“I was just following orders.”

The “defence” of Adolf Eichmann, who had planned the extermination of European Jews, when he was on trial for his atrocious crimes.
Stanley Milgram wanted to determine the extent to which...
...people would follow the orders of perceived authority figures.
The Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg after the Second World War said that they were just doing what they were told. Their defence was obedience to their superiors.

But hey, they were Nazis.
Americans would never behave like that.

Or would they?

Milgram was determined to find out.
Milgram’s Obedience Study (1963)

“monumental contribution to science”

“dangerous, dehumanizing and unethical research”

Two extreme opinions - where do you stand?
Obedience

Definition:
Performing a behaviour in response to an order given by someone in a position of power or authority

Do it!

OK, OK...
Imagine that you are in Milgram’s Experiment...

Yale is your basic prestigious institution. You know, turrets, towers, old brick, green lawns. Wow, you think.

• You volunteer to be part of a study on learning and punishment.

• You report to Yale University, where the experiment is taking place.
• You are greeted by an authoritative-looking man in a grey lab coat.

You imagine with a kind of awe that such a man would never suggest anything illegal, immoral or shabby.
In what appears to be a random occurrence,...

...you and your fellow participant are assigned roles.

Hey, I get to be the teacher.

Hey, I get to be the learner.
In reality, the actual participant is always selected to be the teacher.

The learner is an actor and a stooge of the experimenter.

PARTICIPANT

ACCOMPlice OR CONFEDERATE
Setup of the Milgram Experiment

The **learner** is seated in another room.

Electrodes are attached to his hands in your presence.

You, the **real participant**, are asked to “punish” the learner with increasingly painful electric shocks whenever he makes a mistake.
The experimenter informs you that the shocks will be painful but will cause no tissue damage.
The shock generator looks alarmingly real.
It has 30 switches that deliver shocks from 15 shocks to 450 volts. At the high end, the generator is labelled: “Danger: severe shock”.
At 300 volts, the learner begins to pound on the wall.

When you ask the experimenter whether you should stop giving the learner shocks, he tells you firmly, “It is absolutely essential that you continue.”
What would you do?

What happened in the actual experiment?
In the actual experiment...

the participants groaned, sweated, begged to be allowed to stop, stuttered, trembled and bit their lips,...

but they still obeyed.
65% obeyed right up until the 450 volt level.
Assumptions and Reality

- **0.12%** Psychiatrists predicted that 0.12% of participants would obey to the 450 volt level.

- **2%** The general public predicted that 2% would obey.

- **65%** of actual participants obeyed to the 450 volt level.
Milgram was *aghast*. He had never expected to obtain these results.

He set out to identify the factors that would *reduce* this dangerous tendency to obey...
“The essence of obedience is that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person’s wishes, and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions.”
Conclusion

Milgram concluded that if the situational pressures and circumstances are right, anyone might obey orders to inflict harm on innocent strangers.
The experiment has been replicated many times.

The results are distressing and disheartening, but perhaps they explain to some degree...

- why such dreadful atrocities occur during wars and invasions
- why racism can lead to genocide
- why people are sometimes coerced into acting against their morals and values
The factor that most reduced the obedience of the participants, when Milgram restaged the experiment and changed some of the conditions...
Reducing Obedience

...was having a rebel in the room with the participant. The rebel would refuse to obey the authority figure. The participant, seeing the courage and determination of the rebel, also refused to obey.
The effect of the rebel...

If there'd been more rebels, there might have been fewer atrocities in the history of humanity.
Will you be a rebel? I hope so.