

"disobedience as a physiological and moral problem," essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



"Disobedience as a Physiological and Moral Problem," is written by Erich Fromm and in his 1963 essay Fromm argues that obedience is the virtue and disobedience the vice. (Fromm 403). Fromm sees disobedience as a vital to our society and that blind obedience is bad, and he uses many examples to try to convince us of this belief. I believe that Fromm has some very good points and makes a strong argument.

I agree with many of the main points he makes and his appeal to those are used great in his passage. Although Fromm wrote this essay just after the Cuban missile crisis, so many of the hasty generalizations and false analogies he uses is because of the time period he wrote it in. Although after the 9/11 attack, the threat of terrorists acquiring and using nuclear weapons against the U. S.

seems very real, making Fromm as pertinent today as when he wrote this more than 40 years ago (Behrens and Rosen 402). Fromm (1900 - 1980) was an American psychoanalyst best known for his application of psychoanalytic theory to social and cultural probes. He was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany and educated at the universities of Heidelberg and Munich and at Psychoanalytic Institute in Berlin. Some critics argue that if you follow his argument to the logical conclusion, you will have anarchy. Then you also have the religious people that are saying when one follows a Williams 2 moral pattern of life, whether they are obeying or disobeying (legit or bogus) authorities are beside the point. What matters, is if they are doing the right thing.

Fromm explains his views by first examining the fact that across many different cultures, there is a common belief that human life as we know it began with an act of disobedience. He cites the examples of Adam and Eve and the Original Sin, and Prometheus theft of fire from the gods of ancient Greek mythology (Fromm 402, 403). He also thinks that human development advanced through acts of disobedience. Fromm says, " intellectual development was dependant on the capacity for being disobedient to authorities that tried to muzzle new thoughts and to the authority of long established opinions which declared change to be nonsense," (Fromm 403.

He uses this evidence to state his view that if human history started with and evolved through acts of disobedience; it may very well end because of an act of obedience. Fromm goes on to explain how obedience came to be such a governing factor of civilization, and how we came to be seemingly hardwired to obey. He lists a number of convincing factors. He reasons that while one is under the authority of a power, this obedience carries with it a feeling of safety and protection and a sense of being a part of something much bigger. Fromm clarifies " I can make no error, since it decides for me; I cannot be alone, because it watches over me; I cannot commit a sin, because it does not let me do so. " (Fromm 405).

Also, because obedience has been considered a virtue for so long, it is essentially associated with being good. Disobedience becomes a sin and can be universally rejected (Fromm 406). Williams 3 Fromm used clearly defined terms, such as heteronomous obedience which is submission and autonomous obedience that is one of affirmation (Fromm 404). Then he goes

on to explain two other qualifications. Authoritarian conscience is what most of us experience when we listen to our conscience, then you have conscience that is to be used to express two phenomena that are quite distinct from each other. But the main focus of Fromm's essay is the need to understand why we are so driven to obedience.

There is an unstated implication here and once this is known, we can overcome our inherent need to obey and ensure the survival of our species. We also need to remove the stigma from disobedience to see it as the virtue that it truly is, or we become a part of the march to extinction. Fromm's argument that human history commenced with acts of disobedience seems effective; though the parables he mentioned may not be based on fact, they are widely accepted part of our culture, and are powerful enough to have made it through centuries. However, if our world were to end, it would not be caused by a hypothetical act; it will be concrete action with definite consequences. Fromm's arguments predominately use logos with underlying pathos (appeals to emotions) when discussing religion.

The editors in the first part of the essay use the appeal to ethos by stating that Fromm was one of the twentieth century's distinguished writers and thinkers (Behrens and Rosen 402). Fromm uses logos and he argues it logically. When he explains his clearly defined terms, "Obedience to a person, institution or power (heteronomous obedience) is submission; it implies the abdication of my autonomy and the acceptance of a foreign will or judgment in place of my own" (Fromm 404). Also a very strong appeal to pathos was used when referenced Adolph Eichmann, and how he

was considered innocent of all charges, because he was just following orders. Fromm also uses some fallacies in his essay, such as the hasty generalization used when he states, " There is the possibility, or even the probability, that the human race will destroy civilization and even all life upon earth within the next five to ten years" (Fromm 403). Considering this was written in 1963 and we have made it 45 years, one would say that would be a very bad argument to put in this essay and it definitely hurts the creditability of the essay.

Next, you have Fromm comparing present people to people in Stone Age. This false analogy is based on opinion only with no factual data to back this up. Also, Fromm could have used the context of the era in which he was writing (in a time which many feared a repeat of WWII) to lend some weight to his argument and could have strengthened his argument with examples of destruction due to unquestioning authority. Similarly Fromm is somewhat hasty in his statement of conclusion. His closing sentence, " At this point in history that capacity to doubt to criticize and to disobey may be all that stands between a future for mankind and the end of civilization" (Fromm 406).

Certainly a compelling set of words, and would be a powerful closing statement in a different paper. Unfortunately, Fromm's essay is concerned more with the history of obedience and various examples of authority/submissive relationships. He gives general examples of situations where there is obedience or disobedience, but fails to address why Williams 5 they are bad or good. His essay is more about the " whys" of obedience but

lack sufficient evidence as to how and why obedience will lead to our doom. The only part of the essay that addresses his thesis is the conclusion. The body of the essay contains almost no evidence to support his claim, aside from a brief reference to Eichmann.

Even the title of the essay is not upheld. While he does describe psychological and more aspects of disobedience, he fails to address why they constitute a problem. Fromm's essay is a very well written, interesting, and informative explanation of why we feel the need to obey and have distaste to disobedience. However, it does very little to back up his position that, " human history began with an act of disobedience, and it is not unlikely that it will end/or be terminated by an act of obedience" (Fromm 402).

The pathos appeal to emotion works great in this essay, but Fromm does use too many fallacies that hurt the credibility of the essay. As it stands, the majority of the essay is written objective and its discrepancy with the subjective thesis are too much of a stretch.