

*Obedience*

Obedience

## Americans and Obedience

“You Americans know nothing about obedience! You trivialize it, just as you trivialize all profound concepts pertaining to the soul. Yet no one can understand human history who does not understand obedience.

“What incredible *whim* made us decide that we could ever live *except* in obedience? The more shallow, the more superficial, the more *American*, a person is, the more inclined he is to imagine that he can somehow be a master, can be in charge. The deeper a person is, the more he thinks and *feels*, the more obvious it is to him that there is no other way to live except to obey, because this person has had the realization of realizations, namely, the realization that *something exists*. As he goes through his life, he cannot get out from under the appalling burden: *something exists!* He knows that, for all our extraordinary progress in science, it has not come one millimeter closer to explaining this overwhelming fact. *Why is there something, rather than nothing at all?*, the old philosophers asked. They, too, felt the overwhelming weight of the realization of realizations. And all those who experience it know that from it follows with absolute certainty that there is no choice for us except to obey.

“I know, you will tell me that, at least in America, we have advanced beyond old-fashioned notions of the importance of obedience. I tell you to look at the social history of the country for the last thirty years, the millions flocking to gurus of every conceivable variety, the middle-class lost souls whose only hope in life is that they will somehow be able to survive until the next therapy session. Everywhere the cry shakes the heavens: *Tell us what to do!*

“You say, ‘obey what’ or ‘whom’? That is the dilemma of dilemmas. Imagine a twelve-year old boy suddenly stopped in his tracks by the thought: ‘God wants me to obey him. But that can only mean, obey him *all the time*. What else can it possibly mean, since he is God? But then there is a way of moving my arm now that will be obedient to him, and all the other possible ways will not. No matter where I am or what I have just done, there is always a *next thing to do* that will be obedient to him, and all the other possible things will not be. How can I know what this obedient next thing to do is?’

“Yes, yes, I know: it is entirely conceivable that at any given time there may be *several* next things to do, any one of which will be obedient to him. Nevertheless, the boy still has no way of finding out what these are except in situations described in the Bible, or in whatever holy book you care to name. And I never heard of any holy book which said, in effect, ‘in any situation not covered by this book, do whatever you please.’

“You tell me that there is not the slightest proof that obedience has any effect on our future. I tell you that the reason there is no proof is that the experiment has never been made except among a few believers. How do we *know* that there isn't some set of physical positions and thoughts which, if they occurred in all of humanity at a given moment, would not change the world entirely, make the heavens open, bring the face of God down to us? This man with arm half-raised and right foot six inches above the ground, thinking about a wheelbarrow he played with in his childhood, that old woman sitting in a chair knitting, her head tilted at precisely 36 degrees from the vertical as she thinks about the flower pots in the back yard, that head of state leaning on a balustrade and thinking about a little girl he saw in a crowd the day before — find this one and only one combination of physical positions and thoughts and suddenly everything will change!

“But I say there *is* an answer to this seemingly hopeless dilemma. You may not like it, but here it is: *obey the call to suffering*. Do whatever leads you to the greatest suffering. I may not know very much about this world, but I do know that suffering is more important than anything else, certainly more important than pleasure — than *not* suffering. I can't tell you how I know this

or why, but I know it as certainly as I know that 2 plus 2 equals 4. That the call to suffering is the answer to the question of whom or what we should obey, follows just as certainly as a deduction in formal logic. And, in case you are consoling yourself with the thought that I am crazy, or at least not very bright, let me remind you of the esteem in which suffering has been held by so many great thinkers of the past, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein to name two recent examples, and its importance in most of the world's great religions.

“Our duty is to suffer as much as we can, torture ourselves to the very limit, and part of that torture must be the realization that this is nonsense, that others are happy, therefore we should be, that we only think this way because of our childhood — this is essential because it trivializes our suffering and therefore makes it worse. It is our duty to envy those who are happy, those who live in nice houses, with loving families, those who haven't the vaguest idea of what lives like ours are like.

“Everywhere Americans try to deny the importance of suffering, particularly suffering that does not seem to arise from physical causes. They try to explain it away by blaming their parents, thinking nothing is more obvious than that their misery, their life-long depression, has its source in the way they were raised. But 150 years ago — merely yesterday as far as human history is concerned — it was equally obvious, to the highly educated and to the ordinary person, that sin and the unknowable will of God was the cause of our suffering.

“If, in America, most people were reasonably happy — if hardly anyone drank too much or used drugs or needed psychotherapy — then, *maybe*, we could say that Americans were right in denying the universal importance of suffering, that in fact it is something that technology and good mental and physical hygiene enable us to leave behind us. But everywhere reality puts the lie to this denial. The whole country is in agony — you can't begin to *name* all the types of mental illness, not to mention physical illness, that are brought before the public in just *one week* of television, not to mention one week of newspapers, magazines, and radio, not to mention one year of the same. With all our technology, our per capita pain, mental and physical, has only increased. The more we try to do away with suffering, the worse it gets: the country is proving the very law it is trying to deny!

“It is our duty to suffer as much as we can. We must spend our lives trying to achieve things that are all but unachievable, things that will all but break us, and we must hate ourselves every step of the way for our failure, and if, somehow, we appear to be on the verge of success, we must not take the final step, so that forever after we will be tormented by the question of whether we actually would have succeeded or not.

“We must drag ourselves hollow-eyed through our days, praying that someone puts us out of our misery, that we get hit by a car or get a quickly-fatal — no, a slowly-fatal — form of cancer, but at the same time we must make every attempt to be wary, to protect ourselves, to eat and live healthily.

“We must do what we hate, reminding ourselves all the while that our efforts are worthless, that even as we are struggling to accomplish the goal, somewhere, someone is already accomplishing it faster and better than we can ever hope to.

“Our highest calling, which few if any of us can hope to achieve, but which we must nevertheless strive for, is not only to endure unbearable suffering that we know is meaningless, worthless, but to do so in complete isolation — never talk about it or write about it, never let anyone know during our life or after, what we have endured. If human life has any purpose, this is it, but only insofar as we receive no consolation, no lifting of our spirits, from the knowledge.” — S.f.

## **Additional Thoughts**

Two arguments can be made against the life of suffering, both centered on what appears to be the inevitability of hypocrisy in such a life: first, if the suffering is in fact real, if it is in fact on the very edge of the unbearable, then we are constantly trying to put an end to it. Second, if we succeed in living at the edge of unbearable pain, we will derive satisfaction from that knowledge, and this will constitute a diminution of our suffering. The counterargument to the first case is that we have no obligation not to be hypocritical; the counterargument to the second is that either we are determined to live the life or we are not.

“The question of obedience — the question of whether it is possible to obey our way to happiness, or at least to less misery, and if so, how to know what the obedient thing to do at any given moment is — this is the single most important metaphysical question.” — S.f.

The only valid argument against obedience, if in fact S.f.’s thesis in the above essay is correct, is the same as the only valid argument against worshipping God, namely, our refusal to honor what we do not respect. Otherwise, there is no real argument.

*Obedience*