

He was referring to the filmed record of the psychologist Stanley Milgram's classic—some call it notorious—experiment in obedience and authority conducted at Yale University in the summer of 1961. So disturbing and astonishing was this experiment and what it seemed to reveal about human nature that it has ever since been a required subject of study and debate by countless students of psychology and sociology, as well as by many philosophers and theologians.

Following immediately in the wake of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, the Milgram experiment seemed to show a terrifying tendency in people to violate the most fundamental principles of morality when so ordered by an authority figure—just as, at the trial, Eichmann claimed to be merely "following orders" when he collaborated in the businesslike slaughter of millions of men, women and children in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Milgram's experiment has been a key element in discussions of good and evil and the fragility of human morality—and especially with respect to what Milgram called "the perils of obedience."

But there was one crucial aspect of this experiment, as shown in the film, that has received only a limited kind of study. It is because of this one vividly demonstrated aspect of human nature that I have shown this film to every philosophy class I have ever taught in which the question has arisen: what is evil and why does evil exist?

And it was just this element of the film that Octavio was referring to. In order to explain what this aspect is and why it is so important, it is necessary first to have a clear picture of the design of the experiment and its results. Here is a description of the experiment, based on Milgram's own account.

The setting is a psychology laboratory at Yale University. Two volunteers are there to participate in what is being called a study of memory and learning. One of them is designated as "teacher" and the other is called a "learner." They are told that the experiment concerns the effect of punishment on the ability to learn and remember. The individual who is to be the "learner" is led into a soundproof room and asked to take a seat in what seems to be a kind of electric chair. His arms are strapped and immobilized and an electrode is attached to his wrist. At this point in the film, a slight gasp of horror often ripples through the class. But it is understood that this is an honorable scientific experiment and that therefore no one is really going to be hurt.

The learner, strapped down in his electric chair, is told that a list of simple word pairs will be read out to him through the microphone/ loudspeaker. The aim, he is told, is to test his ability to remember the second word of a pair when he hears the first one read again. The experimenter tells him that whenever he makes a mistake, he will be given electric shocks of increasing intensity. Both the "teacher" and the "learner" are told that "although the shocks may be painful, they are not dangerous." At this, students in the class start shaking their heads and furrowing their brows.

After watching the learner being strapped into place, and hearing the directions given to him, the teacher is seated before an impressive shock generator. The teacher, of course, does not know that the whole experiment is geared to study him and his reactions, and is not at all concerned with the man acting as the learner. In fact, the learner will not be receiving any shocks at all.

The instrument panel consists of thirty switches placed in a horizontal line. The switches are labeled with voltage numbers ranging from 15 to 450 volts. These switches are distinctly grouped into the following classifications going from left to right: SLIGHT SHOCK, MODERATE SHOCK, STRONG SHOCK, VERY STRONG SHOCK, INTENSE SHOCK, EXTREME INTENSITY SHOCK, and DANGER: SEVERE SHOCK. Two switches after this last designation are ominously marked xxx. At the showing of this film two weeks before, many students started squirming in their seats when these voltage designations appeared on the screen. Some laughed nervously.

The experimenter—wearing the white laboratory coat that lends him some of his authority—demonstrates that when a switch is depressed, a separate, corresponding pilot light is illuminated, an electric buzzing is heard, and the dial on the voltage meter swings to the right. The camera also shows that the upper left-hand corner of the generator is labeled SHOCK GENERATOR, TYPE ZLB, DYSON INSTRUMENT COMPANY, WALTHAM, MASS., OUTPUT 15 VOLTS-450 VOLTS.

Before the experiment gets under way, in order to further strengthen belief in the authenticity of the machine, both the "teacher" and the "learner" are given a sample 45-volt shock from the generator. A random determination is made as to which of the subjects will be the "teacher" and which will be the "learner." In fact, as we viewers soon learn, the selection process is rigged. The man who is to be the victim—the "learner"—is actually an actor. The other man, who will be the "teacher"—the one who will be inflicting the shocks—is a genuinely unknowing subject who has come to the laboratory in the honest belief that he will be participating in a straightforward scientific experiment, for which he will be paid a modest hourly sum. But in fact, the actor playing the role of the learner will be receiving no shocks at all. The machine is a fake, however real it seems to the "teacher."

The point of the experiment is to study how far an individual will go when he is ordered by someone in authority to inflict increasing pain on a helpless, protesting victim.

In the film, the actor playing the part of the learner is an unassuming, portly middle aged man named "Mr. Wallace," conservatively dressed in a business suit. Just before the experiment gets under way, Mr. Wallace informs the white-coated experimenter that a few years before he had been diagnosed with a chronic heart condition. The experimenter assures him there is no danger—but this little offhand fact will play a major role in the drama that is to come.

As the experiment begins, the film's narrator explains that "thirty psychiatrists at a leading medical school were . . . asked to predict the performance of one hundred hypothetical subjects. They predicted that only a little more than one-tenth of one percent would administer the highest shock on the board. Yet actually fifty percent of the subjects obeyed the experimenter's commands fully."

We are then shown portions of several "teaching" sessions, each with a different teacher. The teachers come from various walks of life and social classes, ranging from corporate executives to laborers. But in all cases conflict arises when the learner begins to show that he is experiencing discomfort. Some of the teachers break off sooner, some later.

But we are now watching the teacher/learner interaction that Milgram has chosen as the climactic sequence in the film. And it is here that the secret of human good and evil—what we might call the tragedy of attention—begins to show itself most vividly.

THE ANGUISH OF FRED PROZI

Mr. Prozi, we are told, is "about fifty years old and unemployed at the time of the experiment." With closely cropped graying hair, a husky build, and wearing a white, short-sleeved polo shirt, "he has a good-natured, if slightly dissolute appearance." There is nothing remarkable or out of the ordinary about Mr. Prozi. He is someone we know, someone we have dealt with, sat next to in a bar or at a diner, joked with at a family gathering, borrowed a ladder from or called in to fix a leaking faucet.

After the learner has time to "study" the list of word pairs and after the list is removed from him, Mr. Prozi, with an attitude of angelic cooperativeness, begins the testing. When at 70 volts the learner starts re-acting to the shocks with grunts of discomfort, Mr. Prozi snorts and gives off nervous little belly laughs. But he gallantly presses on as the shocks increase in intensity with every mistake made by the learner. At 150 volts the learner starts yelling and demands to be let out. Mr. Prozi now turns his head round toward the experimenter and plaintively whispers, "He refuses to go on . . ." To this the experimenter coldly replies, "The experiment requires that you go on."

With a look of puzzled compliance, the good Mr. Prozi proceeds. Each time a wrong answer is given, the voltage is stepped up and the learner shouts louder and louder, "Let me out of here! Let me out of here! I refuse to go on!" Increasingly distraught, Mr. Prozi turns his face again and again in pained bewilderment

toward the experimenter, his right elbow planted next to the shock generator on the table in front of him and his right hand frozen, palm upward, in a helpless gesture directed toward the booth where the learner is strapped to his "electric chair." And again and again the experimenter merely replies with such icy phrases as "Whether the learner likes it or not, the experiment requires that you go on."

My students clearly cannot fathom what they are seeing. They seem as paralyzed as poor Mr. Prozi.

Mr. Prozi continues. After a loud sigh and a shaking of his head, he pronounces the next word and its four alternatives, only one of which is the correct answer. The word is "sharp." Slowly and distinctly, he pronounces the alternatives, obviously longing for the learner to get it right and avoid the next shock: "Shsfi—sharp," says Mr. Prozi, stuttering nervously. And then slowly and emphatically:

"Ax!

"Needle!

"Stick!

"Blade!

"Answer please!"

We hear a long-lasting buzzing sound as the learner presses the but-ton indicating his answer. What is happening to the learner?

The buzzing goes on and on and, finally, when it stops, Mr. Prozi calls out in desperation:

"Wrong!" He turns again to the experimenter. "It's up to a hundred and eighty volts!"

"Please continue, Teacher!"

Prozi calls out to the learner (whose first name, we now learn, is Neal): "Neal, you're going to get a shock, a hundred and eighty volts!" And as Mr. Prozi presses the switch, and as the buzzing sound is heard that indicates the shock being delivered, the learner screams from the booth:

"I can't stand the pain! Let me out of here! Let me out of here!"

This is too much for Mr. Prozi. Defiantly, he swivels around to face the experimenter. "I can't stand it," he says. "I'm not going to kill that man in there. You hear him hollering?"

But the experimenter is unyielding. "As I told you before, the shocks may be painful, but . . ."

My students are on the edge of their seats, inwardly rooting for the good Mr. Prozi.

"But he's hollering!" says Mr. Prozi, "He can't stand it. What's going to happen to him?"

And suddenly everyone sees that the "air" is going out of Mr. Prozi's defiance. Patiently, matter-of-factly, the experimenter reminds the teacher of his role as teacher, his task, his job: "The experiment requires that you continue, Teacher.

Reaching for his last shred of independence, Mr. Prozi complains: "Aaah, I'm not going to get that man sick in there—you know what I mean?"

The experimenter is calm and implacable. "Whether the learner likes it or not, we must go on, through all the word pairs."

Mr. Prozi sharply interrupts and the class is ready to cheer. But no. What Mr. Prozi says is: "I refuse to take the responsibility. He's in there hollering!"

Well, all right, maybe it's the good man's way of standing up to the experimenter.

"It's absolutely essential that you continue, Teacher."

And at that point, as the class later reports their feelings, Mr. Prozi, as it were, slips under the waves and surrenders his will. With his left hand indicating the unused questions, he says, weakly and sadly,

"There's too many left here, I mean, jeez, if he gets them wrong, there's too many of them left, I mean, who's going to take the responsibility if anything hap-pens to that gentleman?"

"I'm responsible for anything that happens to him," answers the experimenter. "Continue, please!"

And so the session goes on . . . and on: 195 volts: "Let me out of here! My heart's bothering me! Let me out of here! You have no right to keep me here! Let me out of here, my heart's bothering me, let me out! Let me out!"-210 volts, 225 volts, 240 volts, 270 volts—Mr. Wallace shouting and groaning and then screaming in anguish at the top of his lungs, " Let me out of here! Let me out of here! You can't hold me here! Get me out! Get me out! Get me out!"

And the experimenter: "Continue. . . . Continue."

And Mr. Prozi, his head bowed in front of the apparatus, again and again glancing back to the experimenter, muttering, "I refuse to take responsibility—the man is hollering, the man is suffering . ." as he obediently presses switch after switch. Until . . .

Until no response, no sound comes from the booth. Nothing. Silence. Gloomy silence.

The class, too, is as silent as a graveyard.

Mr. Prozi: "I don't think he is going to answer."

To which the experimenter replies, "If the learner doesn't answer in a reasonable time . . . consider the answer wrong. Say, 'Wrong,' tell him the number of volts, give him the punishment, read him the correct answer. Continue, please."

And on and on. At a certain point, Mr. Prozi pleads with the experimenter: "Can't you check in and see if he's all right, please?" To which the experimenter again coldly replies, "Not once we've started. Please continue, Teacher."

Mr. Prozi obeys, sighing deeply. "Answer please," he calls out to the learner. "Are you all right in there? Are you all right?" Once again, he swivels around in his chair. "Something's happened to that man in there. You better check on him, sir. He won't answer or nothing."

"Continue. Go on, please."

"You accept all responsibility?"

"The responsibility is mine. Correct. Please go on."

And Mr. Prozi does go on. With nothing but dead silence coming from the booth, he rapidly goes all the way to the end, 450 volts. He sighs and stops.

But it is not yet over, not yet over. "Continue using the 450 volt switch for each wrong answer. Continue, please."

At this the students burst. "For Christ's sake!" someone yells out in the darkened classroom. "Good God," says another. "I can't believe it," says another.

But everyone becomes still again as Mr. Prozi speaks:

"But I don't get anything! What if he's dead in there? I mean, he told me he can't stand the shock, sir. I don't mean to be rude [protesting groans from the class], but I think you should look in on him. All you have to do is look in on him. All you have to do is look in the door. I don't get no answer, no noise. Something might have happened to the gentleman in there, sir."

Experimenter: "We must continue. Go on, please."

And Mr. Prozi obeys, furiously delivering the maximum 450-volt shock again and again to a possibly dead or dying man he cannot see strapped in his electric chair on the other side of the wall.

And only then is the session called to a halt. Another voice is heard—apparently another psychologist has entered the room—saying, "Excuse me, Teacher, we'll have to discontinue the experiment."

THE FACE OF FRED PROZI

I often turn up the lights and pause the film at this point, asking the class to reflect upon what they have seen. Sometimes we discuss the ethics of the experiment itself, and the psychological pain that is obviously experienced by whoever has the role of "teacher." Or, especially if there are psychology majors in the class, we sometimes criticize the design of the experiment, wondering, for example, if subliminally the teacher senses that the learner is really an accomplice. But the overwhelming effect on the class is invariably the horrific question of what they themselves would have done if they themselves had been the teacher. "How is it possible?" they ask. For many of them, and perhaps for any one of us, the question is really: Is it possible that we ourselves might so easily surrender our humanity?

These scenes and this aspect of the experiment have brought this question to countless students and teachers of psychology and social science. But, in fact, it is the next sequence of the film—which generally receives relatively little examination—that contains the most momentous clues to the mystery and tragedy of the ethical dimension of our lives. I pause the film mainly in order to prepare the students for these next scenes.

And so it was in this particular case. I dimmed the lights and before reactivating the video player, I said to the class:

"Give special attention to what happens now. First they are going to interrogate Mr. Prozi to see how he experienced the session and then they are going to explain that the shocks were not real, and finally they will bring out a hale and hearty 'Mr. Wallace,' to show that he has not been hurt—and then everyone will have a friendly little chat so that Mr. Prozi can recover some self-respect. Watch Mr. Prozi very carefully and pay close attention to what they ask him. Observe not only what he says, but what he is."

I start the film. Off-camera, the new voice says: "I'd like to ask you a few questions if I may." Mr. Prozi has turned his chair toward the two

off-camera persons—the experimenter and the psychologist who presumably has just entered the laboratory. Mr. Prozi's expression is grim. What is he feeling? What hell has he been through? Will he let fly at his tormentors if he is given half the chance?

The new voice says, "I'd like to ask you, how do you feel right now?" Tell him, Mr. Prozi! Let him have it!

But no:

The grim face unchanging, Mr. Prozi replies as though surprised at the implication that he should be feeling anything unusual:

"I feel all right, but I don't like what's happened to that fellow in there. He's been hollering and, uh, we keep giving him shocks—I don't like that one bit. I mean, he wanted to get out and we just keep throwing four hundred and fifty volts—I didn't like that. He [referring to the experimenter] wouldn't even go to look at the gentlemen!"

"But," says the voice, "who was actually pushing the switch?"

"I was," says Mr. Prozi quickly and matter-of-factly, "but he kept insisting. I told him no, but he said I gotta keep going. I told him it's time we stopped when we got up to a hundred ninety-five, two hundred ten volts."

"Then why didn't you just stop?"

"He wouldn't let me," he says, raising his voice, "I wanted to stop! I