



# The Alpinists of Evil

Nazis did not just blindly follow orders



In last month's column I recounted how my replication of Stanley Milgram's shock experiments revealed that although most people can be inveigled to obey authorities if they are asked to hurt others, they do so reluctantly and with much moral conflict. Milgram's explanation was an "agentic state," or "the condition a person is in when he sees himself as an agent for carrying out another person's wishes." As agents in an experiment, subjects shift from being moral agents in society to obedient agents in a hierarchy. "I am forever astonished that when lecturing on the obedience experiments in colleges across the country, I faced young men who were aghast at the behavior of experimental subjects and proclaimed they would never behave in such a way but who, in a matter of months, were brought into the military and performed without compunction actions that made shocking the victim seem pallid."

This is an astute observation because research on the motivation of soldiers during combat—well summarized by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman in his deeply insightful book *On Killing* (Little, Brown, 2009)—reveals that a soldier's primary motivation is not politics and ideology but devotion to his band of brothers. "Among men who are bonded together so intensely," Grossman explains, "there is a powerful process of peer pressure in which the individual cares so deeply about his comrades and what they think about him that he would rather die than let them down." As a social primate species, we modulate our morals with signals from family, friends and social groups with whom we identify because in our evolutionary past those attributes helped individuals survive and reproduce. We do not just blindly concede control to authorities; instead we follow cues provid-

ed by our moral communities on how to behave.

The power of identification is emphasized in a reinterpretation of Milgram in a 2012 article in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* by University of St. Andrews psychologist Stephen D. Reicher, University of Queensland psychologist S. Alexander Haslam and University of Exeter psychologist Joanne R. Smith. They call their paradigm "identification-based followership," noting that "participants' identification with either the experimenter and the scientific community that he represents or the learner and the general community that he represents" better explains the willingness of subjects to shock (or not) learners at the bidding of an authority. At the start of the experiment, subjects identify with the experimenter and his worthy scientific research program, but at 150 volts the subjects' identification begins to shift to the learner, who cries out "Ugh!!! Experimenter! That's all. Get me out of here, please. My heart's starting to bother me. I refuse to go on. Let me out." It is, in fact, at 150 volts

that subjects are most likely to quit or protest. "In effect," Reicher and his colleagues postulate, "they become torn between two competing voices that are vying for their attention and making contradictory demands on them." This hypothesis better explains subjects' overt moral struggles after 150 volts far better than Milgram's agentic state because the latter encompasses only the subject-authority tie at the exclusion of the obvious subject-victim empathic bond.

The other shortcoming of Milgram's model is that it lets Nazi bureaucrats off the hook as mere agentic apparatuses in an extermination engine run by Adolf Eichmann, whose actions were famously described by Hannah Arendt as the "banality of evil." Where is the moral accountability? As historian Yaacov Lozowick noted in his 2002 book *Hitler's Bureaucrats*: "Eichmann and his ilk did not come to murder Jews by accident or in a fit of absent-mindedness, nor by blindly obeying orders or by being small cogs in a big machine. They worked hard, thought hard, took the lead over many years. They were the alpinists of evil."

Examples of Nazi climbers ascending into the thin air of evil abound in a 1992 book entitled *The Good Old Days*. As explained by one such alpinist, SS Lt. Col. Karl Kretschmer: "It is a weakness not to be able to stand the sight of dead people; the best way of overcoming it is to do it more often. Then it becomes a habit."

Provisionally, learned habits can be unlearned, especially in the context of moral groups. ■

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