage. Unwilling teachers were told “the experiment requires that you continue”. When the next question goes unanswered, the technician explains that no answer is a wrong answer, and punishment should be given. More pounding follows, but this is the last that is heard from the learner. The rest of the questions go unanswered, and the teacher keeps increasing the voltage.



The experiment was rigged to investigate the psychology of obedience. Both lots read ‘teacher’, and the ‘learner’ was really a friendly middle-aged actor in league with the scientists. Before the experiment, psychology majors questioned had estimated that up to three percent of subjects would continue to the final shock. In the event, all forty subjects continued until the pounding, at which point five stopped. A further nine disobeyed over the next four questions, but twenty-six continued through “intense shock”, “danger - severe shock”, to the maximum, marked “XXX”.



Most teachers become uncomfortable, stuttering, sweating, groaning or complaining. Fourteen broke into nervous laughter, but sixty-five percent continued to the final shock. According to an observer:

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within twenty 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.¹⁹⁰

The implication is that most men will obey an authority figure, without threat or coercion, causing extreme pain or worse to a friendly stranger, even if it does not profit them and goes against their instincts and morals. In follow-up interviews, many admitted they believed the learner was either dead or unconscious.¹⁹¹ In other set-ups, when the learner asks the technician if the shocks might exacerbate his heart condition, full obedience dropped to half. When required to physically press the learner's hand against an electric plate, only thirty percent went to the maximum,¹⁹² but when the psychological distance was increased, and the teacher pressed a lever authorising an intermediary to administer punishment, 93 percent let him have it.¹⁹³ Milgram comments:

Each individual possesses a conscience which, to a greater or lesser degree, serves to restrain the unimpeded flow of impulses destructive to others. But when he merges his person into an organizational structure, a new creature replaces autonomous man, unhindered by the limitations of individual morality, freed of humane inhibition, mindful only of the sanctions of authority.¹⁹⁴

So what about the question of evil? Torture is pretty nasty, but unless sixty-five (or 93) percent of us are evil, we have to look for answers elsewhere. People are not 'Evil' with a capital E, a shiver down the spine and a cameo by Boris Karloff, but we are obedient. We are horribly, mindlessly, murderously obedient, and our spinelessness sucks Adolf Hitlers and Asaharas off the rubbish heap of human existence into positions of power. Was Hitler evil? He was a failed artist, lightly wounded in the First World War, and his physician cured his psychosomatic blindness by filling him with Messianic delusions.¹⁹⁵ As chancellor he was wired and paranoid from his daily amphetamine injection, but a whole country obeyed him, or rather, they obeyed the machine he directed. He did not create the system of government; he was voted in. He did not create the culture of anti-Semitism, nor the conditions of interwar Germany. He merely reworked the system into a lunatic's dream of world domination for a humiliated and destitute population.

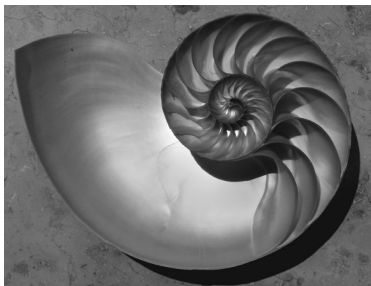
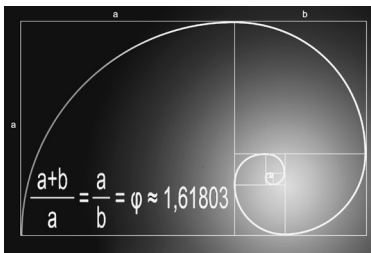
SHOCKING SUBJECTS

War and genocide would be impossible without obedience, so what keeps us from exercising our free will? If anything is evil, it is the system itself, not the basket case in charge, nor the subservient citizens. Like most mammals, humans are social animals programmed to follow each other. The chickens that wander past my shack in the Amazon would find more food searching apart, but they stay together because they are safer together. We are like chickens and sheep, only we follow ideas and abstract entities as well as dominant beasts. If Yale University has the power to create torturers in an afternoon, Milgram asks “one can only wonder what government, with its vastly greater authority and prestige, can command of its subjects.”¹⁹⁶

It is tempting to think that the sixties and seventies trimmed the claws of the beast, but replications of Milgram’s experiments over the next twenty-five years showed no change whatsoever.¹⁹⁷ Our leaders still point at something complex and call it something simple like “the parasitic Jew” or “the Axis of Evil”, and slaughter follows close behind. A holocaust begins in the mind; first opposing opinions are exterminated, and then we follow the leader, goose-stepping down the road to atrocity. The evil things on this planet are not individuals but institutions, not living people but lifeless abstractions, not Nazis but Nazism. Whether the atrocity is dreamt up by a paranoid anti-Semite in shiny boots, a scientist in a white coat, or a celibate celebrant in a silly hat, the evil is built into the system that executes his will.

*But Reverend, surely it would be carnage
without someone to maintain law and order?*

Order is intrinsic in nature, arising spontaneously in the waves of the sea, in the rhythms of nature, in the patterns in jade beloved of Taoists. The golden section (1 to $1/2(\sqrt{5} + 1)$) manifests in snail shells, in stems



along branches, and in the proportions of our bodies. Harmonic relationships determine the sizes of and distances between planets, chaos maths governs coastlines and crystals, rivers, roots, and the rhythms of the heart. A living sponge is fractal in shape, a conglomeration of single-celled creatures; it reforms naturally, without instruction, after being pushed through a sieve. Birds sing fractal songs,¹⁹⁸ and so do we. Zipf’s formulae predict how falling sand forms piles, how often words appear in a text,¹⁹⁹ how often scientific papers are cited,²⁰⁰ and how large cities grow.²⁰¹ We built fractals into architecture long before we knew what they were, and our stock markets follow fractal patterns.²⁰² Individuals acting



together generate macro-order, whether single celled creatures or stockbrokers.

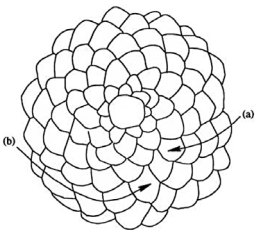
There is no overseer telling bees what to do, but the honey gets made, no mountie marshals salmon up river, no monarch opens the deer mating season, no flight controller plans bird migration. Instincts order animal behaviour, and that of the big monkey man himself. Crowds follow

the formulae of fluid dynamics so closely that stadium designs can be tested on computers. Farmers plant in spring and harvest in autumn, regardless of the law. When authorities interfere with natural processes, order is disrupted, not created, and the results can be catastrophic; the Soviet collective agricultural policy, for example, drove millions to starvation and cannibalism. Changes made to the Ganges since the sixties cause terrible flood damage in Bangladesh. This is partly due to dams built in India, but there is another factor. Hemp (*bhang*) used to grow widely in *Bangladesh* (literally 'hemp people country'), but not since 1964, when the government signed an agreement with the US promising to control it. Before this time, limited flooding was almost an annual event, but with light moss rather than tough hemp roots holding the soft mud of the delta together, floods have become far more irregular in both frequency and size, and cover almost twice the area. The worst known flooding in history occurred in 1998.^{203 204 205}

The seasons followed each other in an orderly fashion until we started messing with the atmosphere. We cause havoc by imposing order as we imagine things should be, rather than paying attention to how they are. There is, however, no fundamental disharmony in nature, and we are part of nature. The system is beginning to draw itself back to equilibrium, and we may not enjoy the readjustment.

Instincts stop children eating sweets when they feel sick, or remember the time they actually were sick, but parents and other authority figures fetishise their own vices, making chocolate bars, cigarettes, and shoplifting into far more than they are. A healthy child's various instincts evolved over aeons in harmony with the planet, and one of these is a hormonal obligation to establish his independence. A cigarette is the perfect ritual to mark out

a space where he is in control, and the teacher who comes searching validates the whole operation. Such taboos encourage the exact opposite of what they set out to stop, charging transgression with meaning. Italians grow up drinking wine with their families, and



there is very little alcoholism in Italy, but the tightest restrictions in Europe did not stop British teenagers drinking secretly in graveyards or aggressively in the street, and consuming by far the most booze in Europe.

So what's all this about law 'n' order? Have you ever heard of order 'n' law? No, it's "law 'n' order", like "Tom 'n' Jerry" or "Queen 'n' country", Siamese words joined at the 'n', as if one implies the other. Does law create order? Do the police do any good? Not one of a thousand of Milgram's subjects threatened to call the police.²⁰⁶ Crime has been increasing, generally speaking, in most countries since records began, and probably since the first constabulary was formed in 1829. Crime detection has improved, certainly, but the boys at the House of Commons do not attribute the whole increase to this.²⁰⁷

Homicides plummeted during the Great Depression, when everyone was on the same breadline,²⁰⁸ but inequality breeds crime. The thirty most peaceful countries have the lowest inequality, and ten of the eleven most violent countries have the highest.²⁰⁹ The US is one of the most violent countries in the industrialised world, and one of the most unequal. The best views in Rio de Janeiro are from luxury tower blocks in patrolled compounds and slums creeping up the mountains; kidnapping has become a way to bridge the gap between the two, and police are outgunned in gang-controlled areas. Cops and robbers is an increasingly deadly game in South Africa, with well organised, well armed, super-violent gangs attacking shopping malls and making guerrilla roadblocks.²¹⁰

Neither laws nor policemen can solve these problems. Rats, pigs, dogs and monkeys all become aggressive when overcrowded, frustrated, or hungry, and these conditions exist in poor urban centres. It may be even more basic than mammalian psychology. Two electrodes with the same charge sit quietly near each other, but when the charge of one is increased, a spark returns the system to equilibrium. Electrodes further apart can sustain a greater imbalance, but sooner or later sparks fly, and they are all the more explosive.

In Brazil, South Africa, and increasingly the US and the UK, the distance between communities is growing, and sparks are flying. In Japan, imbalance is kept in check. Low interest rates and relatively equal incomes protect the poor and tether the rich. Even the homeless have good shoes and plenty to eat, and burglary, robbery and pickpocketing are extremely rare.





痴漢注意

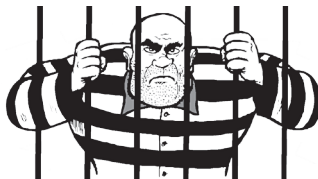
A wallet I dropped on the street was returned days later with the notes present, and a camera I left on the bullet train came back on the same train a few hours later. Umbrellas and bicycles are considered fair game, but these are crimes of convenience perpetrated by otherwise upstanding citizens caught in a downpour, or after a drunken night of karaoke. The other high-risk items are bras and knickers, for which horny ninjas are willing to scale walls. Crime reveals tensions in society, and here the tension is sexual, whereas in Brazil, it is financial. We grab what we are deprived of, and for hard-working Japanese, it is often ladies' arses. Subway groping is endemic, with no-groping signs beside the no-smoking signs, and undercover cops riding trains in short skirts. This is the hangover from Confucianism, a patriarchal moral code separating the sexes from the age of seven.²¹¹

*But father, what about rapists
and child-murderers?*

Frustration is more serious in fundamentalist Muslim countries where, unlike Japan, there are no commuter porn films and kinky brothels decorated like trains, but where the most enthusiastic rapists on the planet are produced.²¹² Like the rest of nature, we malfunction when unnatural restraints are imposed upon us, when morals are branded into our psyches. Both rapists and gentlemen begin life as beautiful babies with breast fixations. Rape is practically unheard of amongst the Mosuo tribe, one of the last surviving matriarchies, where a woman hangs on to a man for as long as she wishes, before sending him back to the man-pool. The last thing on a rapist's mind is the law, and most burglars are far more worried about their next junk fix.

We assume that bad laws are better than no laws, that we will kill each other if "law 'n' order" is not enforced, but we kill each other anyway! Crime is a symptom of discord, as much as a cause. There are some decidedly messy brains in the world, but whatever their problems are, they are our problems too, because they are robbing and raping us.

There is no clear evidence that locking people up helps. Jail is the ideal environment cultivate bitterness like-minded folk. The spent detained at without a deity for tortured time thinking



for alienated men to and swap skills with few evenings I have Her Majesty's pleasure company, I have killed almost exclusively

about how I might torture and kill the people who put me there. A year in a cage, away from friends and family, away from women and surrounded by

SHOCKING SUBJECTS

misery would almost certainly leave me violently deranged. Five days was enough in the Stanford prison experiment, where mentally sound volunteers were given the uniforms and duties of guards and prisoners (it makes for interesting viewing on YouTube). Their roles quickly replaced their normal identities. Guards changed dramatically, brutalising prisoners with bags over their heads and humiliating tasks. Prisoners became catatonic, and the experiment had to be aborted on the sixth day. Four prisoners had broken down, one was on hunger strike, several guards had turned into serious sadists, the kinder guards were turning a blind eye, and everyone involved was under the erroneous impression that they were not allowed to leave.²¹³

*Things will get out of control without the police,
my good Reverend, out of control I tell you!*

Things are already out of control! If someone was in control, perhaps he could stop people nicking my bicycle. Perhaps he could stop the cascade of events that leads to war or famine. There is no fat controller, and if there was he would be criminally negligent. Control is an illusion. Government is a seething mass of cannibalistic rats, but we swallow it as if our lives depend upon it. Would we not be better off with a simple hub, an administrative centre to organise whatever needed to be organised? Why must it have the power to compel and punish?

Do we need laws at all? Road safety has improved dramatically at Dutch and German intersections where street markings, road signs and traffic lights have been removed, and in whole towns without pedestrian crossings or pavements. People pay attention to each other rather than the codes governing them. The survival instinct kicks in, and they drive more carefully. The engineer behind the scheme boasts that there has never been a fatal accident on one of his roads:

“Who has the right of way?” he asked rhetorically. “I don't care. People here have to find their own way, negotiate for themselves, use their own brains.”²¹⁴

Traffic is complex. We don't know if the system would work on a national scale, but we do know that around 800,000 die every year in road accidents, despite lights, cameras and action against illegal driving.²¹⁵ It would be chaos, of course. But order arises from chaos.

But father, what do we do with antisocials?!

Anarchic roads do not mend the ways of the fifteen percent who drive irresponsibly even when there are road signs, but what does? What does stop people who just don't give a shit?

When Westerners don't know what to do, we usually do something anyway. The Taoist advice is to do nothing and wait until "what is high up gets pulled down".²¹⁶ Rehabilitation centres are apparently too expensive (though the police, judicial and prison services can't be cheap), so do nothing rather than something that makes things worse. Leave a mugger mugging for a few years until he grows out of it, until he tries to mug a kung fu master, or becomes a kung fu master and masters his anger, or until a mob gives him a beating. The police protect delinquents from revenge attacks; vigilantism is another crime. Vigilante attacks eventually happen anyway, because nature saw fit to make us feel like disciplining someone who keeps disturbing the harmony of the community. But the law acts as a lid on a pressure cooker, and the eventual attack is far more serious, a desperate act of revenge against a thousand little thugs running the streets of a broken-down community.

It is not ideal, but neither are exploding planes. Several petty criminals have emerged from prison or street gangs with designs on mass-murder.²¹⁷ Schoolteachers and youth-workers have also turned jihadi for various reasons, but it is far more complex than a religious calling; the most active suicide bombers are the Tamil Tigers,²¹⁸ who have only secular objectives. Foreign troops on sovereign territory is a more accurate indicator of the likelihood of suicide attacks than religion (though these issues are rarely distinct in the Middle East).²¹⁹ Whatever the reason for homegrown bombers, there is always a reason, and psychology, sociology, and compassion will help far more than policing. Mass-murderers are not idiots. The Unabomber was a maths prodigy who was concerned about how technological society limits our freedom, something eminent professors of semantics lecture upon. His actions may not have been the best solution, but neither is shaking your head as if nothing can be done about our sliding world. The police react to jihadi attacks by rounding up incendiary preachers and sending them into prison, helping the recruiting mission whilst the root problem remains; somehow both foreigners and locals are getting angry enough to blow themselves up.

What is the answer? I don't know, but in the mean time, stay still. Pay attention. Stop reacting. Let the wheel stop rolling, when it rolls near you, and allow order to arise organically. Angry youths are not the enemy. Islam is not the enemy. The enemy is the simplistic mind that seeks an enemy outside of itself, and locks up junkies and miscreants as if it makes them go away. Regulations regulate like a cork regulates diarrhoea. The police force, which George Orwell called "the bodyguard of the moneyed class",²²⁰ prevents people from policing themselves.

We are pawns marching along familiar tracks. Centuries ago, bishops brought their black and white Gospel to every corner of the board on the point of a knight's lance. 'The truth' has developed beyond recognition, but

SHOCKING SUBJECTS

it never gave up the assumption that it is anything less than the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The endgame is underway as castles dominate the board, but can the pawn push on through hostile territory to the end and the promise of transformation?

Check. The Pope is not responsible for your soul. The government is not responsible for your behaviour. The policeman is not responsible for your safety. The doctor is not responsible for your health, nor the psychiatrist for your sanity. The scientist is not responsible for reality, and don't let him get away with it. Law makes people criminal, medicine makes people sick, and none of this benefits anyone except the kings who control the game.

Check and check again. Our experiences are ours to interpret, messages written in strokes of pain and pleasure, and the gist is always the same: Pay attention! Keep checking the bastard! Take his knight and fork his queen! A full spectrum lies between the black and the white, so choose your shade and raise a banner.

Pawn threatens castle. Milgram repeated his experiment with a group of teachers, only one of which was the real subject. When an actor refused to continue, ninety percent of subjects followed his example.²²¹ We obey until a better course of action is made available, at which time nearly everyone will switch, even if the new plan comes from a source with much less authority, a pawn rather than a bishop. A freethinking agitator need only suggest a program less heartless than the one he is part of. Given the sorry state of the state, this should not be too difficult.

Pawn takes castle, transforms into whatever he likes.

Checkmate in three.

Ω

