

Example of essay on sartre, the milgram experiment, and obedience to authority

[Philosophy](#), [Freedom](#)



1) Morris Braverman was a 39-year old social worker with a very serious and repressed demeanor. He gave the impression of being “ intelligent and concerned” but with “ enormous over control” as he went through the experiment, shocking the ‘ learner’ up to the maximum voltage (Milgram 53). As he kept pushing the buttons, he started laughing, very softly at first but increasing in intensity until his laughter became very loud and disruptive. He asked the ‘ experimenter’ if he had to continue to follow these instructions and was told that he had no choice, the experiment must be completed, even while the victim was (apparently) screaming and crying out in pain. As Braverman kept on his was no longer able to control his laughter at all. Afterwards, though, he was once again very cool, calm and controlled, explaining very rationally that he understand the experiment to be a test of a “ sadistic” teacher and a student reacting to “ a learning situation that was authoritative, rigid, and punitive” (Milgram 53). None of it ever seemed real to him, but like the actions of some other personality, and he said “ I’m a nice person, I think, hunting somebody, and caught up in a mad situation” (Milgram 54). He did not really want to hurt the victim and was trying to think of some way of carrying on the experiment without inflicting pain. Nor did he know why he started giggling uncontrollably because this was not his normal personality. Later, he was appalled at his extreme level of obedience and compliance, especially when his wife remarked “ You can call yourself Eichmann” (Milgram 54).

Elinor Rosenblum was a middle-aged housewife with a degree from the University of Wisconsin, who did volunteer work with juvenile delinquents, the Girl Scouts and the PTA. She came across as “ fluent and garrulous, and

projects herself strongly, with many references to her social achievements” (Milgram 79-80). She spoke in a very authoritative manner to the ‘ learner’ as she administered the fake electric shocks up to the maximum, but was highly submissive and deferential to the ‘ authority figure’ of the experimenter. As she kept increasing the voltage, she asked “ Must I go on? I’m worried about him. I’m shaking. I’m shaking. Do I have to go up there?” (Milgram 80). She meant all the way up to 450 volts, which she did on the instructions of the experimenter. Afterwards, she asked “ how can I inflict punishment on a person like that?”, and indicated that she was really upset because this action had caused her great distress (Milgram 80). In her work with juvenile delinquents, she explained that she never used punishment, but rather taught them manners, as well as “ respect” for older people and “ respect for society”, although clearly she had also shown such “ respect” to the experimenter (Milgram 81). Even with her own daughter, who was in the National Honor Society, she had hardly ever been punitive or cruel, and in fact thought of herself as “ softhearted” and “ a softy” (Milgram 83). When she saw that the learner had really been an actor, she was immensely relieved and started explaining “ I’m exhausted. I didn’t want to go on with it, you don’t know what I went through here”, and also mentioned that she tried to push the buttons more lightly in hopes that the pain would not be as severe (Milgram 82).

Sartre would not accept the excuses of either one of these people that they had ‘ no choice’ about committing this atrocity, because he would insist that they were rational human beings who had free will and the responsibility for making their own choices and decisions. With human freedom comes

responsibility and they could have chosen not to obey the ' experimenter' in his white coat. They were therefore responsible for inflicting pain and death on another human being—or at least they would have had the experiment been real—and therefore they betrayed all of humanity. Both of these people claimed that committing heinous acts like these did not represent their true or authentic selves, but that they were just carrying out a role that was assigned to them. Neither of them took pleasure in inflicting suffering on someone else, nor had they ever done anything like this before. They regarded themselves as sensitive, intelligent and humane people who never would have committed such acts if they had not been ordered to do so. Morris Braverman was perhaps laughing because some part of him recognized the absurdity and madness of this entire situation and that he was indeed acting like a thug or a sadist by just following the insane orders of some authority figure. Sartre would have commended him (or his) wife for arriving at a certain insight, though, and that he had behaved just like another Adolf Eichmann in surrendering his own conscience and morality to someone else. He would not have had much praise for Elinor Rosenblum, though, not only because she took no responsibility for actions, but she was mostly upset because of the effect that the ' experiment' had on her. She was very upset and even shaking as she pushed the buttons, but was mainly concerned for herself rather than the victim. Her main reaction was basically ' look at what you made me do' and ' look at what you put me through here', just like those Germans who carried out all kinds of atrocities during World War II and were concerned only for the psychological and emotional effects on their own men rather than the victims. This would not be acceptable to

Sartre and other existentialists who did indeed believe that every action also affects the rest of humanity.

2) According to Sartre the main objections to existentialism, from both religious believers and Marxists, was that it was a gloomy, depressing, nihilistic philosophy that ignored morality and human solidarity.

Existentialists were charged with promoting a “desperate quietism” in which nothing could be done about the problems of the world, and with “dwelling on human degradation, with pointing up everywhere the sordid, shady, and slimy” (Sartre 9). Its enemies called it a purely subjective, egotistical and individualistic philosophy that also denied “the reality and seriousness of human undertakings”, and unable to condemn even the worst atrocities and evils but only stare at the spectacle as if it were all a sick joke or dark comedy (Sartre 10). For Sartre, absolutely none of this was true, either personally or politically, and he regarded it as a crude caricature. He insisted that “man first exists, that man first of all is the being who hurls himself toward a future” and is alive and conscious in recognizing that he is going to be part of it (Sartre 16). He alone is responsible for planning his own destiny, even under the most adverse and difficult circumstances, because he has free will. Thus he chooses to work, think, act, write, participate in political moments or resist tyranny and oppression (or he can choose not to do nothing), but he is still responsible no matter what choices he makes.

I think Sartre is successful in explaining that much of the human condition is degrading, evil and oppressive, and that people do have choices whether to accept this as a fact of life or attempt to do something about it. Perhaps they can only take small and limited actions to bring about a more humane world,

but being able to do only a little is not an excuse for doing nothing. Sartre himself was hardly a passive, apathetic philosopher who lived in an ivory tower, but a very engaged and activist intellectual who participated in various radical and left-wing causes. He was a member of the resistance in occupied France, for example, and later opposed the wars in Vietnam and Algeria. There was nothing in his philosophy that prevented him from being active in all the major political and social issues of his time, although he was often criticized for not being enough of a Marxist by the Communists while the conservatives condemned him for being too leftist and revolutionary. If he is to be judged by his own philosophy, he chose to take a stand on important issues and took responsibility for his actions, so that alone proves that an existentialist does not have to be a selfish egotist or cynical nihilist who is unable to commit to any action or cause outside of himself.

3) Existence Precedes Essence means that subjectivity and the individual were the starting point, not an end-all and be-all. He denied that God or evolution created the essence of human nature before existence, but rather that “ man exists, turns up, appears of the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself” (Sartre 15). Each individual had this power of self-definition, for good or evil, and they made the choice, so human nature is exactly what each person conceives it to be. All the choices human beings make affect others as well as themselves, and this is unavoidable. With every action or failure to act, the existentialist is choosing not only for himself but all of humanity (Sartre 19). In this philosophy then, each person should act as if all of humanity were watching them, and should ask whether what they are choosing is a worthy example for all others who are alive now and will be in

the future. They have to face life in the real world with all its problems, but generally without any faith that they will be saved or redeemed by God or any supernatural power, for all the power is in their own hands.

Existentialists often feel anguish, doubt or despair, but not because they are apathetic and indifferent to life and humanity, but because they feel a great responsibility toward others. It is like the responsibility of an officer who has to lead a group of soldiers into battle, knowing that their lives are in his hands and he will be responsible for any decisions that affect them (Sartre 20).

Unlike Sartre, I am not an atheist but believe in God and an afterlife, although I follow no organized religion. I certainly do not believe that human beings are just robots or automatons, programmed to follow orders and act in a certain way, but rather that they do have a great deal of free choice and free will. I am skeptical that such freedom is pure and absolute, though, because all people are products of a certain environment, culture, upbringing and social class that will determine the parameters of most of their future ideas and behavior. Much of this is just programmed into them during childhood before they have any real choice in the matter, and most will probably never break free of all this early indoctrination and think fully and completely for themselves. Perhaps they have such complete freedom in the purely theoretical sense, but the vast majority of people are never really going to use it. In addition, many really are too poor and oppressed, just primarily concerned with physical survival and the basic necessities of life, to really attempt to live by an existentialist philosophy of free choice and freedom of action. They will end up going along and getting along, following

orders and doing what society expects, just like most of those people in the Milgram experiments. Only a few will ever really question authority, protest, defy social conventions and disobey orders, but will simply act like 'sheeple'.

WORKS CITED

Milgram, Stanley. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. Harper Perennial, 2009.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. NY: Citadel Press 1957, 1985.