Disobedience: Virtue Or Vice? Essay, Research Paper

Disobedience: Virtue or Vice?

Throughout history, sociologist have analyzed the characteristics of human behavior. They each write essays giving their educated opinion about a certain situation. Erich Fromm first published the essay Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem in 1963. It was also published in the textbook Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum. He wrote this essay hoping to educate the general public on his ideas about disobedience. Fromm believes that disobedience has caused the human civilization to advance. He begins by stating his thesis which says, human history began with an act of disobedience, and it is not unlikely that it will be terminated by an act of obedience (377). Fromm develops his ideas using a variety of rhetorical strategies.

In the introduction to the essay Fromm explains that for centuries humans have thought of obedience as a virtue and disobedience as a vice. He then goes on to give his thesis.

Fromm begins paragraph two by giving the example of Adam and Eve ushering in human history with an act of disobedience to God. Saying Their act of disobedience broke the primary bond with nature and made them individuals (378). He believes that man was not truly human until he got banned from the Garden of Eden. Humans would now have to rely on their own resources to get food, clothing , and shelter.

In the third paragraph Fromm uses example again. He states in this paragraph, that he[man] had not been corrupted by his sin, but freed from the fetters of pre-human

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harmony (378). Man would now search for a new paradise to replace the Old Paradise that he was forced to leave.

In the paragraph four, we see yet again Fromm s use of example. Fromm explains that there would be no human history were it not for the disobedient act of by Prometheus. In Ancient Greek history, Prometheus stole fire from Zeus, enclosed it in his cloak, and gave it to civilization. After finding this out, Zeus chained him to a rock and didn t release him for a thousand years. Prometheus never asked for forgiveness from Zeus for this wrongdoing.

Fromm begins the fifth paragraph with classification and division. In the statement, Man has continued to evolve by acts of disobedience (378), Fromm separates evolution into two different categories. Spiritual and intellectual. Spiritually man has been able to evolve only through acts of disobedience. Intellectually, man has continued to evolve by contradicting what the nobility believed to be true. Furthermore, Fromm thinks that the spiritual faith and intellectual knowledge of today would not be possible had it not been for people being disobedient.

In the sixth paragraph, Fromm uses a variety of strategies. One strategy is example. He thinks there is a great possibility that an act of obedience will destroy human civilization in the next few years. Fromm writes that even though, intellectually, man is living in the Atomic Age, he is still living in the Stone Age as far as the

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government and society are concerned. The writer also lets known his belief that obedience to authority will eventually be our undoing, referring to the fact that nuclear

power only takes the push of a button by a lone hand, and the command to do so (378). Certainly this was a much bigger threat during the cold war era, but it is still a valid point in most respects today.

Fromm wants to explain himself in the seventh paragraph by giving a definition. He states But I do not mean to say that all disobedience is a virtue and all obedience is a vice (379). He is simply saying that it is inconceivable for a certain group to feel that every one of their rules is right. This does not mean one should rebel or become a revolutionary. It means if one feels strongly enough about something, don t be obedient just because it has been taught that way for years and years.

Fromm goes on to use classification and division in the eighth paragraph. He writes submission as being obedience and through submission one learns to obey. Meaning that over time one has been socialized to think a certain way about a subject. He defines this type of obedience as being heteronomous obedience. The other type of obedience is called autonomous obedience. He describes this as being obedient not because you have to, but because you agree with the example in question. Fromm believes that every person has their own laws of conduct. In these laws of conduct we are always obedient to ourselves, but we are not always being obedient to the government.

Paragraph nine is a transitional paragraph. After giving good definitions of obedience, Fromm wants to continue explaining his ideas on conscience and authority.

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Fromm uses two different classifications of conscience in the tenth paragraph. He divides conscience out into Authoritarian and Humanistic. This paragraph stresses the

important difference between the authoritarian conscience , which is essentially the same as what Freud calls the Super Ego , what drives us to do all the amazing stuff we do and is effected by external factors (such as our social environment). He claims this is the conscience that is eager to please and afraid of displeasing (379). He also talks

about the humanistic conscience , which is the voice inside everyone telling them instinctively what is right or wrong (379). Whether we follow this voice is at our own discretion. The humanistic conscience would let the man pushing the button to end society know that it was wrong

In the eleventh paragraph Fromm analyzes whether or not man follows his own conscience or what he has been brought up to believe. Fromm states, Consciously I believe that I am following my conscience; in effect, however, I have swallowed the principles of power (379). By unknowingly conforming to what the society s norms are, Fromm thinks he is doing what he wants to do. Actually, he is doing what he has been taught to do through his childhood and education.

In the twelfth paragraph Fromm uses classification and division again. Fromm says that there is rational and irrational authority. Giving the example of rational authority with the relationship between teacher and student. Both should realize what role they are playing and both should do their best in furthering the student s education. Fromm gives the example of a slave and his master for irrational authority. Stating,

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what is advantageous to one is detrimental to the other (380). A slave owner has but one purpose. To make his life easier by making someone else do his work for him. Try

to imagine how one would feel being completely owned by somebody and knowing they will be shot if they try to escape. The self-morale or self-image of a slave would be very low.

In the thirteenth paragraph Fromm gives an example as to why man obeys so much without question. Saying, As long as I am obedient to the power of the State, the

Church, or public opinion, I feel safe and protected (380). Being obedient keeps one on the same level as everyone else.

The fourteenth paragraph is a continuation of Fromm s ideas from the thirteenth paragraph. Fromm analyzes the characteristics that one must have to disobey. By growing up into a fully developed individual (380) and being able to derive answers to questions by oneself gives one the courage to question authority and to develop their own answers to their questions.

In the fifteenth paragraph Fromm analyzes the causes and effects of disobeying. He begins to talk about how a person can become free through disobedience. By learning to say no to power, one can become free. If one is scared of freedom, then they do not have the courage to disobey. Therefore, freedom and disobedience go hand in hand.

In the sixteenth paragraph Fromm uses a variety of strategies. The first would be classification and division. Obedience has always been looked at as being good and disobedience has always been looked at as being bad. Fromm believes the reason for this

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is a minority that mostly rules over the majority. Saying, This rule was made necessary by the fact that there was only enough of the good things in life for the few, and only the

crumbs remained for the many (381). If one wanted to rise up on the social ladder, they must learn to be obedient. Fromm thinks man desires to be obedient. By being obedient one gives the power over to someone else. One does not necessarily have to think for themselves anymore. They will just do what the laws say. Fromm goes on to give the example of Martin Luther and The Enlightenment. These two things questioned the way things were. Luther felt the Catholic Church was handling its business wrong.

Therefore, he was disobedient and in the process ended up creating an entirely new religion. The Enlightenment questioned things as they had been for hundreds of years. It is hard to imagine what state our world would be in today if no one had brought any of these questions up.

In the seventeenth paragraph, Fromm gives the example of the German soldier Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann is a symbol of the organization man, of the alienated bureaucrat for whom men, women and children have become number (381). By listening to the authoritarian conscience instead of the humanistic conscience, Fromm compares Eichmann to everybody in the world. Saying that we see ourselves in him because he was just doing his job.

In the concluding paragraph Fromm says, The organization man has lost the capacity to disobey, he is not even aware of the fact that he obeys (381). This is very

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true. In today s society man obeys everyday. So much that it doesn t even occur to him anymore.

In conclusion, the essay Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem by Erich Fromm is a brilliant work concerning whether or not man has evolved through

the disobedience of authority. Fromm uses numerous amounts of rhetorical strategies in his essay to prove this. He believes that, in order for man to survive, he should consider all possibilities when presented with a situation.

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References

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