

# **EDUCATION AND OBEDIENCE**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	1
Literature Review.....	1
Thesis Statement.....	5
Theoretical Framework.....	5
Project Description.....	5
DEDICATION.....	6
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	7
GLOSSARY.....	8
INTRODUCTION.....	11
CHAPTERS	
I.    OBEDIENCE.....	13
That We Obey.....	13
Why We Obey.....	14
Obedience to The Point of Immorality.....	16
II.   OBEDIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES.....	17
Education.....	17
Obedience.....	19
Moral Theory.....	20
III.  CONFUTATION.....	22
To Obey, or Not to Obey.....	22
An Example: The Civil Rights Movement.....	23
CONCLUSION.....	25
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	28

## **ABSTRACT**

Education and Obedience

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### **Literature Review**

My interest in philosophy of education began long before I understood it to be its own subject. My mother home schooled me and my younger sister for all twelve years of school leading up to college. To do this she developed her own philosophy of education by way of studying others'. She relied heavily upon Charlotte Mason's *The Original Home Schooling Series*, which contained the books, *Home Education*, *Parents and Children*, *School Education*, *Ourselves*, *Formation of Character*, and *A Philosophy of Education*. My mother took issue with much of the way children are taught in public schools, and she wanted to teach us differently. After studying, she created her own philosophy of education and her goal became to teach us not how to absorb and regurgitate information, but to love learning. This love of learning has followed me through college.

Throughout college, especially given my chosen field, education has continued to pique my interest. I had been, for a long while, considering what it is that I believe distinguishes a successful education from a failed education. I realized fairly quickly that my major distinction is critical thinking. I wanted to work with this in some way, but I did not know how. Then, in the

summer of 2018, I saw a movie called *Experimenter* about social psychologist Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments and the following events. While it is widely believed that Milgram's experiments were "bad science," learning about the obedience of Milgram's subjects gave me the missing piece to what I wanted to do in regard to studying philosophies of education. At the same time, I was discussing the possibility of working on a senior thesis with some faculty members of the Philosophy & Humanities department at Texas A&M University. Dr. Claire Katz kindly agreed to be my faculty advisor during my research and writing process. Additionally, I had the pleasure of taking Philosophy of Education from Dr. Katz in the Fall of 2018. In her course, we studied many of the sources I read for my research.

I began with the *Republic*, by Plato and I focused on his ideas that individuals are born with certain capacities and that they ought to be educated accordingly. Some people in Plato's city were fit only for basic education, which would determine what type of metal they were, others were suited for higher education. For Plato, the type and amount of education given individuals, is based on their capacity and their nature.

From Plato, I moved on to John Locke. I read *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, *The Exercise of Reason*, and *An Essay Concerning Human Education*. I focused on Locke's idea that we are all born as "blanks slates" to be taught how to reason and to be filled with knowledge.

After Locke, I read pieces of *Emile*, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His philosophy of education is more extreme than I intend my thesis to be, especially his ideas of isolation during the education process. However, his ideas about learning as a natural stage-progression was instrumental in shaping modern-day philosophies of education, and is, therefore, extremely valuable for my purposes.

Having read Rousseau, I moved on to John Dewey. I found *Experience and Education*, and *My Pedagogic Creed* relevant to my work. There is a stark and important contrast between Dewey's ideas and Plato's. While Plato believes education is for the highest class of citizens, Dewey believes everyone ought to be educated. He, like Locke and Rousseau, says that education is based on experience. He says that all experiences are educative in some way, but not all are beneficial. Dewey believe that everyone ought to be educated in the same way because everyone ought to be treated equally and no one considered to have more of a right to authority than other people.

Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*, addresses the important relationship between education and oppression. He suggests liberation through education. However, he points out that education itself can, if done wrong, be oppressive. Those who educate can become oppressors and the educated can become oppressed. The mere idea of "saving" the oppressed only oppresses them further, as it dehumanizes and patronizes them. This dehumanization is, by definition, oppressive. This poses a problem when trying to move the oppressed people to the status of non-oppressed. There is an additional concern that the formerly oppressed will, in turn, become oppressors.

Additionally, I read *Discipline and Punish*, by Foucault, which discusses the prison system and the similarity between it and school systems. Foucault also discusses the relationship between authority and power and their relevance in society. Often, people are perceived to be in a position of authority when they are in a position of power, which usually includes the power in inflict negative consequences.

Jonathan Kozol's, *Savage Inequalities* is a remarkable first-hand account of some of the atrocities seen in United States schools that are either poorly funded or located in poorer

geographical areas. His book opens eyes to the financial, racial, and class crisis in our school system.

Lastly, concluding my reading of educational philosophies, I read Theodore Adorno's, "Education After Auschwitz," in which he discusses how we ought to educate children to avoid such horrors as Auschwitz from happening again.

I then moved on to the starting point of my interest in working on this project: Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments. I read *Obedience to Authority*, in which Milgram discusses the experiments he conducted to observe the pattern of obedience people display when put in morally questionable circumstances by perceived authority figures. His experiments I use only as a picture of our lack of critical thinking and a need for some kind of change in how we educate our children.

I also wanted to look at a school in the United States that has already implemented philosophy in its curriculum. Waikiki Elementary School, in Honolulu, Hawaii is one such school that has adopted the idea that critical thinking is a necessary skill and that children should begin to practice it at a young age. The school works with Philosophy for Children to teach their students to think critically, independently, respectfully, and mindfully.

To conclude my research, I turned to Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals* and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." In reading the former, I looked at Kant's discussion of the relationship between reason and morality and the categorical imperative. He says that reason leads to morality; the categorical imperative serves as logical way to test moral theories. The latter aided my research of what respectful disobedience looks like in practice and how it is rationalized reasonably and critically.

## **Thesis Statement**

Using philosophy and philosophical thinking to educate children in critical thinking is part of the solution to passive obedience. While Kant makes the claim that reason leads to moral behavior, it is evident throughout history that people often know what the right thing to is yet do not do it.<sup>1</sup> Hence, critical thinking (reason) is not the solution on its own; there is a gap between the knowledge of right and wrong and the action of standing up to perceived authorities who are acting immorally.

## **Theoretical Framework**

My research focuses on philosophy of education, philosophy of human nature, moral philosophy, and how they are combined.

## **Project Description**

My research focuses on the formation of ethics and morality in us, through the development of our nature by means of education. Through my study of different philosophies of education, the relationship between obedience and authority, and the relationship between critical thinking (reason) and action, I hope to be able to expose a gap in the solution to the problem of obedience to the point of immorality.

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1. Immanuel Kant. *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, 80.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my mother, who was determined that my education would not teach me what to think, but how to think, and that I would not learn for the sake of something else, but that I would learn love learning for its own sake.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Dr. Claire Katz, for her guidance, ready help, and encouragement through the research process. I would also like to thank the many faculty members in the Philosophy & Humanities department at Texas A&M University for their dedication to and passion for philosophy. It has been a privilege and an honor to study under faculty members at such a prestigious research university.

Thanks also go to my friends and family for their encouragement throughout the research and writing process. Thank you, too, to my high school teacher, Matthew Turnbull, who first turned me on to philosophical works and the impact they have on our world.

Finally, thank you to my mother and father for constantly encouraging me in my pursuits and my goals. I could not have done this without them.

## GLOSSARY

**True Authority vs. Perceived Authority:** A true authority figure is not only a person who tells other people what to do but also someone who has the power to inflict some kind of consequence if they are not obeyed. Perceived authority figures are those who we believe to have authority over us, whether they truly do or not. Of course, there are those who have authority over us on one subject or another: “experts.” However, for our purposes, “authority” refers to the power of someone who tells us what to do, someone we obey. Additionally, true authority figures may, in fact, become perceived authority figures once they contradict the highest authority -moral authority.

**Authority Figures:** Authority figures are embodiments of authority. There are moral authority figures and legal authority figures. All authority figures are either true authorities, such as commanding officers or college professors, or perceived authorities, such as the friend in the group that everyone listens to but they do not truly have to obey.

**Complacency/Passivity:** a lack of questioning, an uncritical acceptance of what one is told/taught.

**Critical Thinking:** not merely problem-solving abilities, it is not only knowing how to find the answer to a question but also knowing what sort of questions to ask. Critical thinking is the ability to recognize the difference between a true authority figure and a perceived authority figure as well as the ability to question authority.

**Disobedience vs. Respectful Disobedience:** Of course, one does not always do what their authority figures say, this is disobedience. However, there is disobedience that is wrong, and there is respectful disobedience that ought to occur after critical analysis of an authority figure and/or what they say. Respectful disobedience should be able to be backed up by some form of reasoning, whereas mere disobedience can occur purely from ignorance, immaturity, or other such unreasonable states of mind.

**Education vs. Schooling:** Education happens anywhere and everywhere, while schooling is a kind of learning that happens in a K-12 classroom or institution, and possibly into college. Schooling is the facts students are taught to be able to pass a test. Education, in contrast, is broader than facts. It is not only the accruing of knowledge, but the development of a person. This happens in the classroom, but it occurs elsewhere as well, through individual experiences. Schooling merely teaches students what to think and/or believe. Education teaches students how to think.

**Legal Authority:** man-made laws and regulations. These laws are enforced and have some authority. They are not, however the highest level of authority; people ought to be allowed to question them. While legal authority is a type of true authority, it can still be wrong -immoral.

**Moral Authority:** interchangeable with moral law. This is the highest authority. Moral authority is always correct, although it is often misinterpreted. All other authorities ought to appeal to

moral authority. Other authorities, as well as lower authority figures, ought to be questioned for contradictions to moral authority.

**Obedience vs. Passive Obedience:** Obedience is the following of what one has been told, doing what an authority figure (true or perceived) has said to do. Obedience can occur even if the authority figure has been questioned. Passive obedience, in contrast, is obedience absent of critical thinking. It is obedience that does not question the morality behind the action nor the consequences the action might have. Passive obedience occurs when there is no questioning of the authority figure.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis addresses the relationship between education and passive obedience and the gap between moral knowledge and action. In what follows, I discuss the way in which schools, particularly in the United States, generally do not teach the critical thinking skills necessary to create independently minded adults. Rather, the United States is producing complacency (passivity) in its citizens. This is a problem. Stanley Milgram's subjects in his obedience experiments obey beyond their personal moral conscious. Education plays a primary role in creating obedience against better judgement, such as is seen in Milgram's subjects. Why do they continue to obey when they think they are doing something that is immoral? They obey, in part, because they were taught to do so, and further, because they were taught how to answer questions but never how to ask them.

We are not giving students the kind of educations that will enable them to think critically. Instead, by not teaching them how to think critically, we are training students to passively obey. We are teaching them problem-solving skills and how to answer questions, but we are not teaching them how to ask critical questions of the material or opinions presented to them. Because of this, students are not learning how to question authority. This is partly because they are simply not taught how to ask beneficial questions and partly because questioning authority is frowned upon -or so they are taught. This gaping hole in the education process is far more likely to produce people who obey passively rather than question their perceived authorities, and this has the potential to become dangerous if a certain kind of authority figure presents itself.

Of course, education is not solely responsible for passive obedience. Even those who have the critical thinking skills to question authority when they believe them to be wrong, may

not possess the courage to act against the authority figure. Thus, there is a gap between thought and action. So, why do we obey? Ought we to obey? If so, when? In contrast, if there are times when we ought not obey, what creates that distinction? To answer these questions, my research focuses on how we as individuals develop morally, what role education plays in the formation of our moral conscience and our ability to adhere to that, even if it means disobeying established authorities. Additionally, this thesis addresses some examples of respectful disobedience and those who have bridged the gap between thought and action. My analysis of Milgram's experiments, different philosophies of education and of morality, and examples of respectful disobedience will help us to understand why people tend to obey orders even when those orders conflict with their own moral conscience. If education is part of the formation of a human being, we ought to be certain that we are educating young human beings in the best possible way.

# CHAPTER I

## OBEDIENCE

### That We Obey

We have a problem with education, specifically in the United States, which negatively impacts our citizens' ability to think critically and reason well. To explore this and surrounding issues, we must begin by looking at human nature in respect to obedience and authority. First, we will look at Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments he conducted in the 1960's.<sup>2</sup>

Milgram's obedience experiments begin when a subject is brought into a room. The subject and another person draw papers. One is to be the "learner," the subject is to be the "teacher." The learner is taken into a separate room and hooked up to a machine that delivers electric shocks. The subject (the teacher) is taken into the other room and told that he is to get the learner to memorize a list of word pairs. Every time the learner gets a pair wrong, the teacher is to apply an electric shock. The shocks range from 15 volts to 450 volts (a dangerous level). Most people would like to believe that they have the skills and the wherewithal to stand for what they believe in, and that they would stop shocking the learner after they had expressed pain. Unfortunately, most people would be wrong. Even when the "learner" expressed a desire for the experiment to be stopped due to the pain, Milgram's results show that, when told by the "experimenter" to continue, 100% of subjects continued to 300 volts, and about 65% continued to the end.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 13.

3. Milgram, 35. Perhaps now is a good time to mention that the "learner" was merely part of the experiment and, in reality, was receiving no shocks at all.

Milgram's Obedience Experiments indicate something worrisome about human nature. That his subjects relinquish their agency and comply with orders they believed to be immoral and harmful is of great concern. However, what if this tendency is not merely nature-based? Is there a chance this behavior is being reinforced, and therefore continually cultivated, through education?

### **Why We Obey**

Why do we obey our perceived authorities? We might do this for many reasons. Perhaps we tend to obey out of fear of what will happen to us if we do not; perhaps out of fear of disappointing our perceived authority figure or seeming unintelligent to them; or perhaps because we feel as though we can rationalize our obedience by absolving ourselves of any responsibility. Milgram's subjects could have had a fear of disapproval or a desire to impress someone perceived to be intelligent. Especially in an academic setting, it is easy to understand how a subject would potentially feel intimidated by the experimenter. Additionally, when questioned by the subject, the experimenter guaranteed that the outcome was his own responsibility, not the responsibility of the subject. Lack of responsibility in the matter greatly increases the likelihood to continue to obey. Milgram calls this confidence from lack of responsibility the "agentic state."<sup>4</sup> People are more likely to do something they disagree with as long as they are not going to be held responsible for negative outcomes. When questioned for their actions, many Nazis said they were simply "following orders," and many of Milgram's subjects only continued after being assured that they would not be held responsible for harming

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4. Milgram, 143.

the “learner.” Not having to take responsibility makes it easier to accept a harmful outcome; the feeling of guilt is lessened, even extinguished.

It was not without hesitation and even protestation that the subjects continued to administer the electric shocks; but they continued.<sup>5</sup> All subjects were over the age of eighteen, all had volunteered. Presumably, if they had volunteered, their continued presence was also voluntary. It is clear that the subjects viewed the experimenter as an authority figure. Most, if not all subjects questioned the instructions of the experimenter, but they complied with the experimenter when told to do so. While they had the necessary skills to doubt their perceived authority in this case, they did not act on their doubt. As mentioned above, there might be many reasons for this; one, because we are trained to obey through the way the United States education system schools students.

In United States schools, those that are fortunate enough to have the basic funding needing for providing a general level of schooling, students are not asked to think critically, they are taught how to solve problems and answer questions. These skills are good and necessary, but they do not create the type of people who will know how to ask valuable questions of their authority figures in the future. In schools, questioning of any authority is unwelcome; students are expected to obey absolutely, any questioning of their authority figures is perceived as disrespectful. This attitude about questioning authority and respectful disobedience must change, along with the way students are educated. It is necessary that the culture’s view of respectful disobedience changes because, until that happens, critical thinking alone is not sufficient to create action contradicting perceived authorities.

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5. Milgram, 41.

## **Obedience to The Point of Immorality**

If Milgram's subjects understood that their actions, under instruction of the experimenter, were wrong, why did not more refuse to continue the experiment? Their actions did not align with their understanding of morality. They still obeyed to a point they believe to be immoral. Obviously, then, there is a disconnect between thought and action, so that even if someone has the moral understanding necessary to question authority, they may not take action. Whether this is out of fear of a perceived authority figure, or a symptom of the "agentic state," it is a problem. It is obvious that the subjects, who realized that they were being asked to do something immoral and asked the experimenter if they should continue, either had some sort of level of critical thinking skills -enough, at least, to question right and wrong- or merely did not want to hurt another human being. However, I would like to suggest that better critical thinking skills would have allowed his subjects to ask the questions necessary to realize that the experimenter was only a perceived authority figure and that they were not truly under his authority. Even so, acting on knowledge does not necessarily follow directly from having knowledge.

There are many examples of people obeying their authority figures even when they believe them to be wrong. It happens on grand scales, such as the Holocaust, but it happens on much smaller scales too, such as bullies who get other children to become bullies simply out of peer pressure or by creating fear. While critical thinking is necessary for questioning authority, it is not sufficient. There is something else, something that must occur between thought and action. It is this step, following critical thinking, to taking action against perceived or immoral authority figures. Before we can have a thorough discussion about this, we must first discuss education in the United States, moral philosophies, and their relationship to obedience.

## CHAPTER II

### OBEDIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

#### **Education**

How are we taught? To answer this, I have studied many different philosophies of education, what they assume about human nature, and how they suggest education develops the individual. There are many ideal philosophies of education which have served in helping shape the education system in the United State, such as what is found in Plato's *Republic*. Plato considers education to be one of the most important parts, if not the most important part of society. In the city Plato describes, it is by means of capacities and natures that we can find the workers and the leaders; education in in the city looks different for both of these groups. Plato says the determining factor between the groups in the republic is built into the person and that they should be educated according to their capacity. Each individual in the city is made of their own particular metal, all having their own natural inclinations towards a certain level of education. He believes that some children of the republic ought to be educated more than others based on their natures.<sup>6</sup> Plato's system for his city is class-based, although not founded on monetary criteria. Plato believes that everyone in the republic ought to be educated to the degree that best fits their place in society, i.e. according to their natures, whether that is, what he calls, the merchant, the guardian, or the philosopher king.<sup>7</sup>

In Plato's city, the philosopher kings would be well-educated in skills necessary to reason and lead; the other citizens would be taught the necessary skills for their trades. Plato's intention

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6. Plato, *Republic*, Book III.

7. Plato, V.

was for the philosopher kings to be the unquestioned authorities of the city. They would be the highest class, the ruling class. The philosopher kings would have true knowledge of reality; the other classes would have knowledge necessary only for their jobs within the city. In Plato's city, this gap in education would be thought of as natural, based on each individual's nature, while we generally tend to think it is gaps in education which create the different classes.

In contrast to Plato, John Dewey believes that everyone ought to be educated in a similar fashion, regardless of nature or capacity. Dewey also says that people ought to be educated according to their natures, however, he means something different than Plato. For Dewey, education according to nature means in the natural order or time, not prescribed as in traditional theories of education.<sup>8</sup> In this way, people are educated according to their capacities, in the way and time which suits their nature. Additionally, Plato's theory of education seems to focus more on the schooling aspects, while Dewey is concerned with experience. He believes that people are educated by their experiences.

Locke's philosophy is similar to Dewey's with regard to experience and different from Plato's with regard to nature and capacity. He believes we all learn through our experiences of the world. However, he does not believe education ought to be based on capacity, because he believes we are all born the same: "tabula rasa," a "blank slate."<sup>9</sup> We all start from the same point and our experiences shape us. Of course, we all have differing experiences, in some way or another, so we will all be made different by them.

Many of these philosophers differ in some aspects of their ideas, but their philosophies all seem to point to one central cause of the "worker mentality" -what we see in Milgram's subjects.

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8. John Dewey, *Experience & Education*, Ch. 1.

9. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Education*, 17.

The cause is a lack of critical thinking skills, i.e., a lack of skills needed not only to answer questions, but to ask critical questions, and to question authority, rather than passively obeying. We have created this problem ourselves by only giving children questions to answer (especially the kind of questions that have answers directly in the textbooks), rather than teaching them to ask critical questions. We have created this problem by requiring passive obedience -either directly or through social/cultural norms.

## **Obedience**

It makes sense that the United States citizenry would, on the whole, passively obey. They have been trained that way. In addition to not teaching the proper critical thinking skills, which aid in reasoning between right and wrong and determining the legitimacy of our authority figures, we criticize any questioning of authority or disobedience. In theory, we claim not to. Even in practice, we often criticize our political leaders because we have the freedom to do so in the United States. However, it is one thing to criticize, another to question, and yet another to respectfully disobey. Criticism need not be taught; it comes almost naturally. Criticizing an authority figure is easy and often not something which is feared -not in the United States. Even children criticize things they dislike. Criticism in no way directly leads to disobedience.

Questioning, however, is a skill which may include criticism, but necessitates critical thinking as well. This is the first step toward respectful disobedience. To be able to question authority figures, there must be an understanding by which a disagreement can be formed, not merely a dislike. Questioning an authority figures implies critical thought and consideration of ideas; it implies a reason for disagreement, and a desire for critical, reasonable discussion of positions. Criticism does not necessarily mean there is an equality, but a critical conversation

based on critical questioning implies a certain level of equality between the interlocutors, if only an acknowledgement of a human equality.

Disobedience does not necessarily come from questioning, however. It is possible to question an authority figure, disagree with them, yet still obey. This happens on a small scale, when children do not like what their parents tell them to do, they question it, but they end up obeying anyway. On a larger scale, citizens obey laws they believe to be immoral even after questioning the laws or the lawmakers. There is still some missing step, or steps, between questioning and disobedience. Often, we stop at questioning, never moving to action.

### **Moral Theory**

Kant's moral theory seems to suggest that questioning authority, or knowing that they are wrong, leads directly to correct action. For Kant, moral knowledge is sufficient for moral behavior.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, we have far too often experienced that this is not the case. For example, as far as we know, many Nazi soldiers knew that they were doing something immoral. They had the understanding, but this understanding did not move them to action. Additionally, as we have discussed above, most of Milgram's subjects questioned the morality of the experiment. They knew they were causing harm to another human being, which they understood to be immoral. However, the overwhelming majority of them continued until the end of the experiment. It is clear, then, that moral understanding is not sufficient for moral action, especially action against a perceived authority figure.

When we do move from questioning to action, however, it is usually for reasons regarding moral authority (moral law). Typically, respectful disobedience occurs when we feel

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10. Kant, 80.

that the current authority figures are not adhering to a higher morality, the highest authority. In this sense, perhaps the categorical imperative aspect of Kant's moral theory is correct.<sup>11</sup> I am not suggesting that Kant is correct in the sense that moral knowledge is sufficient for moral action, and the categorical imperative is a reason-based test for actions, so any action which does not fit in the categorical imperative is immoral and the knowledge of this is sufficient to prevent immoral actions. In fact, it is an unfortunate fact that we often entirely disregard the categorical imperative and other moral codes like it, such as the "golden rule." However, the categorical imperative is absolutely a way in which we judge morality at large (whether we are aware of it or not).

If a law or action of some authority figure contradicts a moral code, such as Kant's categorical imperative, we are more likely to question that law or authority figure. Their immorality is clearer and more easily exposed. The debate would be over whether or not the law or authority contradicted the higher moral code, and, if it was determined that they did, more than likely they would be disobeyed. Authority figures and the law are still answerable to higher moral laws and it is by this moral authority that we can begin to judge the legitimacy of man-made laws and authority figures. Critical thinking becomes necessary in determining whether or not a perceived authority figure is acting in harmony with the higher moral code. It is when they are not, that disobedience becomes a moral option.

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11. Kant, 70. Categorical Imperative definition: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law."

## **CHAPTER III**

### **CONFUTATION**

#### **To Obey, or Not to Obey**

Considering the above discussion, what would happen if people decided they were not going to obey any rules? How should we decide when to obey or not? Of course, if people decided they would no longer obey any rules, there would be chaos. There would not be any order to the way things work if anyone could simply decide that they disagree with their authority figure and will no longer obey what they say. Some sort of order is necessary for the organization of groups of people. To maintain order, we have organized ourselves, made laws, in the United States we have appointed leaders. Order is kept when we obey these laws and these leaders. I do not propose disobedience of these solely out of disagreement, even reasonable disagreement.

It is not that we ought never obey, but rather, that we ought not simply obey passively. How, then, will we decide when to obey or not? This is where critical thinking and moral theory are put to use. As I briefly mentioned above, there is a higher moral code, such as Kant's categorical imperative, which holds greater authority than laws or authority figures. It takes critical thinking skills to be able to determine whether or not a law or perceived authority figure is abiding by this high moral authority. Dislike or criticism is not enough to justify disobedience of a law or authority figure: there must be a questioning and a moral disagreement if there is going to be disobedience. Additionally, this questioning and moral disagreement cannot be personal, it must be based on a higher moral code.

## **An Example: The Civil Rights Movement**

Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea of respectful disobedience of immoral laws and perceived authority figures is one of the greatest examples of questioning and action in the last fifty years. His "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is inspiring. King did not fear questioning the laws or authority figures of the times. He thought critically about what they were doing, compared their actions to the higher moral code and found them to be in violation of it. Respectfully, however, he acknowledged their authority and accepted the consequences of his disobedience. He, rather eloquently, outlines what he calls the "four basic steps" of respectful disobedience (or "in any nonviolent campaign"): "collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exists; negotiation; self purification; and direct action."<sup>12</sup>

These four steps are similar to the steps I have discussed above: critical thinking, discussion, and action, with a missing third step (a gap) between discussion and action. Perhaps this gap could be filled with "courage," some people have courage to act and others do not. However, King puts "self purification" in this gap, outlining what he means by this in his letter. For King, self-purification meant asking himself if he was willing to face the consequences of acting against the law and against authority figures. He asked other members of the Civil Rights Movement to do the same.

When considering what justifies disobedience, King says,

"The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."<sup>13</sup>

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12. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 2.

13. King, 5.

King believed that any law or authority figure which violated the higher moral code was unjust and, therefore, open for disobedience. He recognized, however, that the law and authority figures still ought to be respected since they are necessary for human order. He says, “In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law . . . . That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks and unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.”<sup>14</sup> Just as King in no way advocated passive obedience nor disrespectful disobedience, I am also arguing for the questioning of perceived authorities, obedience when they are found to be in harmony with higher morality, and respectful disobedience when they are not.

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14. King, 6.

## CONCLUSION

If education is part of the problem, it is also part of the solution. As philosophers agree that a substantial cause of passive obedience is a lack of critical thinking skills, they also agree that the teaching of critical thinking skills is crucial for the ideal development of children. The more difficult part is how to implement true critical thinking skills into education. There is so much more to this than what goes on in the classroom. Ideally, the acquiring of critical thinking skills would begin at home within the family. In his book, *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol describes just how idealistic this hope is. There is a crisis in United States schools that far exceeds, I fear, our imaginations. Many school districts, many more than we would like to admit, are incredibly underfunded, some to the degree that young students are asked if they would prefer to use funding for textbooks or for lunch.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, there is still something that can be done, even in these classrooms, which might change the lives of their students and create better opportunities for future generations. In addition to changes in classrooms, we must begin to change the culture so that questioning authority (respectfully) is not only acceptable, but desirable, and so that passivity is frowned upon.

Practically, implementing philosophy in K-12 classrooms is the simplest, quickest, and most effective way to train students in critical thinking. Philosophy, when taught correctly, requires consideration, but not adoption, of views that may fundamentally differ from students' own. It also requires an ability to read and process new information for themselves. Of course, many subjects require this, and there are those who might argue that philosophy is not the standard for critical thinking. However, philosophy takes it further, not only teaching problem

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15. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, Ch. 2.

solving skills, but also requiring critical engagement with the text -asking questions of it. There is a living example of philosophy's success in turning a school around, in changing lives.

Philosophy for Children is an amazing example of how philosophy has positively impacted poorly performing schools in the United States. This program has gone into schools that were performing poorly and turned them around by introducing philosophy. Waikiki Elementary School, in Honolulu, Hawaii is a bright success story for philosophy. "P4C converts traditional classrooms into reflective communities of inquiry where students and teachers continue to develop their ability to think for themselves in responsible ways."<sup>16</sup> Philosophy for Children is already happening in schools in the United States. This specific program is not necessarily the national solution. However, its emphasis on creating a community of inquiry for young children is crucial. The skills, abilities, and confidence that doing philosophy can give to children is invaluable, not only to them, but also to the future of our country as well. Through philosophy, children can be taught how to think, not what to think. When they know how to think, they can begin to question others' ideas and engage in meaningful discussions about morality.<sup>17</sup>

However, having a discussion about morality, even moral understanding, is not moral action. Critical thinking is an important first step. In fact, it is a necessary first step. The United States should start there within our public schools if we are going to make any progress in the questioning (not only criticizing) of those with whom we morally disagree (not only dislike). Not only is critical thinking necessary, a higher moral law is as well. It is this moral authority to which all laws and authority figures answer. Respectful disobedience is justified, according to

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16. The University of Hawaii Uehiro Academy for Philosophy and Ethics in Education, "Who We Are -History of p4c Hawaii".

17. Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*. For more on this topic, see Katz.

Martin Luther King Jr., only when the laws or authority figures are in violation of this higher moral code.

Also necessary for action against immoral laws and authorities is the missing third step, without which, although Kant's moral theory says differently, there is still a gap between critical thought (along with discussion) and action. Martin Luther King Jr. fills this gap with "self purification;" perhaps that is the solution, perhaps it not that simple. For now, the implementation of critical thinking in United States schools, by means of teaching children philosophy, is the best way to start the process of creating a culture in which questioning authority is not only acceptable, but also encouraged. It certainly is not the solution to the bigger problem of obedience to the point of immorality, but it is a much needed and long overdue first step.

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