Obedience and Freedom (and Fools and Legislators)

by Theodore Dalrymple (July 2022)

The Policeman, George Bergen, 1931

A book with the title *Obedience Is Freedom* is certain, in the present conjuncture, to raise eyebrows. The very word *obedience* is now conjures up the 'I was only obeying orders'

exculpatory argument of Nazi war criminals, or the late Stanley Milgram's famous experiments described in his book, *Obedience to Authority*, in which he demonstrated that many ordinary people were prepared to administer what they thought to be a severe and even potentially fatal electric shock to strangers on the mere say-so of someone they believed to be in authority. It does not matter that most of us may at some time have followed orders that we believed to be wrong simply because they were orders, or that Milgram's interpretation of his experiments has been challenged (or that they could not be repeated today because they would be regarded as an unethical assault on their subjects' autonomy, and in any case have become so famous that it is unlikely that naïve subjects could be found):we are against obedience as such, as we are against authority. And some would go as far as to say that the title calls to mind the legend over the entrance to Auschwitz, *Arbeit macht frei*, or alternatively the slogan in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, freedom is slavery.

Once on a plane to Ireland I sat next to a young social worker who saw that I was reading Milgram's book (it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication and I had been asked to write about it).

'We in Ireland know about authority,' she said, meaning that she had grown up under what she considered the eagle eye and iron fist of the Catholic Church, when the Archbishop of Dublin was often thought to be the real ruler of the country. 'I am against all authority.'

'So you don't mind,' I said, 'if I go into the cockpit and take over?'

She didn't mean *that* kind of authority, she replied; but in fact *that* kind of authority depended on quite a lot of other kinds, or at least loci, of authority. British, Irish and international authorities test and license pilots. This whole system depends upon a great deal of implicit trust and cannot

do so by the exertion of raw power backed up by violence, even if it is true that anyone found cheating will be sanctioned.

It is the nature of the obedience and authority that is necessary for the exercise of freedom that the author of this book, a youngish theologian called Jacob Phillips examines, occasionally with more convolution than I think strictly necessary. He is, however, the kind of philosopher who believes that concrete experience or example is important in illuminating principle; and he does not accept the widespread concept of freedom as total lack of restraint or constraint, either from within or from without, such a lack being itself a kind of obedience, in this case to personal whim.

One chapter moved me and illustrated the thesis of the book with particular force. The author recounts how, when he was sixteen years old, his mother began to suffer from a mysterious and undiagnosed illness from which, nineteen years later, she died. The author's father is nowhere to be seen in this narrative, and the author does not even comment on this absence, it being irrelevant to the point he is about to make.

The illness—we never learn the diagnosis—cuts his mother off from all her previous friends and associates. She can no longer work; she soon becomes housebound. Her son is her only carer. This care for his mother affects where he goes to university, because it needs to be physically close to her, and precludes doing many of the things he might otherwise have liked to do, principally, I surmise, travel. (Travel undertaken in youth is formative like no other.)

It is easy to see how resentful a young man could have become under these circumstances. The supposed best years of his life cabin'd, cribb'd, confined by his mother's illness! And yet he did not experience it like this, as we, who did not have the experience, think or imagine that we might, or probably would, have done.

Of course, his freedom was limited by his mother's illness and his care of her: but which freedom is so free of circumstance that there are no limits to it? This thought leads us on to dangerous ground, for if we go far enough, we could argue that, Man being existentially free by nature, as it were, the political and social arrangements under which he lives do not matter, for he always has choice and circumstances are always limiting. Even in the most thoroughgoing tyranny on earth, that of North Korea, people must still have some room for manoeuvre, if only in their thoughts, and probably some in their actions too, for in that hermit kingdom of Kim III, people must still vary according to whether they are kind or not, friendly or not, and so forth. Uniformity is that which cannot be fully imposed on Mankind, though it has often been attempted, always with horrible results.

But to return to our sheep, as the French say (and research, incidentally, has shown sheep are less sheep-like than one might have supposed). Why did the author not experience his mother's illness and his need to look after her as an assault on his freedom? The answer is that he had a pre-cognitive commitment to his mother. Every time that he did something for her—her shopping, say—he did not have to hold an inner dialogue to decide whether he should do the shopping or go backpacking in South-East Asia. There was thus no inner struggle. His antecedent commitment made what might have seemed a choice to others not a choice to him, and therefore he lost nothing by it. There was plenty of scope for his freedom elsewhere.

This reminded me of why we often behave well, at least by comparison with how we *could* behave. I will take a trivial example: why do I never drop litter in the public space? Is it because, every time I have something for which I have no further use, I have an internal struggle and rehearse the arguments for dropping it just anywhere—my convenience, for example—as against those for retaining it and disposing of it

in a more socially responsible way, the latter arguments always prevailing because they are better?

No, of course not. On the contrary, I feel an almost physical inability to drop litter in the street, which would actually take determination to overcome. (Determination is not a good quality in itself. It depends on the end to which it is being employed or used.)

But where does this quasi-physical inhibition come from, how did it develop? It is not a natural instinct, rather the contrary. It is probably more natural to create a mess than to avoid doing so.

The answer is obvious and banal: it is because, from a very young age, my mother told me not to drop litter. She didn't explain why, and I don't remember her ever having done so (though of course my memory is fallible). If I had asked her, what would she have replied? I doubt that it would have been much of a disquisition on the metaphysical foundations of moral judgment. She would probably have said something like 'It's not done' or 'What if everyone did it?' These are no intellectually satisfying answers at any deep philosophical level, but in fact, however far one proceeds, one never arrives at a wholly and unarguably satisfactory philosophical level. The argumentative are never satisfied. And a life spent arguing on such matters as whether one should drop littler, not open doors for others, serve oneself first, and so forth, would be unbearable. The author quotes Noam Chomsky as saying that he 'would like to see communicated to people that every form of authority and domination and hierarchy, every authoritarian structure, has to prove it's justified,' and this because 'it has no prior justification'; but a life spent challenging every last authority, or always being on the cusp of doing so, is a paranoid life.

This is not to say that authorities are always good or trustworthy; clearly, they are not. But if we spent our lives

demanding safety certificates from bus drivers, or to see his licence, or demanding to test his eyesight on the grounds that it might have deteriorated since it was last tested, we should never get on a bus: and that is only one instance of our trust in others as they go about their work on our behalf. As Doctor Johnson said, it is better sometimes to be deceived than never to trust.

True obedience, says the author, retains some element of voluntary consent, a willingness to submit to authority when it is possible not to do so. Obedience is more than bowing to the inevitable. It often requires an informal but assumed acceptance of what is done and how it is done. That is why a shared understanding of behaviour requires a shared culture.

Lord Justice Moulton, a British judge, whom the author of *Obedience to Freedom* does not cite, gave a talk a century ago in which he referred to what he called 'obedience to the unenforceable.' If we live in a society in which we agree on how to behave only because there is a policeman round the corner waiting to arrest is if we behave in any other fashion, we shall live either in a state of anarchy tempered by repression or in a dictatorship as great as any that has ever existed, tempered only by incompetence. Manners cannot be enforced but have to be internalised to such an extent that the process of internalisation itself has been forgotten.

Sometimes I wish that I had internalised manners better than I have. The truly mannerly person does not have to remember to behave in a mannerly fashion: he does so as a matter of course, because, like Luther, he can do no other. But it seems that, increasingly (though this is perhaps an old complaint), many people reject the idea of manners, 'the domain of Obedience to the Unenforceable,' as Lord Moulton called it, as an unacceptable limitation of their freedom, and furthermore as a sign of weakness of character, insofar as that obedience implies a submission to convention. 'The obedience,' says Lord Moulton, 'is the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be

forced to obey. He is the enforcer of the law upon himself.' To this civilising vision, people now prefer to be laws unto themselves. Not Man is, but *I* am, the measure of all things.

Informal regulation by convention can, of course, be as abominable as any unjust law. There is no escaping the possibility in human affairs of abuse, however. Conventional behaviour can be cruel towards or disdainful of others. It can change for the better or worse. The mannerly person knows that the purpose of manners is to smooth the path of social relations in as many circumstances as possible and will therefore eschew hurtful convention, though without making an ideological song and dance about it.

In one of his chapters, the author draws a comparison between the informal and formal means of improving race relations. The latter employs laws and bureaucracy in an attempt to change people's souls. In the former, they do it for themselves, sometimes (but not inevitably) for the better. The instance of this that the author gives is the music scene in North-East London in the 1990s. Black and white were drawn together by mutual interest to the point of race no longer being an important category for them. I admit to a certain scepticism, to put it mildly, as to the aesthetic or civilisational value of what it was that drew the races together, but that is not here the point. Pentecostal churches, which from an abstract intellectual point of view strike me as absurd, achieve the same integration and do far more good than harm.

As Lord Moulton feared, there is a tendency for legislators to rush in where manners no longer tread. Conduct is divided into two categories, the legal and the illegal, and crudity is the result.

Table of Contents

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

Follow NER on Twitter @NERIconoclast