

Does “Obedience” Have Any Redeeming Qualities?

June 2020: I read this essay and added commentary for Episode 306 of the Everything Voluntary podcast.

I’ve been sitting on the topic of obedience for awhile now, trying to tease it apart in a way that redeems the phrase, “obedience is a virtue.” But alas, I cannot. Obedience, in my view, is not a virtue. Obedience is abhorrent.

What do I mean by obedience? I’m not sure, actually. I could mean “submission to a higher power or authority”, and by submission I could mean, “the act of referring to a third party for judgment or decision.” In what ways can obedience be considered virtuous?

For starters, virtue, again in my view, requires willful intention. If one is being coerced into behaving virtuously, then no virtue is truly being engaged in. Except perhaps in a meta sort of way, ie. going along with a government’s demands to refrain from [insert coerced virtuous behavior here] in order to stay out of jail so that you can fulfill your parental obligations.

In those cases, obedience is nowhere to be found. A threatened person is not “obeying” or “submitting” in the sense as defined above, but in a wholly different sense, that of a “letting down” of one’s intention to defend themselves from harm, and instead avoiding harm by doing as commanded to do. This type of obedience betrays virtue.

Are there any other cases of “obedience” being demanded that are not also coercive? Parents demanding obedience is obviously as coercive as government’s demanding it. Same goes for prophets and priests, demanding obedience to their god’s laws and what not.

Obedience seems to be a confused concept. The definitions provided above came from an etymological dictionary. Yet, how people define obedience today is not merely a matter of voluntary reference to a third party. That sort of things happens all the time. When I research a fix for a malfunctioning computer, I am referring to a third party’s judgment and proceeding to follow it. But I wouldn’t call that “obedience”.

If some action is a good or wise in the pursuit of one’s desired and chosen ends, then we can expect it will be performed. If you find yourself demanding “obedience” of another person, child or adult, then methinks you should stop and think about what actions you are demanding, and why. Are they something the other person would do without your demand? If not, why not?

When I ask my children to do something, I’m not demanding obedience, but asking for a

favor. If they don't want to do it, I may whine about it for a bit, but I don't threaten them. If I need them to behave in a certain way during a particular visit somewhere, I will explain my needs and the visit's requirements ahead of time, those who agree will participate, and those who don't, won't. If the visit won't meet their own needs, they may decline to come. That's usually fine. When it's not, it's my job to spend more time convincing them of the merits of coming, perhaps appealing to their self-interest. This shouldn't look any different from convincing another adult of the same thing.

Obedience, or rather, the demand for obedience, seems always to ignore the demandee's own desires. "Obey me" has become an abhorrent phrase to me for both the implied threat and implied belief that other people can't be reasoned with, that they are or should be mindless. If something is a good idea for its own sake, you don't need to demand obedience. If it's not a good idea, then you probably shouldn't be doing it. Leave "obedience" for dog training. At least that's the way I see it.