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### Milgram, Proximity, and Environmental Crisis

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**Парадигма Милгрэма сегодня**

**Stanley Milgram's Obedience  
Paradigm for 2014**

**К 40-летию публикации монографии  
«*Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*»**

**For the 40th Anniversary since the Publication of  
*Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View***

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**УДК – 316.47**

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Данное издание является уникальным собранием статей американских, английских, французских и российских исследователей, посвящённых разработке различных аспектов одной из ведущих парадигм современной социальной психологии – экспериментальной obedience-парадигмы выдающегося американского психолога Милгрэма (1933 –1984). Наряду с теоретическими работами (Т. Блэсс, С. Ливин, Г. Перлштадт, А.Н. Поддьяков, К. Стотт, Ю. Тарнов, К. Уорси, П. Холландер, А. Чалефф, Э. Эрдос) представлены также эмпирические исследования (Л. Бег, Ж.-Л. Бовуа, А.Е. Войскунский, Р.В. Ершова, В. Зейглер-Хилл, Д. Курбе, Д. Мантелл, О.В.Митина, Д. Оберле, Р. Панзарелла, Е.И. Рассказова, Э.Саузард, В.В. Сорокина, Э. Фэй). Книга вышла в свет в день открытия в России (Коломна, МГОСГИ) Международной конференции «Повинуемость легитимным авторитетам (30 лет социальной психологии без Милгрэма, 40 лет его противоречивой монографии: экспериментальная obedience-парадигма вчера, сегодня, завтра)». Книга представляет интерес для специалистов в области социальной психологии, социологии, политологии, студентов и аспирантов и всех, интересующихся проблемами деструктивной повинности легитимным авторитетам – лицам, наделённым официальной законной властью.

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## MILGRAM, PROXIMITY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

### МИЛГРЭМ, ПРОСТРАНСТВЕННАЯ БЛИЗОСТЬ И ЭКОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ КРИЗИС

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**Kenneth Worthy** - Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley is a research associate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and teaches at UC Berkeley and St. Mary's College of California. He is the author of the book *Invisible Nature: Healing the Destructive Divide between People and the Environment* published in 2013 by Prometheus Books. He blogs at kennethworthy.net and “The Green Mind” on PsychologyToday.com.

**Кеннет Уорти** - доктор философии, Калифорнийский университет, Беркли является научным сотрудником Калифорнийского университета в Санта-Крузе и преподает в Калифорнийском университете в Беркли и колледже Св. Марии в Калифорнии. Он является автором книги "Невидимая природа: преодолевая пропасть между человеком и окружающей средой", выпущенной издательством Прометеус Букс в 2013 году. Он ведет блог на kennethworthy.net и рубрику «The Green Mind» на странице PsychologyToday.com

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “From Dissociation to Destruction through the Psyche” in Kenneth Worthy, *Invisible Nature: Healing the Destructive Divide between People and the Environment* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2013).

Адаптация текста «From Dissociation to Destruction through the Psyche» От диссоциации к уничтожению через личность» из книги Kenneth Worthy *Invisible Nature: Healing the Destructive Divide between People and the Environment* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2013).

**Author’s note:** Dr. Kaiping Peng first suggested the Milgram studies for empirical data about the connection between phenomenal dissociations and destructive behavior. Thanks also to Dr. Nestar J. C. Russell and Dr. Brian Dahmen for many ideas and for reviewing various versions of the manuscript.

**Примечание автора:** Первым, кто предложил использовать исследования Милгрэма в качестве источника эмпирических данных о связи между феноменальными разобщениями и деструктивным поведением, был доктор Кайпинг Пэнг. Я бы хотел также поблагодарить Д-ра Нестара Дж. К. Рассела и Д-ра Брайана Дамена за внимательное прочтение различных версий рукописи данной работы и за ценные замечания.



K. Worthy. Milgram, proximity, and environmental crisis. In Regina V. Ershova & Alexander Y. Voronov (Eds.) Stanley Milgram's Obedience Paradigm for 2014. Kolomna, Russia: Moscow Regional State Institute of Humanities and Social Studies.

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**Key words:** *proximity, authority, obedience studies, Milgram, ecopsychology, environmental values and attitudes, environmental consciousness, environmental crisis, organizational structures.*

**Ключевые слова:** *пространственная близость, легитимный авторитет, исследования повинности легитимным авторитетам, Милгрэм, эконсихология, экологические ценности и установки, экологическое сознание, экологический кризис, организационные структуры.*

### **Abstract**

Several of Stanley Milgram's experiments following his famous obedience experimental paradigm examined the effect of proximity between subject and victim. He found proximity to be inversely related to obedience—that is, as the victim was made more present to the subject across experimental variations, obedience dropped. This article uses these proximity findings and related empirical results and theory to support the assertions of environmental scholars who claim that human-nature alienations are to blame for the increasingly severe global environmental crisis. It shows that *phenomenal dissociation*—the lack of immediate, sensual engagement with the consequences of our everyday actions and with the human and non-human others that we affect with our actions—increases destructive tendency; knowledge and awareness are not always sufficient to curb destructiveness. This study begins to reveal some of the psychodynamics by which phenomenal dissociations lead to destructive tendency; discusses how modern institutions, organizational structures, and technologies propagate harms by mediating between actor and consequences; and argues that environmental psychology, which commonly focuses on attitudinal variables like awareness and concern, must expand its reach to account for the pervasive phenomenal dissociations of contemporary life.

### **Аннотация**

Милгрэм поставил несколько экспериментов в рамках его знаменитой экспериментальной obedience-парадигмы, направленных на изучение влияния пространственной близости между испытуемым и «жертвой». Он обнаружил: чем ближе «жертва» находится к испытуемому, тем меньше деструктивная повинность. Эти результаты, касающиеся эффектов пространственной близости, а также другие сходные эмпирические данные и теоретические соображения, как показано в данной работе, подтверждают мнение учёных экологов, считающих, что причиной разрастающегося глобального экологического кризиса является отчуждение человека от природы. *Феноменологическая диссоциация* – отсутствие непосредственного эмоционального и чувственного участия в событиях, составляющих последствия наших повседневных действий, равно как и отсутствие взаимодействия с "другим" (человеком или животным), на которого оказывают влияние наши поступки – усиливает деструктивные процессы. Таким образом, знание и понимание не всегда достаточны для сдерживания деструктивности. В

настоящем исследовании мы сначала описываем психодинамические процессы, с помощью которых феноменологическая диссоциация приводит к деструктивной тенденции. Затем мы рассматриваем как современные общественные институты, структуры и организации, а также технологии, выступая в качестве промежуточного звена между деятелем и последствиями, способствуют распространению вреда. Экологическая психология, обычно концентрирующаяся на таких аттитюдных переменных, как осведомлённость и интерес, должна распространить своё внимание на феноменологическую диссоциацию, пронизывающую современную жизнь.

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## Introduction

The United Nations-sponsored Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the most comprehensive survey of the ecological conditions of Earth ever undertaken, reveals widespread, severe human-caused damages to nature. The harms include a substantial, largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth; severe degradation or unsustainable use of sixty percent of “ecosystem services,” such as fisheries and air and water purification; and a significantly increased likelihood of spontaneous and potentially catastrophic non-linear ecosystem changes.<sup>1</sup> These developments are taking place under societal conditions that are unprecedented in human history—the stark separation of people from nature and from the consequences of their actions.

In most of the contemporary world, people live and act within contexts that are dramatically different from those experienced by people throughout most of human history, when global-scale, multifaceted environmental crises did not exist. Modern life situates each person at the nexus of a series of elongated material and informational networks that separate individuals to an unprecedented degree from the origins of their sustenance, the destinations of their wastes, and the consequences of their actions. Modern material and social networks disperse and propagate the consequences of one’s actions globally and in turn provide a degree of phenomenal (capable of being known through the senses or immediate experience) insulation from those consequences. Institutions such as corporations and government agencies separate people from nature by mediating between them and the resources, nature, and other humans that they affect with their everyday consumption and other acts. These conditions reduce or distort knowledge and experience of particular consequences of particular actions. Separations from the

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<sup>1</sup> Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Program, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Synthesis*, The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Series (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2005), pp. ii, v, 1, 2.

spheres of nature and society where consequences are manifest also limit more general knowledge and appreciation of those spheres.

This chapter explores the nexus of these two salient features of modern life—the global proliferation of environmental destruction on one hand, and the marked and increasing separations of people from the human and non-human others that they affect with their actions on the other. It uses Stanley Milgram's obedience experimental paradigm and other empirical and theoretical psychology as a lens to better understand how such separations result in harmful choices. I introduce the term *phenomenal dissociation* to mean a lack of immediate, sensual engagement with the consequences of one's everyday actions and with the human and non-human others that one affects with his or her actions.

The long reach of late-modern transportation, telecommunications, and other technological and institutional networks places people in phenomenally dissociated relationships with many other remote, unknown individuals, societies, and landscapes and other natural entities by dispersing the consequences of actions globally. Modern institutions have become important mediators between individuals and the others with whom we have material relationships; they mediate in virtually all of our important relationships with non-human nature and with the human others producing goods that we rely on; they aggregate and disperse our choices, actions, and relevant consequences with those of many other people, obscuring them. Harmful consequences of one's actions return in abstracted, aggregated, and diluted form. It is difficult for a beef-eater to associate particular acts of beef eating with the suffering of particular factory-farmed animals and with the contamination of particular soils and waterways by drugs administered to those animals, even when having abstract knowledge of those problems. It is difficult to know who and what are all of the others affected by our choices and actions.

The theory and empirical data presented in this chapter show that knowledge of the harmful consequences of one's actions is not enough to inhibit destructive actions; immediate, sensual experience of one's consequences and the spheres where those consequences are expressed are crucial ingredients in limiting destructiveness and fostering caring relationships. One motivation for this research is the perplexing contradiction exhibited profusely in contemporary society between high levels of environmental concern or awareness and continuing high levels of global environmental degradation. One need only note concerns over the severity of global climate change and the proliferation of large, inefficient personal vehicles and homes in the United States. This gulf between environmental

awareness and environmental destruction has been an explicit point of engagement for many researchers.<sup>1</sup>

### **Proximity and Destructiveness in the Obedience Experiments**

Our spatial relations shift from one situation to the next, and the fact that we are near or remote may have a powerful effect on the psychological processes that mediate our behavior toward others.

Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 1974

In the early 1960s a young Yale University psychologist, Stanley Milgram, wanted to understand the destructive obedience of soldiers in the German death camps from 1933 to 1945 when “millions of innocent people were systematically slaughtered on command.”<sup>2</sup> To that end, Milgram performed some of the most surprising, controversial, influential, and famous experiments in the history of psychology: at least twenty-one variations on an experiment designed to measure destructive obedience to authority.<sup>3</sup> The studies made a deep and lasting impression

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Ecological Enlightenment: Essays on the Politics of the Risk Society* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995); Michael Christopher, "An Exploration of the "Reflex" in Reflexive Modernity: The Rational and Prerational Social Causes of the Affinity for Ecological Consciousness," *Organization & Environment* 12, no. 4 (1999): 359; Elisabeth Ryland, "Gaia Rising: A Jungian Look at Environmental Consciousness and Sustainable Organizations," *Organization & Environment* 13, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 1. Together with Hannah Arendt's writings on the Holocaust, particularly *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Milgram's findings dispelled the belief that the Holocaust had been the result mainly of a peculiar, perhaps momentary, characteristic of the collective German psyche. The experiments showed in contrast that situational, social features were more relevant to understanding how so many people could have supported and carried out the German Nazi attempt at exterminating European Jews. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem; a Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions," *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 60, no. 3 (1991): 408. Blass and Arthur G. Miller have written extensively on the influence of Milgram's obedience experiments. For example, see Thomas Blass, "The Milgram Paradigm after 35 Years: Some Things We Now Know About Obedience to Authority," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 29, no. 5 (1999); Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions."; Thomas Blass, *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000); Arthur G. Miller, Barry E. Collins, and Diana E. Brief, "Perspectives on Obedience to Authority: The Legacy of the Milgram Experiments," *Journal of Social Issues* 51, no. 3 (1995); Arthur G. Miller, *The Obedience Experiments: A Case Study of*

on our understandings of human behavior. In 1975, the Turkish social psychologist Muzafer Sherif, a founder of the field, said,

Milgram's obedience experiment is the single greatest contribution to human knowledge ever made by the field of social psychology, perhaps psychology in general.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, researchers performing a comprehensive review of the studies declared,

Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority are surely among the most celebrated in the history of psychology.... The Milgram experiments...have stimulated thought as has perhaps no other single research program.<sup>2</sup>

Among other results, some of Milgram's variations showed that phenomenal dissociations make people more destructive.

In Milgram's obedience experiments, a naïve subject (a volunteer), playing the role of teacher in a supposed learning experiment, is instructed to administer increasingly severe electrical shocks to a supposed learner in the experiment.<sup>3</sup> The shocks are supposed to serve as punishment for incorrect answers and thus improve learning. But the learner is not a volunteer as the subject is told; rather, he is an actor who receives no shocks at all. If the subject protests against moving to the next higher shock level, an authority figure (supposedly the experimenter but actually another accomplice of the experimenter) instructs the subject to continue delivering shocks and thus fulfill his role as teacher. The instructions to continue follow a pre-set script that increases in level of insistence to match increasing levels of resistance from the subject.

The switch array used by the subject to supposedly deliver shocks runs in 15-volt increments from 15 volts to 450 volts. Labels on the switches range from SLIGHT SHOCK at the lower end to DANGER-SEVERE SHOCK at the higher end. Before the experiment proceeds, the subject receives an actual sample shock

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*Controversy in Social Science* (New York: Praeger, 1986); Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, p. 207.

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Harold Takooshian, "How Stanley Milgram Taught About Obedience," in *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*, ed. Thomas Blass (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, Collins, and Brief, "Perspectives on Obedience to Authority: The Legacy of the Milgram Experiments." Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I use both "subject" and "participant" to denote people being studied in psychological experiments, following the original authors. The term "subject" has gradually been replaced by the term "participant" in psychology.

of 45 volts, applied by pressing the third switch on the shock generator, to convince him or her that the generator is real.<sup>1</sup> The subject helps the experimenter strap the learner into the chair.

The following describes the baseline version of the experiment, the basic procedure of which many variations were carried out. The subject hears the learner mention that he has a “slight heart condition.” During the supposed learning experiment, the subject and learner remain in adjacent rooms, and the subject can hear but cannot see the learner. The learner’s audible responses to the supposed shocks begin at 75 volts, when he grunts. The responses increase to a verbal complaint at 120 volts and a demand to be released from the experiment at 150 volts, when he also mentions that his heart is starting to bother him. At 270 volts he begins to produce an “agonized scream.” The learner’s screams and demands to be released become increasingly vehement and emotional as the voltage is increased. Forty subjects were tested in this baseline version of the experiment.<sup>2</sup>

The psychologist Thomas Blass, a foremost scholar on the obedience studies, argues that they have remained not only controversial but also salient for many reasons. First, there is the “unexpected enormity of the basic findings.”<sup>3</sup> Sixty-five percent of the subjects (twenty-six out of forty), all American adult men, complied with the experimenter’s instructions fully, shocking the learner all the way to the maximum level of 450 volts. Eighty percent of the subjects (thirty-two out of forty) continued past the point when the learner said his heart was bothering him and demanded to be freed from the experiment.<sup>4</sup> These results defied predictions by groups of Yale University seniors and professional psychiatrists, who predicted total obedience rates of 1.2 percent and 1.25 percent respectively—a far cry from 65 percent.<sup>5</sup>

A second reason for the salience of the obedience studies is that together they make up one of the largest integrated research programs in psychology. Milgram conducted extensive variations on the baseline experiment and developed an integrated analysis of the aggregate findings. A third reason for their relevance is that psychologists have fervently debated the obedience studies in print, both praising and criticizing them.<sup>6</sup> A “storm of controversy” grew around the

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<sup>1</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, pp. 3–4, 20.

<sup>2</sup> This describes Experiment 5: A New Base-Line Condition. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4, 34, 55–57.

<sup>3</sup> Blass, “Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions,” 398.

<sup>4</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, pp. 56, 60–61.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral-Study of Obedience,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1963): 375; Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, the obedience experiments have “played a central and enriching role” in a number of controversies, such as those over research ethics, the social psychology of experimentation, and deception

experiments because they actively deceived naïve volunteer subjects, they seemed to show how easy it is to get people to do harm, and they exposed participants to emotionally grueling conditions.<sup>1</sup> Although the subjects were told after each experiment that no shocks had actually been administered, some experienced severe psychological reactions during the experiments, including signs of extreme tension while delivering the most powerful shocks, ranging from sweats and trembling to nervous laughter and uncontrollable seizures (experienced by a remarkable number of the subjects).<sup>2</sup> Some volunteers believed they could be seriously injuring the “victim.”

The fourth reason for the unusual salience of Milgram’s obedience research is its relevance to and use in fields outside of psychology, from communications research to philosophy, political science, education, and Holocaust studies. Finally, the research remains significant because it revealed a “fundamental and far-reaching” implication about human nature: that situations can override personal dispositions in determining behavior.<sup>3</sup> In other words, even nice, sympathetic people can, under certain circumstances, be influenced to harm others, even when their own wellbeing is not at risk.

Context is crucial, the experiments confirmed. People do not simply act according to their own predispositions, which may help explain why some people who care greatly about the environment consume and create pollution just as much as other people. Without the context created in the obedience experiments—an

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versus role playing. Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions," 398.

<sup>1</sup> Miller, Collins, and Brief, "Perspectives on Obedience to Authority: The Legacy of the Milgram Experiments," in "The Ethical and Methodological Controversies"; Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions," 398; Miller, *The Obedience Experiments: A Case Study of Controversy in Social Science*, pp. 88–89.

<sup>2</sup> Milgram, "Behavioral-Study of Obedience," 375; Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions," 398–99. Subjects were observed sweating, trembling, stuttering, biting their lips, groaning, digging their fingernails into their flesh, and smiling and laughing nervously. In four of the experimental conditions, fifteen subjects experienced full-blown, uncontrollable seizures. Stanley Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," *Human Relations* 18, no. 1 (1965): 68.

Some might question whether it is proper to use the results of the obedience studies due to the ethical questions surrounding them. There certainly was at least momentary suffering for many of the subjects, though Milgram claimed that follow-up studies showed that subjects did not suffer long-term consequences of participation in the experiments, and very few subjects (1.3 percent) stated that they were sorry to have participated. *Ibid.*, p. 58; Stanley Milgram, "Issues in the Study of Obedience: A Reply to Baumrind," *American Psychologist* 19, no. 11 (1964). In my view referring to the obedience results (and those of the other experiments cited here) causes no substantial further harm and may lead to important benefits. I do not mean to condone the methods by referring to the results.

<sup>3</sup> Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions," 398–99.

authoritarian figure continually demanding that the subject deliver shocks—certainly few subjects would have “hurt” the learner unprompted, having been told what to do only at the start. A man dressed in a white lab coat posing as a scientist in a university setting with serious-looking equipment sitting nearby could get people to inflict pain on other people. A variation on the experiment showed that the subjects would not have delivered painful shocks on their own volition, that they were not acting out their latent aggressions: when told that they could choose any shock level to be administered, most of the subjects delivered shocks in the lowest range. Only two ventured into the “danger” zone.<sup>1</sup>

In the longstanding debate between psychologists who are situationists (seeing behavior as arising from context or situation) and those who are dispositionists (seeing behavior as arising from personality or disposition), the obedience experiments come down firmly on the situationists’ side. Situation prevailed over disposition for most of the volunteers. The experiments provided ample evidence of subjects forcing themselves to act against their own personal dispositions to do no harm. The conflict expressed itself as sweats, trembling, nervous laughter, and seizures for many subjects. Strangely enough, these symptoms are a hopeful sign that people are predisposed not to harm others.

But neither situation alone nor disposition alone determines behavior. Most subjects in the baseline experiment succumbed to the situation, but fourteen out of forty (35 percent) disobeyed.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the ones who disobeyed, choosing not to hurt the learner, scored higher in “social responsibility” on a well-known personality test, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, from the start, just by demonstrating the power of situations to influence behavior—particularly to do harm—the obedience experiments already begin to support the idea that dissociations can be harmful. Dissociations are about contexts that lead people to make destructive choices seemingly against their personal values.

You can see situations at work all the time. Perhaps you know about global climate change and even about some of the many problems that it causes, and maybe you want to reduce your burden on the planet. Meanwhile, you are bombarded with advertisements to buy a new car (and the manufacture of a car alone makes a large global-warming impact). In the United States car companies for decades have been pushing large, consumptive vehicles because they return the

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<sup>1</sup> This was Experiment 11: Subject Free to Choose Shock Level. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, pp. 61, 70–72.

<sup>2</sup> Milgram, “Behavioral-Study of Obedience,” 375.

<sup>3</sup> Alan C. Elms, *Social Psychology and Social Relevance* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1972), pp. 130–31.



highest profit margins; today, SUVs and muscly trucks dominate many American parking lots and streets. The two main candidates in the 2012 US presidential election sometimes seemed to be competing over who would drill for more oil, implying there is no urgent climate change problem. Advertisements, peer choices, government officials—all seem to condone the choice that conflicts with your values. You buy. Your environmental values take a back seat in your roomy new vehicle.

Starting with the compelling power of situations, the obedience experiments provide a solid foundation to begin to understand the links between dissociation and destruction despite the criticism they have received, particularly around the ethics of experimental deception.<sup>1</sup> Milgram studied almost a thousand American adults in the series.<sup>2</sup> Psychologists have carried out and published at least twenty experiments modeled on Milgram's obedience paradigm worldwide, with overall results confirming the original findings.<sup>3</sup> The validity of the results has not diminished in time.<sup>4</sup> A similar experiment with an authentic victim (a puppy receiving actual shocks to the point of becoming animated and howling, sad to say) yielded similar results for men (curiously, *all* thirteen female subjects obeyed fully in delivering shocks to the puppy).<sup>5</sup> Milgram's results and those from the puppy experiment closely match results from an experiment conducted in 1924 in which the experimenter instructed subjects to manually cut off the head of a live rat.<sup>6</sup> The relevance of the obedience results outside of psychology, their remarkable

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<sup>1</sup> Miller and Blass are among the psychologists who continue to find the Milgram experiments of value and who survey their continued influence in psychology and other fields. Miller, Collins, and Brief, "Perspectives on Obedience to Authority: The Legacy of the Milgram Experiments."; Miller, *The Obedience Experiments: A Case Study of Controversy in Social Science*; Blass, *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*; Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions," 398.

<sup>2</sup> Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," 74.

<sup>3</sup> Blass, *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*, p. 59; Thomas Blass, "A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Studies of Obedience Using the Milgram Paradigm: A Review," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Blass, "The Milgram Paradigm after 35 Years: Some Things We Now Know About Obedience to Authority," 969.

<sup>5</sup> Charles L. Sheridan and Richard G. King, "Obedience to Authority with an Authentic Victim," *Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association* 7, no. 1 (1972). The complete obedience of the female participants may be related to the youth of the participants, who were in their late teens. One may wonder about the detachment required for the experimenters themselves when they designed an experiment in which a puppy suffered like this.

<sup>6</sup> This experiment was conducted by Carney Landis and associates at the University of Minnesota to study physiological expressions of emotion. The job of decapitation was often awkward and prolonged due to the stress and internal conflict experienced by the participants. Peter V. Butler, "Destructive Obedience in 1924: Landis' 'Studies of Emotional Reactions' as a Prototype of the Milgram Paradigm," *Irish Journal of Psychology* 19, no. 2–3 (1998): 242.

demonstration of the power of situational, contextual factors, and their central concern with human destructiveness all suggest that they can shed light on our harmful choices.

### **Testing Proximity**

The strongest confirmation of the link between dissociation and destruction comes from a set of variations on the obedience experiments: the “proximity series,” which manipulated the proximity of the supposed victim to the subject across four experiments. The first variation, “Remote-Feedback,” differs from the baseline experiment in that the victim (“learner”) makes no vocal complaint and the subject cannot see him. But at 300 volts, the “laboratory walls resound as he pounds in protest.” After 315 volts the victim no longer answers questions, and the pounding ceases. The next experiment in the proximity series, “Voice-Feedback,” adds vocal protests. The victim is in a separate room, but his complaints can be heard clearly through the walls of the room. The “Proximity” variation places the victim in the same room as the subject, a few feet (a meter or so) from him, and thus makes the victim visible as well as audible. In the final proximity variation, “Touch-Proximity,” the victim receives a shock only when his hand rests on a shock plate. At the 150-volt level, the victim demands to be set free and refuses to place his hand on the shock plate. The experimenter then orders the subject to force the victim’s hand onto the plate, requiring the subject to have physical contact with the victim beyond the 150-volt level.<sup>1</sup>

Forty subjects were studied in each of these four experimental variations. Obedience rates, the percentage of subjects who obeyed the experimenter fully and delivered all shocks up to the highest level, fell as the subject became more proximate to the victim: 65% in the Remote-Feedback condition, 62.5% in the Voice-Feedback condition, 40% in the proximity condition, and 30% in the Touch-Proximity condition.<sup>2</sup> In the most dissociated condition, Remote-Feedback, no subject stopped before administering the 300-volt shock, at which point the victim kicks the wall and no longer answers the teacher’s multiple-choice questions.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the subjects became less willing to inflict harm as the victim (and his suffering) became more immediate and salient to them.<sup>4</sup> Results from earlier pilot studies support this relationship. In the pilot the victim provides no protests, verbal or pounding, but is still dimly visible through a mirror to the next room. In this setup “virtually all subjects, once commanded, went blithely to the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, pp. 32–34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34–36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," 62.

board, seemingly indifferent to the verbal designations [on the shock generator before them] ('Extreme Shock' and 'Danger: Severe Shock')."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, if we cannot see and hear nature, if we cannot witness our degradations, there may be no limits to our destructiveness. Proximity is the opposite of phenomenal dissociation, so the proximity series shows that people are more likely to make harmful choices when they are more dissociated from the consequences and the others they are affecting, even when they know they are causing harm.<sup>2</sup>

### *Milgram's View*

Although the obedience results provide ammunition for the argument that phenomenal dissociations are inherently destructive, they do not quite tell us why. This question concerned Milgram. Why should it be relevant to actually witness a harm that you are creating if you know about it? Moreover, when you are able to witness it, why should it matter how close you are? With the results in hand he sought to develop a theory to explain the relationship between distance—phenomenal dissociation—and destruction, among the other findings. In a paper titled "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," Milgram presented an elaborate framework to explain this relationship.<sup>3</sup> He identified six factors that make people more harmful under conditions of dissociation. Most of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Blass analyzed the Milgram data and showed that, although there actually is no statistical significance to the differences in obedience rates between the remote and voice-feedback variations or between the proximity and touch-proximity variations, all of the other differences were significant. So there exists an inverse relation between proximity and obedience. Blass, "Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions," 401.

One of the most interesting experiments following the Milgram obedience model is the one performed in the late 1960s by Harvey A. Tilker of the City University of New York. Tilker investigated subject responsibility and victim feedback by manipulating them through several experimental conditions. Responsibility was varied between No Responsibility, Ambiguous Responsibility, and Total Responsibility. Feedback was varied between No Feedback, Auditory Feedback, and Auditory-visual Feedback. Tilker found that total accepted responsibility for another person's well-being and maximum feedback from that person regarding his or her condition were major determinants of socially responsible behavior. Harvey A. Tilker, "Socially Responsible Behavior as a Function of Observer Responsibility and Victim Feedback," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 14, no. 2 (1970): 99. These results match previous results showing that feedback from a victim reduces the intensity of aggression directed toward the victim. Arnold H. Buss, "Instrumentality of Aggression Feedback and Frustration as Determinants of Physical Aggression," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3, no. 2 (1966). When responsibility was diffused, as it is when there are multiple witnesses to an emergency, speed of assistance or action was declined. John M. Darley and Bibb Latané, "Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility," *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 8, no. 4, pt. 1 (1968).

<sup>3</sup> Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority."

them, described below, seem to apply to situations in which the object of harm is not a human.

*Empathic Cues:* In the more remote conditions, the victim's suffering possesses an abstract, remote quality for the subject. "He is aware, but only in a conceptual sense, that his actions cause pain to another person; the fact is apprehended but not felt." A conceptual engagement does not necessarily lead to an emotional response. Milgram noted that this is a common enough phenomenon and gives the example of a bombardier who knows that his weapons will inflict suffering and death, yet his knowledge is "divested of affect and does not arouse in him an emotional response to the suffering that he causes." Visual cues of the victim's suffering may trigger empathic responses in the subject and give him a more complete grasp of the victim's situation. The empathic responses themselves may be unpleasant and thus curb destructive behavior. You might not enjoy looking up close into the eyes of the pig being slaughtered for your dinner.

Retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman studies the conditions that enable killing in war and everyday society and its psychological costs. He writes, "At close range, the resistance to killing a person is tremendous. When one looks an opponent in the eye, and knows that he is young or old, scared or angry, it is not possible to deny that the individual about to be killed is much like oneself."<sup>1</sup> Grossman quotes a Vietnam Special Forces veteran saying, "When you get up close and personal, where you can hear 'em scream and see 'em die, it's a bitch." Proximity to a source of authority and distance from a victim facilitates killing, Grossman notes.<sup>2</sup> Empathic cues work, of course, with nonhumans as well. It is easy to imagine feeling empathy for a pet or perhaps even a "head" of cattle. I have personally experienced it with inanimate things as well, such as trees, and I know others do, too. Proximity and face-to-face encounters encourage empathy and provide the context for all sorts of genuine emotional connections to arise, including those that lead to caring and nurturing choices.

*Denial and narrowing of the cognitive field:* Milgram writes, "When the victim is close, it is more difficult to exclude him phenomenologically."<sup>3</sup> In the more remote conditions, it is easier to exclude him and his suffering from thought. In the two most remote conditions, feedback is sporadic and discontinuous, while in the two most proximate conditions, inclusion in the immediate visual field renders the victim continuously salient, and harder to ignore.<sup>4</sup> Tellingly, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2009), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 308.

<sup>3</sup> Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," 63.

<sup>4</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, pp. 37–38.

conditions in which subjects could see the victim, subjects often averted their eyes to avoid seeing him.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, when our victims lie outside our cognitive fields, when we do not even know they exist, it becomes difficult to consider their well-being, regardless of whether they are humans.

*Reciprocal fields:* In proximity conditions, not only can the subject observe the victim, but the actions of the subject are now under scrutiny by the victim. When the victim witnesses the subject's actions, it may give rise to shame or guilt in the subject, an emotional response that can curtail harmful action. Blindfolding the victim of a firing squad may result in less stress not only for the victim but also for the executioner. Executioners may wear hoods for the same reason. Being part of the victim's field of awareness may make subjects more self-conscious, embarrassed, and inhibited in perpetrating destructive violence against the victim. Reciprocal fields are defeated by forms of dissociation that prevent the victim from seeing the actor. Perhaps this factor is most relevant when the recipient of destructive acts is human. But consider also the powerful effect of the gaze of nonhuman animals. I will never forget the frightened, desperate look in the eyes of a very sick dog I had taken to the veterinary hospital in an emergency, as the vets approached her to draw blood.

*Experienced unity of act:* Under dissociated conditions, it is more difficult for the subject to be aware of the connection between his actions and the consequences for the victim. The act and the consequences are physically separated. The two events of pressing a lever and protests and cries in another room are in correlation, but "lack a compelling unity." In the proximity conditions, this unity is more fully achieved.<sup>2</sup> The experienced unity of an act is disrupted when actors are dissociated from consequences in space or time. There is little experienced unity, for example, between buying a ream of paper and the felling of the trees that went into it.

*Incipient group-formation:* Placing the victim in another room affects the social relations of the situation. It draws the victim further away from the subject while the subject and experimenter remain closer together. A group begins to form between subject and experimenter, but the victim is excluded. In the remote condition, the victim is truly an outsider who stands alone, physically and psychologically, like nature, which stands alone, away from our daily lives. When the victim is brought closer to the subject in the proximity conditions, it is easier to form an alliance with him against the experimenter. The subject now has an ally against the experimenter. Alliances shift with changing spatial relations. Another of Milgram's experimental variations, the "closeness of authority" variation, further

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<sup>1</sup> Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," 61.

<sup>2</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, pp. 38–39.

supports the notion of incipient group-formation. When the experimenter is physically removed from the room where the subject sits and the two communicate via telephone (with all other conditions remaining equal), obedience drops sharply.<sup>1</sup> Alliances are of course more relevant to situations involving other humans being harmed, but perhaps they occur when animals are victims, too.

Another experimental variation confirms the importance group formation: the “bring-a-friend” condition. Milgram never published this condition, possibly because he used an unethical procedure in it.<sup>2</sup> Subjects were instructed to bring an acquaintance of at least two years, who became the learner, who was then secretly instructed by Milgram in how to deceive the subject into thinking the shocks were real. In this condition, in which a relationship already existed between the subject and the learner, only 15 percent agreed to administer every shock. For most people, the existing relationship outweighed the one between the subject and the experimenter, though it is strange to think that 15 percent of people would agree to give dangerous shocks to a friend or acquaintance. Nevertheless, we can see that having a pre-existing relationship with someone—or something, perhaps—reduces harm, a result that can be applied to reducing destruction in the real world by establishing more relationships with the others our actions can affect.

*Acquired behavior dispositions:* People and other social animals learn not to harm others mostly in contexts of the proximal relations in everyday life, dealing with people in face-to-face interactions at home, in the neighborhood, and at the grocery store. In the past aggressive actions against physically close others may have resulted in retaliatory punishment, while aggression against physically more distant others may rarely have led to retaliation. In the obedience experiments “the concrete, visible, and proximal presence of the victim acted in an important way to counteract the experimenter’s power and to generate disobedience” against destructive orders.<sup>3</sup> We may in effect be taught to respect and protect others who are physically closer to us. Perhaps that explains why so many indigenous cultures living in close contact with nature exhibit great respect for the natural world.

Milgram’s concepts of *agentic state* and *strain* help in understanding the tension we feel between our environmental values and our participation in actions

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<sup>1</sup> Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," 65.

<sup>2</sup> François Rochat and Andre Modigliani, "Authority: Obedience, Defiance, and Identification in Experimental and Historic Contexts," in *A New Outline of Social Psychology*, ed. Martin Gold and Elizabeth Douvan (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1997), pp. 235, 37, 38; Nestar J. C. Russell and Robert J. Gregory, "Spinning an Organizational 'Web of Obligation'? Moral Choice in Stanley Milgram's 'Obedience' Experiments," *The American Review of Public Administration* 41, no. 5 (2011): 500–01.

<sup>3</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, pp. 39–40.

that harm nature.<sup>1</sup> Milgram believed that the obedience-experiment subjects were drawn into an agentic state—they became, in part, agents of the experimenter, carrying out his wishes. Several factors drew them into this state: the experimenter’s elevated authority in the institutional setting, the existing agreement between the subject and experimenter, the relative ignorance of the subject compared with the experimenter in the setting, and the subject’s loss of responsibility. Strain is the internal force that drives subjects to want to stop their harmful acts.<sup>2</sup>

Milgram’s concept of agentic state aptly describes our abdication of responsibility to corporations and institutions that decide how our food is grown, what drugs are safe, and how nature will be used. His concept of strain likewise seems to describe the phenomenon in which many people want to stop the environmental damages to which they contribute but end up just feeling disempowered to do so. Most of us do have choices, just as the obedience subjects could stop obeying. But we seem to abdicate much of our responsibility to society to tell us what is right and proper, and it tells us, for instance, that driving personal cars is completely acceptable in almost all cases—it is our right as free individuals—even while driving is well known to create some of our worst environmental problems.

In the obedience experiments several aspects of the situation kept subjects in the agentic state. Milgram called them “binding factors.” The *sequential nature of the action* makes it hard to give up at any particular point once you have started giving shocks because doing so might imply that your prior actions were immoral.<sup>3</sup> The subjects also had *situational obligations*: they made a promise to help the experimenter and felt obliged to keep that promise.<sup>4</sup> Because people are socialized to follow rules set down by authority figures, the subjects experienced *anxiety* when they considered not following the experimenter’s instructions. Their anxiety over violating the rules appeared in the form of nervous laughter and trembling. These symptoms disappeared as soon as subjects chose to disobey, resolving the tension of the situation.<sup>5</sup>

It is always easier and less anxiety provoking to go along with the rules and conventions of society, which bind us into maintaining the sequence of harmful acts

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 143–48, 54–57.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 132–34, 53–64. Blass believes that the theoretical component of Milgram’s book was its weakest section: Thomas Blass, *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2004). Nevertheless, it appears to be the most comprehensive framework currently available for understanding the obedience proximity results.

<sup>3</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 149–52.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

that we participate in daily. Why not just buy one more plastic bottle of water or one more smartphone? Many aspects of daily life place us in situational obligations to do things we know result in harms. To maintain friendships often means driving long distances and flying. To be a good mother for many Americans means buying plenty of gifts for the children at Christmas, even knowing many will be used only briefly before being discarded.<sup>1</sup> Milgram's analysis of destructive obedience reflects everyday life in other ways as well.

### *Cogs in the Machine?*

When people know they are inflicting harm but continue to do so because situational factors compel or entice them, they feel strain. Some people might feel slightly guilty about driving instead of taking public transit. But factors that increase dissociations between the subject and action on the one hand and the object and consequence on the other alleviate the strain. The ill consequences of driving are so remote, and there are so many layers of industry and government between us and the consequences, that it is usually easy for most of us to just drive without considering them at all. Milgram summarizes this effect:

Any force or event that is placed between the subject and the consequences of shocking the victim, any factor that will create distance between the subject and the victim, will lead to a reduction of strain on the participant and thus less disobedience [to the demand to inflict harm]. In modern society others often stand between us and the final destructive act to which we contribute...Indeed, it is typical of modern bureaucracy, even when it is designed for destructive purposes, that most people involved in its organization do not directly carry out any destructive actions. They shuffle papers or load ammunition or perform some other act which, though it contributes to the final destructive effect, is remote from it in the eyes and mind of the functionary.<sup>2</sup>

Milgram envisions fields of force that diminish in effectiveness with increasing psychological distance from their source. They can either inhibit or promote certain types of behavior.<sup>3</sup> Fields of force emanating from the experimenter promote compliance with his instructions, whereas those emanating

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<sup>1</sup> George Monbiot, "On the 12th Day of Christmas...Your Gift Will Just Be Junk," *The Guardian*, London, December 10, 2012, <http://gu.com/p/3cdnx> (accessed February 4, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," 66.



from the “learner” inhibit compliance. The more we are inundated with advertisements to buy new smartphones, for instance, the more we may be under the influence of the field of force of the companies selling them. Conversely, the more we hear about, see, and maybe even feel the toxic effects of their creation, the more we may be influenced by a competing field of force.

In some versions of the obedience experiments, the field of force emanating from the learner was muted. One obedience subject said, “It’s funny how you really begin to forget that there’s a guy out there, even though you can hear him.”<sup>1</sup> His comment echoes modern humanity’s relationship with nature. Most of us know about our society’s abuses of nature. We can hear nature at a distance. But institutions of science, government, and industry hold authority in our lives and can put us in an agentic state. We comply, yielding to their authority, carrying out acts we know to be destructive toward nature and other people, like Milgram’s subjects who yielded to the experimenter and delivered (what they believed were) painful, possibly damaging shocks to the victim, even when hearing his screams. Milgram observed, “any competent manager of a destructive bureaucratic system can arrange his personnel so that only the most callous and obtuse are directly involved in the violence.”<sup>2</sup> Relatively few people are needed for the most socially and environmentally destructive tasks, and corporations can usually find people sufficiently obedient, tolerant, ignorant, or unconcerned. Most simply lack more benevolent opportunities.

Our continued abuses of invisible others can have effects on us, not just on them—just as Milgram’s subjects found themselves trembling, laughing, or worse. Ecopsychologists talk about environmentally related despair in ways that recall the emotional effects of strain experienced by obedience experiment subjects.<sup>3</sup> The authority of modern industrial and other institutions prescribes behaviors—purchasing inefficient vehicles and other features of the “good life”—that contribute to results that people find distressful, such as global climate change and deforestation. Most meat eaters are appalled when they finally find out about the conditions on factory farms that their purchases support. The dissonance between acting in accord with that authority and the knowledge of undesired consequences of such actions may harm our mental health in ways we are only beginning to appreciate.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> Terrance O'Connor, "Therapy for a Dying Planet," in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, ed. Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995).

### *The Cycle of Destruction*

What other psychological dynamics may inhibit change? Milgram's explanations for continued obedience in the experiments offer some insights. To change a routine, to give up a practice that may be harmful, runs the risk of implicitly condemning our own past behavior. The new behavior would create a self-critical stance toward the old one, and the self-critical stance would conflict with our positive self-image and thus create cognitive dissonance: the discomfort or anxiety of holding two conflicting ideas or beliefs. In the obedience experiments the step-wise progression and the gradually increasing nature of the harms probably helped launch the sequence and propel it forward. At lower shock levels, it is easier to obey the authority figure and deliver shocks because the effects are much smaller. As the shock level increases, it becomes emotionally more difficult for subjects to continue to obey, yet to break off the pattern recriminates oneself for delivering the previous shocks. Subjects may feel compelled to continue to the end to justify the previous shocks they gave.<sup>1</sup> Because the shock levels increase gradually and uniformly, there is no obvious dividing line at which the subject can justify stopping without condemning his own previous behavior. The overall effect is similar to the "foot-in-the-door" technique: a person is more likely to comply with a major request after having complied with a more minor one.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, environmental destruction has increased in scale and scope continuously over the five or so centuries of the modern period, with some exceptions. Modern technology and wealth, bolstered by the exploitation of new energy sources, particularly fossil fuels, have increased each person's individual potential for destruction. Continuing on the same path may be a way of avoiding the cognitive dissonance that might be created by tacitly condemning past behaviors with a change in direction. Put another way, we may have a need to validate past behaviors that degrade the environment by repeating them or changing them only gradually.<sup>3</sup> People who seek major social change would do well to account for cognitive dissonance, in addition to comfort, greed, and the like, as inhibitors of change.

Other researchers have come to similar conclusions. In *The Roots of Evil* the psychologist Ervin Staub, a pioneer in the research and practice in the psychology of peace and violence, sought to understand how destructive practices are

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<sup>1</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan L. Freedman and Scott C. Fraser, "Compliance without Pressure: The Foot-in-the-Door Technique," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4, no. 2 (1966).

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps corporate executives resist switching to new, more environmentally benign practices out of fear of implying that past behavior was improper or even illegal, thereby opening their companies to lawsuits or punitive action by government agencies.

perpetuated. The book analyzes destructive human projects such as genocide and other group violence. Staub notes that the further destruction has progressed, the more difficult it is to stop. He builds on the psychologist Kurt Lewin's (1890–1947) conception of the “goal gradient...the closer you are to a goal, the stronger the motivation to reach it.”<sup>1</sup> Interrupting goal-directed behavior creates tension, Staub found, and humans are motivated to reach closure, to resolve psychic tensions. One of Milgram's subjects said to himself, obviously loud enough for the experimenter to hear, “It's *got* to go on. It's *got* to go on,”<sup>2</sup> as if the goal of completing the experiment were paramount. Meeting a goal brings the promise of closure.

What goal might lead to environmental destruction? The modern story of progress drives much of the change that we see. We believe in progress—a linear historical progression in which human welfare continually improves through better science, technology, and social organization. According to this story, humans are becoming less dependent on and vulnerable to nature. We are becoming nature's masters. Perhaps the thought of getting closer to the goal of true independence of and mastery over nature, as expressed in science fiction, drives us ever onward. As Lewin said, as we get closer to the goal (or so we believe), our motivation becomes stronger to reach it. And this drive may persist in full light of the damages we cause along the way. So far, better technology and management have not delivered us from environmental ruin, in spite of positive developments like wind power and hybrid vehicles.

In his work in Burundi, Rwanda, and elsewhere to foster caring, non-aggressive people and societies, Staub applies “just-world” thinking to understand human destructiveness and the absence of helping behavior. People's naïve beliefs in a just world lead them to devalue victims of harm, making harm self-perpetuating. At some level most of us believe that people get their just desserts, that victims have earned their suffering by their actions or character. Staub notes that genocidal conflict is fueled by an intense devaluation along class or other group lines.<sup>3</sup> Milgram also saw this effect in his subjects, many of whom grimly devalued the victim after hurting him. A typical comment was “He was so stupid and stubborn he deserved to get shocked.” Milgram writes, “Once having acted against the victim, these subjects found it necessary to view him as an unworthy individual, whose punishment was made inevitable by his own deficiencies of intellect and character.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 85–85.

<sup>2</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*, pp. 33–34, 79, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, p. 10.

Just world thinking may carry over to social institutions, to lead us to believe that our institutions of industry, science, and governance are operated by mostly righteous people performing mostly righteous acts, so others who are harmed may justly be so. We can ask, Does this phenomenon apply at some level not just to other people we may harm with our choices, like the coastal populations in Bangladesh who will be inundated as the seas rise with global climate change, but also to nonhuman nature? Do we begin to think that having suffered our abuses nature, including other animals, somehow deserves such treatment?

### *Social Division and Destructiveness*

Is it possible to test the idea that participation in a bureaucracy can perpetrate harms? Another variation of the obedience experiments showed that it is. The “peer administers shocks” variation removed the subject one additional step from the victim in the experiment’s social hierarchy by placing another person between the subject and the victim. The subject in this variation does not press the shock levers but tells someone else to do so. The person sitting at the shock-machine controls is actually an accomplice of the experimenter, though the subject is told he is another subject. The subsidiary act of ordering another person to administer the shock remains vital to the overall progress of the experiment in which the subject believes he is participating.<sup>1</sup>

In this condition, when the experimental subject does not press shock levers but rather orders someone else to do so, only three subjects out of forty (7.5 percent) refused to continue to the highest shock level.<sup>2</sup> Recall that in the baseline experiment, fourteen out of forty subjects (35 percent) defied the experimenter. That means introducing only one level of social intermediation into the situation, and no other changes, dramatically increased the likelihood of subjects to be destructive, from 65 percent to 92.5 percent. Similar experiments verified these results.<sup>3</sup> These findings cast a shadow on the bureaucratic structure of modern institutions of industry and governance, in which decisions traverse uncountable

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 121–22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> Wesley Kilham and Leon Mann in Australia directly tested and compared obedience levels of transmitters (the role of conveying the command) and executants (the role of pressing the levers). In their transmitter condition 54 percent of their subjects were fully obedient, as compared with 28 percent of subjects in the executant condition. In other words, subjects were twice as likely to be destructively obedient when they did not have to directly press the lever, but rather instructed another person to do so. Wesley Kilham and Leon Mann, “Level of Destructive Obedience as a Function of Transmitter and Executant Roles in Milgram Obedience Paradigm,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 29, no. 5 (1974): 700. Kilham and Mann included a study of gender effects. They found that females were much more defiant than males in the executant condition, but in the transmitter condition, they were only slightly more defiant than males. Ibid., p. 699.

layers of intermediaries. Adding only one layer in the experiment, one person, between deciders and their material-world consequences increased the chances that they would make a harmful choice by almost 30 percent. How many intermediaries might there be between a high-tech executive and a high-tech factory worker? Researching bureaucratic destruction, the psychologists Nestor J. C. Russell and Robert J. Gregory concluded that bureaucracies actively seek to broaden the “zones of indifference” enveloping their members so that they can complete the inhuman tasks of the organization as efficiently and smoothly as possible.<sup>1</sup> Feeling and emoting people only disrupt a well-oiled administrative apparatus. Perhaps bureaucracies *are* inherently destructive.

Bureaucratic harm motivated the “Utrecht Studies,” a series of nineteen experiments exploring the willingness of intermediaries to carry out harmful acts. Modern bureaucracies are full of intermediaries, noted the experimenters, Wim H. J. Meeus and Quinten A. W. Raaijmakers. Participants were instructed to disturb a job applicant undergoing a test that supposedly would determine qualification for a job (the applicant was actually an accomplice of the experimenters). The participants were told to say fifteen negative “stress remarks” cleverly designed to hurt applicants’ performance (and supposed job prospects) and to affect performance cumulatively. In the basic setup over 90 percent of participants complied. “Obedience is extremely high when the violence to be exerted is a contemporary form of mediated violence,” the experimenters concluded.<sup>2</sup> Positive attitudes toward social institutions and distant relationships with fellow citizens lead to the high levels of “psychological-administrative violence” found in the experiments and in modern society more broadly.<sup>3</sup> Granted, institutional authorities in contemporary society do not necessarily have “violence” toward people or nature as their goal. Nevertheless, it is certainly one outcome.

## Conclusion

Milgram’s obedience experimental results and analysis, together with the other empirical studies and theories presented here, suggest that phenomenal engagement with the outcomes of our choices inhibits destructive acts. And when our victims

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<sup>1</sup> Russell and Gregory, "Spinning an Organizational 'Web of Obligation'? Moral Choice in Stanley Milgram's 'Obedience' Experiments," 512. The authors take the concept of “zone of indifference” from Chester Irving Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938).

<sup>2</sup> Wim H. J. Meeus and Quinten A. W. Raaijmakers, "Obedience in Modern Society: The Utrecht Studies," *Journal of Social Issues* 51, no. 3 (1995). The original article reporting the experiment was Wim H. J. Meeus and Quinten A. W. Raaijmakers, "Administrative Obedience: Carrying out Orders to Use Psychological-Administrative Violence," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 16, no. 4 (1986).

<sup>3</sup> Meeus and Raaijmakers, "Obedience in Modern Society: The Utrecht Studies."

are more remote from us phenomenally or are separated from us by social or administrative structures, we become liberated to make choices that may hurt them. The same probably holds for non-human victims and nature and society as wholes as well.

As he analyzed the obedience experiments, Milgram wrote, “Proximity as a variable in psychological research has received far less attention than it deserves.”<sup>1</sup> Little work in this area has been done since his obedience studies. And we have virtually no empirical psychology that directly tries to understand what happens to our decision making when the consequences of our actions are diffused and distributed across the globe. It would be helpful to know, for instance, how much we can gain by simple knowledge of particular environmental problems versus witnessing them firsthand. It would be fascinating to carry out obedience experiments in which the victim is not a simulated human victim but a potted plant, for instance. In light of the severity of global climate change, species extinction, habitat loss, and a host of other major environmental problems—which some observers believe could, in the aggregate, spell doom for human society within decades—the analysis presented here suggests that the need to learn more about the psychopathology of phenomenal dissociations may be more urgent than Milgram could have imagined.

The experiments that I discuss in this chapter are inspired by the desire to better understand the origins of major human problems. Milgram wanted to know more about the mass violence in the Nazi concentration camps. The “Utrecht Studies” sought better understanding of the mediated, administrative types of violence that happen in everyday bureaucratic life. Staub’s concern lies in inter-group violence, particularly genocide, which has unfortunately risen in modernity. But what about perhaps the most encompassing complex of problems challenging the future of humanity—the global environmental crisis? One problem alone in this category, global climate change, promises to bring on major problems including mass destitution, wars, and political chaos. Psychologists could contribute greatly by giving us a clearer understanding of the psychopathology of dissociation and how we might best address it.

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<sup>1</sup> Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," 65.

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