

Essay on a synthesis of ideas around obedience from fromm and lessing

[Business](#), [Management](#)



Humans live at the level of society. This is why Aristotle said of humanity “Man is a political animal.” Inherently to society are rules of conduct that people within the society must obey in order for the state to work. From marketing, to sociology, to science and psychology, there are many disciplines that are partly or wholly dedicated to an understanding of human behavior. One way to look at society is to see it from the perspective of Doris Lessing, who in her writing “Group Minds” explores the consensus of a group mind made up of individuals, but acts in ways distinct from a single person. Societal thinking can also be seen from the perspective of why disobedience exists within a society. Eric Fromm, a prolific writer and author of over 30 books in his writing *Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem*, looks at when a person separates themselves from the group mind and acts contrary to the mandates of it.

Lessing refers to humans as “Group animals” that are not even aware of being as such. In the same way that a biologist studies deer in the woods and begins to note and understand behavioral patterns, human beings act in ways that thorough study will show as predictable. Lessing examines how we give into pressures and conform ourselves to a group. She refers to “The West” and states that “we the human race are now in possession of a great deal of hard information about ourselves” (Lessing, 592).

While she believes that we as a society would benefit from an understanding of this self-knowledge, she does not believe that many people are actually using that knowledge available. Though she acknowledges that people in Western societies are educated in “many different ways” she maintains that they will all emerge with a similar idea about themselves. In the West, she

writes that there is an individualistic mindset, one that perhaps hesitates to think of themselves as a cog in a larger system. She defines that mindset as, " I am a citizen of a free society, and that means I am an individual, making individual choices" (Lessing, 592).

On the other side of the same coin, Fromm looks at what sets individuals to work against the societal system in place by looking at disobedience. Just from the title of his writing, there is the assumption that he views disobedience as negative, but calling it a " Psychological and Moral Problem." This assumption though, proves not to be completely true. Instead of viewing it as a problem, Fromm takes the view that human disobedience is an essential tenet of human society writing that " Human history began with an act of disobedience, and it is not unlikely that it will be terminated by an act of obedience" (Fromm, 549).

This act of obedience is not unlike the obedience of conformity that Lessing explores in her analysis of group thinking that results in individuals fitting their beliefs or actions with a group majority.

Lessing gives an example of peer pressure involving a " group of people [who] were taken into the researcher's confidence, [with] a minority of one or two [individuals who] are left in the dark" (Lessing, 592). Given two pieces of wood to compare in length that differ very slightly, the majority in the group came to the conclusion after a period of irritation, and even anger that the two pieces of wood were in fact the same size. This is a fine example of how peer pressure caused the entire group to conclude that the two pieces of wood were indeed the same size. It is obvious that others in the group felt differently due to the fact there were periods of irritation.

Fromm would see the people in the group who refused to adjust their opinion to that of the group as the sort of people in life who created significant changes within society, since it was an act of disobedience, which “ set man free” (Fromm, 549). Fromm is referring here to the Hebrew myth about the Garden of Eden when man learned to rely on his own powers and to become fully human. Fromm is taking some liberties with the moral of the story, since in the context of The Bible and those who tell the story often characterize the characters Adam and Eve as having done something negative in their act of defiance against God.

Fromm sees the groupthink mentality of Lessing as possible what will lead to the destruction of society. He does not mean this poetically. But really believes that group think could be the underlying factor that leads to human kinds destruction.

His predictions are dire, writing that, “ 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, 550). Fromm, it is important to remember, is writing at the time of the Cold War, where the threat of nuclear war seemed to loom every day.

Our opinions, while we want to think they are individualistic, do conform in many ways, some seemingly inevitable, to the influence of others around us. An example that everyone can relate to is how TV and the mass media influences beliefs. While individuals might maintain that they are able to watch TV and not be influenced, it is likely they are less autonomous as they believe themselves to be.

Lessing uses the word “ helpless” to describe how many people go through

life. " People in the West therefore may go through their entire lives never thinking to analyze this very flattering picture, and as a result are helpless against all kinds of pressures on them to conform in many kinds of ways." Humans, Lessing argues, need to be around people as very few people are okay with living their lives alone as solitaries. But within this need is the confidence that a group mind may come up with insights that an individual may not, that group mind, as Fromm would say can be a very dangerous thing.

Fromm is thinking of war when he cautions that obedience could lead to the destruction of society. " When we're in a group," Lessing writes, " we tend to think as that group does: we may even have joined the group to find " like-minded" people (Lessing, 591). This conformity exists a level below consciousness and as a result people are ill equipped to defend themselves against it. For Lessing, knowledge is power; the knowledge that a group may be influencing to a biases degrees opinions of the individual is enough to guard against falling a victim of it. A group has a power to sway beliefs and then gain authority over an individual.

Fromm saw two different types of authority existing. A " rational" and " Irrational" authority. An example of a rational authority would be between a teacher and student; whereas an irrational authority would be between a slave and his master. In the case of the teacher and student the interest of both parties lies in the same direction, acting in the name of reason. The authority in this case does not want to overpower but wants to see the student succeed. That is not the case with the slave and his master because what is beneficial for one is detrimental to the other, exploiting the slave.

Man is so willing to obey the State because it makes him feel safe and protected. This type of obedience is known as “authoritarian conscience” or Super-ego, being obedient to a power outside of oneself which tends to weaken oneself” (Fromm, 551) “Humanity’s conscience” is to be you and to judge yourself, we have our instincts of what is human and what is inhuman. The fight against authority in the State, as well in the family, was considered the development of a self-determining brave person. When man is able to think and feel for himself at that time, he will be able to say “not” to disobey, thus making him a free and independent person. Man must not fear to disobey but also must want to obey.

Neither Fromm nor Lessing are not advocating disobedience for disobedience’s sake. Rather, they understand that it is important for a thinking person in a just society to feel he/she has the option of disobeying should he come to the conclusion that obedience in a certain instance would be immoral.

Works Cited

Fromm, Eric. “Disobedience As A Psychological And Moral Problem.” Writing Reading English 1020 and English 1050. Boston. Pearson Learning Solution, 2011 548-553. Print.

Lessing, Doris “Group Minds.” Writing Reading English 1020 and English 1050. Boston: Pearson Learning Solution, 2011 591-593. Print