

‘A child’s obedience and acceptance of its natural status do not follow on from the completion of education, they must be the basic foundation of education from the very beginning.’

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The Nazis have given obedience a bad name. They got people to believe obedience was a virtue *in itself*. But since then people have come to realise that obedience can only serve life if it is combined with *insight* and genuine *freedom*.

I still cannot understand why I regularly met with discontent and rejection, even aggressiveness, at the mere mention of the word ‘obedience’. In practical terms the plain and simple truth is that all of our activity as teachers rests on our pupils’ willingness to obey. I would like to examine this contradiction by demonstrating the general importance of obedience within the context of our existence as human beings.

Let us start with the psychology of perception. As is well known, we human beings have the ability *not* to see the world as a chaos of unconnected stimuli; instead in the act of perception we assign a *meaning* to everything that comes into contact with our senses. In a sense we, as perceiving subjects, *create* the world we experience as we interpret the stimuli.

A key element of this way of processing stimuli by interpreting them is that we do *not* perceive the ‘objects’ of our field of perception as isolated facts but as things that belong together in some way that makes sense. Perception creates a *structure* of meanings. This is generally referred to as a *situation*. There is almost no point in giving examples, for ultimately every existential act which can be expressed in language takes place within a structure of meaning that can be termed a ‘situation’. We are waiting outside an occupied telephone kiosk, we are work-

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ing in the garden, we are involved in a road accident, we go to an exhibition, we stand looking at a picture. The last two examples show that transferring our attention to a smaller or larger area simultaneously redefines the situation which forms the background to our experience.

These fundamental considerations have a logical connection with the nature of obedience. As active subjects, we experience the situation obtaining at any moment not as something neutral but as a state of affairs that *makes demands on us*. The extent to which these demands are an acquired response is unimportant in this connection. All that interests us here is to establish that in any situation we find ourselves in we naturally feel ourselves exposed to the demand that we observe the rules of behaviour that are inseparable from the nature of the situation. Thus the quiet atmosphere of a church demands silence, or at least that we speak softly, are dressed appropriately and make gentle movements. But the demands inherent in a discotheque, on a beach, at an office desk, on a path through the woods, in a kitchen shortly after a meal or at a vertical cliff-face are quite different. Our lives as individuals as well as our social lives are largely activated and controlled by the fact that we quite naturally submit to the demands made by the situation of the moment. In other words, it is the most natural thing in the world for us to behave in a manner appropriate to the situation. Or to put it another way, we obey the demand that is part of our perception of a given situation.

Thus a 'situation' becomes an *authority* which we obey in the overwhelming majority of cases and *obedience*, understood as behaving in line with an authority, which by no means has to be a person, is almost as much a matter of course for an adult as eating and breathing. *Inappropriate behaviour* therefore, is almost the equivalent of *existential disobedience*. People are disobedient in this sense, then, if they fool around on dangerous, steep terrain, run out into a busy street without paying attention to the traffic, leave dangerous chemicals within reach of children, dump rubbish in the woods or disturb the devotions of people praying in church by laughing and joking.

The question naturally arises as to why we are prepared to obey without giving it a second thought. There are presumably two main reasons: in the first place, we often project the rules into the situation

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ourselves, with the result that they agree with our own values and we consequently feel it is good and sensible to observe them. In the second place, ignoring the rules appropriate to a situation often incurs unpleasant consequences: we can have an accident, be an embarrassment, fail, be rejected, criticised, perhaps even fined or punished, all of which create disagreeable feelings.

As well as these psychological reasons for our everyday obedience, however, we must also consider its essential *meaning*. Communication and social behaviour are very largely dependent on countless situations being perceived by different people in a more or less identical manner. If that were not the case, we would each of us be living in a world of our own. It is only the fact that most people quite automatically behave in a way that is appropriate to the situation that makes our social life bearable. If they didn't, our world would be like a madhouse, and that would make individuals even more insane than they already are. Or to put it in less drastic terms: the fact that most people unquestioningly behave in the manner demanded by the situation guarantees that we can assume as given the minimal conditions that are indispensable if we are to shape our own positive lifestyle.

That does not of course touch on the question of whether, and to what extent, observing such rules of behaviour in particular cases is also *morally good*. There are many situations where the behaviour which seems appropriate is, from a higher point of view, reprehensible. We only need to observe the behaviour of individuals when their club has lost a match, when a large number of the group are drunk or have taken drugs, when a fight is going on in the street or when a horde of soldiers goes from village to village, burning, murdering, and raping. Then things are done which even those who do them cannot understand once they are away from the destructive situation. Given this, young people should be brought up to observe the rules when they have a positive effect and do not contravene morality, but to refuse to obey the prevailing rules when what the situation suggests would involve them in destructive and morally reprehensible behaviour.

This brings us to upbringing and obedience both at home and in school. Since young people need to learn to behave in an appropriate manner, those responsible for their upbringing have to demand obedi-

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ence. They do not do so simply to satisfy their lust for power. On the contrary, it is tedious when one is compelled to exercise power and require obedience, but one does so despite that so that pupils will learn to recognise the rules inherent in a situation and follow them — insofar as they are morally acceptable. Thus authority that demands obedience always appears as the *guardian of a situation that regulates life*. Thus a teacher will take action if, in an arithmetic class, one of the pupils folds the exercise sheet into a paper aeroplane and sends it flying over the heads of his classmates, who are at work; the same behaviour could be acceptable in the next class, handicraft, it all depends on the situation.

If I were in charge of a class today, I would talk to my pupils about what I have said here again and again. I would show them how every adult responds to the demands of situations with automatic obedience morning, noon and night. I would show them that having to obey is not something that stops once we are grown up; on the contrary, being able to obey is part of the make-up of a responsible adult and that behaving in conformity with the situation is a sign of true maturity.

Beyond that, I would also show them that one must be able to refuse to behave as a situation suggests, be rebellious or even revolutionary. I would also make it clear that one must not mistake obstinate defiance, insistence on selfish interests for a refusal that comes from one's conscience, from a genuine sense of responsibility. And I would never dream of inciting my pupils to revolt against all adaptation to social conventions or of encouraging them to confuse immature rebelliousness with true independence.

Apart from this general objective of developing in young people a true sense of obedience and the ability to act on it, we must ask ourselves what its significance is for improving the quality of education. The answer is clear: it is an essential *precondition* for education. The foundations and goals of school as an institution (compulsory education, timetable, syllabus) assume the obedience of pupils, parents and teachers as a matter of course. Without obedience it is impossible to organise teaching. That is such a matter of course that nothing further need be said.

Of much greater significance is obedience as a psychological foundation allowing education in the true sense of the word — the shaping, development and extension of a pupil's personality — to take place.

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Obedience is the readiness to respond positively to objective demands and precisely that is necessary to learn anything at all. That is why *wilfulness* is — along with lack of ability — one of the main obstacles to achieving the desired result in education. Unfortunately, a pupil's wilfulness is often misinterpreted as showing that he has a mind of his own, is capable of independent thought. These are naturally desirable virtues and to be encouraged; in contrast to them, wilfulness has no objective foundation and is always destructive. Wilfulness is always — against all logic and all objective demands — a matter of refusal or at best of doing things differently, of being different on principle, of self-assertion as a disastrous form of compensation. If a teacher fails to recognise wilfulness in a pupil and — with much patience and understanding — gradually overcome it, it will turn into stubbornness and ultimately into a complete refusal to cooperate. Such people are incapable of seeing anything objectively — the precise opposite of what was discussed in the previous chapter as an essential condition for education: openness.

To sum up: the ability to obey is not just an educational target to make social life possible, nor just a necessary condition for the organisation of teaching. Beyond that it is the fundamental attitude of being prepared to accept things, to engage with new things, and is thus a basis for learning, for education and, especially, for the improvement of the quality of education. In contrast, a refusal to accept anything new or different, wilfulness and obstinacy are fundamental obstacles to learning, to education, which need to be recognised in the early stages and handled with psychologically based educational strategies.

It is not only today that obedience has become a problem of educational theory, it was for Pestalozzi too. As a student of Rousseau, he tried to bring up his own son without requiring obedience. As his diary fragment of 1774 shows, he very quickly abandoned this. Like a conscientious bookkeeper, he weighed the arguments for freedom and for obedience against each other and came to the following significant conclusion: *Truth is not one-sided. Freedom is a blessing and so is obedience. We must join together what Rousseau separated. Convinced that an unwise restriction demeaning mankind was a cause of misery, he set no limit to freedom.*

A good twenty-five years later, asking himself which psychological

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faculties of the infant were to be fostered in order to develop its moral life, Pestalozzi came up with the three basic moral emotions: love, trust and gratitude. And he recognised obedience as the indispensable foundation of moral behaviour. He believed that anyone who believes they can do without that abandons the child to a life of indiscipline.