

Obedience

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Dr. Cuthbert Dukes, in taking the chair, said: Had I been able to choose one night in this course of lectures on which to take the chair I should have chosen this evening because the subject "Obedience" interests me perhaps more than any of the other subjects in the list of lectures. Obedience is a subject on which we have changed our opinions very much within recent years. Whilst waiting for my wife to return from the Institute of Child Psychology in the small hours of this morning I picked up a book of poems and so it happened that I came across that wonderful poem about the boy who stood on the burning deck. When I read it through it seemed that it was extraordinary that anyone should ever have regarded that as a praiseworthy action in any sort of way, to stand there simply because he had been told to stay there. But when I came to that magnificent verse:

"Then came a burst of thunder-sound –
The boy – oh! where was he?"

My sympathies were not in the least aroused. When we are told to:

"Ask of the winds that far around
With fragments strewed the sea"

I think also that type of obedience is no longer regarded as altogether estimable. I think those passages in the writings of the Apostle Paul in which he urges children to obey their parents, wives to obey their husbands and servants their masters we now look upon as the less inspired portions of the Apostle's writings. At any rate, we realize that the subject of obedience is one on which we look for guidance, and I personally cannot think of anyone I would rather at the present moment listen to on this subject than the Psychological Director of the Institute of Child Psychology.

Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld: Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, - I feel exceedingly grateful to our chairman for having introduced the subject as he has because it makes it much easier for me to plunge into the middle of the stream. The question of obedience is, perhaps, one of the most frequent that comes up for consideration in the work that I and my colleagues do at the Institute of Child Psychology and that I do in private. About one out of every four or five of the children one sees the complaint made, either at the beginning or during the proceedings, has made reference to obedience. During the past six or seven years in trying to find out what one ought to say, what can be done to assist the situation, what really are the fundamental forces in the situation, I have had to think very carefully indeed about this whole question of obedience as a question.

You will find if you look round the world of to-day that there is hardly any question which is more burning for nations as a whole than to make up their minds and to come to some idea,

some at any rate reasonably corporate conclusion as to the nature and the function of the question of obedience. If you consider the various countries in Europe you will realize that the question of obedience has, so to speak, sprung to life in a way that forty years ago no one could have conceived. You see whole nations building their total national life upon the question of obedience. You see obedience to the State, obedience to an ideal, being erected once again as it was in the very early days of the Christian Church as a central problem, a central motive, of human character. In this country it is a very much less urgent matter. It does not press very hardly upon us and I think very few, except those who are specifically engaged in education, have given the question of obedience a great deal of thought. So that there is not a school of thought in this country to which one can refer. I hope everyone has read The Way of All Flesh; if not, I would urge you to do so because there you will find an example of the way in which our grandparents were brought up and a picture of a reasonable specimen of normal society. You get a view of obedience, a view of the child's relations to the parent and to authority in Butler's The Way of All Flesh, on the one hand, and you think of The Problem Child of Arthur Sullivan Neill on the other hand. You could not have a greater swing of the pendulum in connection with any one of the primary human problems. On the one hand, you have obedience as a cardinal quality, the first and last duty of childhood, a thing by which goodness and rightness is judged in childhood; and, on the other hand, you have obedience held almost as a sin and a crime and the one element to be eliminated in the relationship of grown-up and child.

It is quite obvious that neither can be right, because no extreme of opinion ever is, but it does show that there is something profoundly perplexing and difficult about this subject for it to be possible for such a swing to take place among carefully thinking people, so that I make no apology for not having anything dogmatic to say about it. What I want to put before you is a certain piece of investigation that I have been doing during the last few years and some conclusions that it seems to me we may come to in considering what are the pros and cons, what are the sort of fundamental elements in our problem.

What is Obedience?

First of all, let us try to forget the question of children and parents and think for a moment what exactly is obedience. First, can everyone be obedient? Secondly, if every one cannot be obedient what kind of people can be? Under what circumstances can one be obedient? What are the motives that make one wish to be obedient? What are the motives that make one wish anyone else to be obedient to one's self? I say quite provocatively what I think because, as I have said, there is no school of authority I can quote.

To me it seems that real obedience is inseparable from a certain maturity of character; that to be able to obey swiftly, exactly and simply a given order is to imply in the person who does it a very real degree of growth, a very real degree of personal maturity. There is hardly any quality of a human being so beautiful, so lovely in every sense, as real obedience; that is to say, the capacity of really obeying. If you think of yourselves in your contact with human beings I think you will see how rare that quality is. By really obeying I mean a relationship, between two people or between many people, which is of such a kind that one person can ring up the other and say: "Please walk down Piccadilly until you find the fourth hat-shop on the left. Go in, tell the man that he is not to put the grey ribbon round the centre hat in the third tier. Come out, say 'Thank you' to the fourth policeman on the left and come back" and the other person would merely say, "Would you mind letting me say that over to see that I

have got it correctly" and would go out and do it. That capacity to take up an order exactly as it is given without saying "I do not understand", "Do I walk to Piccadilly?" "Which hat-shop did you say?" and so on. You repeat quite patiently "I said the fourth hat shop on the left". "Oh, are you quite sure there are four?" You say again "The fourth hat shop on the left?". "Yes, quite so; which hat did you say inside? You say, "Thank you very much, I am sorry to have troubled you but I do not think it really matters. I can get on without it." There are very few people who can take a telephone message accurately and read it as it is given; very few who can carry out the simplest command as it is given; there are very few people who really think.

In my profession and particularly in my kind of work, there are a great many odd things one has to do and there is very little time to do them in. You cannot think of the delight it is to find some one to whom I can give such an instruction as the following: Let us say a friend of mine is going to Munich tomorrow. I say "Telephone so-and-so and say 'Snakes please and not very large ones if you can manage it and I would be awfully glad for some monkeys'" and know that perfectly reasonable message will be transmitted. The message is reasonable because the friend in question is in contact with me in my own work and the Institute's work. The message translated would be: I hear you are going to Munich and it is kind of you to say that you will carry out the offer you made to me last Christmas when (you remember) we were discussing the question of the Zoo and we decided there were a great many snakes and we thought how often children wanted snakes and that snakes were not easy to get in England. I think it is possible that in the South of Germany you can get snakes, and so on. Think of the time it would take to explain such a message to the ordinary typist; she would think; It is not snakes; it must be cakes; after all cakes come from Germany, and then think of the bewilderment of my friend at the other end when asked to bring back "not very large cakes" from Munich!

Real obedience is a very rare and difficult quality and one of the highest and most suitable of personal gifts and personal relations between one, two or three people.

The second important point in regard to obedience is that if you get good obedience or if anyone is capable of giving good obedience it is the only way of showing up the quality of the commands. If you wish to say to an organization or a person that he or she is an exceedingly bad commander and has no idea how to give orders; or that an organization is bad, the only way to do so is to be absolutely and slavishly obedient. Because if you are completely obedient, so that the machine goes on perfectly oiled wheels, then it is possible for you, your colleagues, and the persons themselves to see how extremely fatuous and poor their organizing capacity is. As a matter of fact, it is the cruellest thing you can do. One of the cruellest things any rather senior girl or boy can do to an incompetent teacher is to carry out what they are told to do exactly to the letter, because it is only then that the teacher and the rest of the class see that it was a thoroughly badly conceived and badly given out order. So that obedience in the body politic, so to speak, is another very valuable quality for laying bare the bones of thought. That is one of the points I have been meditating very profoundly upon with regard to the War Diaries and War Memories that are coming out now. It seems to me that there is something terrible in these reminiscences and these military papers; it seems that the writers have come to see the appalling waste of life that has resulted from the use of a perfect machinery and a thoroughly inefficient thought. While we hear a great deal about the necessity for obedience in the lower ranks of any organization, whether Army or

Parliament, we spend exceedingly little thought upon the question of the capacity for thought, and the training of the thought of the people who do the commanding. If it were possible to get the laws that are passed in Parliament, some of the particularly fatuous ones, carried out absolutely to the letter for a short time it would be the best way possible of showing how unworkable they are.

So that obedience cuts both ways. It is both a fine quality in the person who can obey and it is, on the other hand, a very dangerous weapon for him to use against the person who gives orders. A third point about obedience as a whole is that the person who is able to be obedient is the person who has learned to mobilize his own powers. Now it is not at all likely that the Christian Church, and particularly the Roman Catholic branch of the Christian Church, would have laid such enormous importance upon obedience in the training of its monastics orders if there had not been also some very real character-power associated with it. And the character-power which is associated with it is the capacity to mobilize yourself. If you have not already thought along these lines, try every two or three days instant and immediate obedience to any order given you, however silly, and you will find that your difficulty is that you cannot bring yourself to the head, you cannot focus yourself. You cannot be told to come here, go there, do this, do that without a question springing to your lips and it is out of your mouth before you have even begun to think. Somebody says, "Won't you sit down?" and you ask "Which chair?" You can see yourself doing it at once.

That capacity to hold the self so much in hand that one is able to use it either in reply to the commands issued within the self or without the self is, again, one of the most valuable of human qualities, and valuable for two reasons. First of all, it means that you are able to function with the greatest economy of effort. The person who is able to be spontaneously obedient at any point is the person who has already got over that interior tidiness I was trying to talk about last week; who has already got the parts of this impulse into compartments so that, like an engine, it can switch on first this part and then that, it can go and be charming and it can go and be efficient, tidy, whatever is wanted. Anybody who has worked in an organization knows that those who can do that are the people who also have a great deal of energy free for drive in their own personal lives. An individual who is unable to do this is usually the individual who is being very wasteful in the management of his or her own personal and emotional economy.

The Motives Behind Obedience

Passing from the question of obedience itself, what are the motives behind obedience? I am often driven to think: Why should anyone in this world ever want to be obedient to anyone else? Because, after all, you cannot run any kind of quality without a very strong motive behind it. Nothing is going to exist in any country or any organization unless you are building upon one of the fundamental motives. We all know that obedience is a thing that crops up every now and again in a very marked form and we know it is a thing that keeps on coming into powerful, emotional human situations, so it must be linked to very strong human motives. What are they? Why should you want to be obedient? I suggest there are four good and one bad reasons.

The first reason is one which is difficult to explain if you are not familiar with thinking along these lines. It is the question of surrender. Professor Charlotte Bühler in Vienna has done a great deal of interesting experimental work on the relationship of the small child to material.

This work is in the course of publication in a book that will be entitled From Birth to Maturity to be published by Kegan Paul. Professor Bühler points out that up to the age of 5 or 6 a child takes the material and bends the material to its own fantasy. It wishes to make some kind of game; it wants to play houses, shops, or horses, and it takes whatever material is available and bends that into its own fantasy. So that the child is more or less indifferent whether the material used is suitable or not. At the next stage of growth the child is able to surrender its own wishes and desires to the nature of the material itself. That is to say, if there are bricks which are capable of building a certain house the child is able to give up his desire to play horses, give up his desire to have another kind of horse and to follow the lines of the nature of that piece of material. That is a very profound change in the relationship between the individual and the environment. This capacity to surrender the individual, to surrender the wish and the will of the child to the laws of the material that it is handling, is the beginning of what we might call maturity, because, after all, the great difference between the person who achieves something in life and the person who never achieves anything is this capacity to surrender to the laws of that which he is attempting to master. It is no use hitting a typewriter when it does not write straight. That is the sort of thing it is very difficult for a child to understand. A child plays with a typewriter and thinks it should write one way but it will not, and so the child wants to hit it in the way mother wants to hit the child and the child the baby. But it is not any use hitting a typewriter. The only way in which you can learn to manage a typewriter is to become the servant of the typewriter so that it may yield its secrets to you.

The first impulse in obedience is the desire in the human being to be intimately in relationship with something which is bigger than the self. It is a tremendously powerful motive. It is a motive which is perhaps at the moment most at the base of Nazi Germany, this desire that the individual shall be lost, in apposition to, in surrender to, in absorption in something which is not the self. That motive, that drive towards surrender, is one of the things you can always count upon if some of the points that I want to take up later are correct.

The second and equally strong and quite powerful motive in human nature is that in being obedient to someone else or something you are yourself delivered from conflict. You are delivered from conflict for a moment or for two days or six years or for your life, as the case may be. Human beings tend to find themselves very much distressed by the difficulty of making up their own minds; by the difficulty of knowing which part of themselves they really are; by the difficulty of knowing what they really want to be; by the difficulty of consistently wanting to do the same thing, and when they come across some person of some body that is capable of issuing clear and concise orders this capacity, this sudden feeling "Now I need not worry any more" is one of the most powerful incentives that there is, so powerful that I believe it to be a motive as strong in the production of war as the question of aggression. I happened to be at my most curious age during the last war and I had the opportunity of being in contact with a large number of both officers and men. I was at that date very interested in psychology and I was interested by the number of times men off their guard said "Oh well, you see, is not it a relief? I have not to worry about my clothes or get my wife's clothes, I have not to worry about anything. I have one simple duty. Everything else is going to be looked after. If I get killed the State will look after my wife. The State will look after my children. While I am away at the Front I cannot look after them at home. All my conflicts are taken away. Here is one strong, plain, simple duty that I can put the whole of myself into with the approval of the whole of myself." So tortured by neuroses of a certain kind is our modern world, so baffled, bewildered, defeated and chaotic that the promise that bolshevism,

communism or the group movement or Roman Catholicism, any clear concise system in which orders are given, holds out to young people of to-day is an almost irresistible appeal, and the appeal is not the appeal of the thing itself; it is the offering to the tormented individual of a plain, simple order. This demand for something to obey is one of the things that we do not like owning, particularly very independent people, but it is just as powerful in us as in anyone else.

The third motive that drives to obedience is quite a different one, it is the devotion to issues. You can get obedience from very fine people to commanders whom they know to be inferior, issuing idiotic orders which are obeyed because of the cause which the leader represents. Devotion to any great issue is, again, something which will impel people to be obedient to the terms of the organized officials of that order. They may not have this reverence, this desire, without conscious conflict. They may be well harmonized and well mobilized people and yet their desire to serve a given issue may be a very strong motive, impelling them into obedience.

Lastly there is the strong feeling of devotion to a given leader. That has nothing to do with issues. Devotion to a given leader is a curious thing. It is immoral, it is unintelligent, it is soothing, it has no consistency and it depends entirely upon certain qualities in certain given individuals. There is a very interesting study published by Montrose in which I think you will find that is very interestingly exemplified. The fact that it is possible to get a man who is a leader and people will follow him anywhere even though they feel him to be foolish, deluded and, in some cases, not altogether strong. It is a quality which is difficult to analyse and the suggestions I want to put to you are for criticism.

I think the quality that more than any other makes a leader, at least that makes people wish to follow a leader, is a kind of unexpectedness. I had the good fortune part of my war work to be one of a group in the employ of a supremely good guerrilla warfare leader and the thing that held us through any kind of stress and storm was that we never knew what he was going to do next. He was always on top of a situation, always full of resource, always ready to meet a situation with some unexpected turn. One had a feeling that when one was with him, whether the day went for or against us, it would be, at any rate, full of life. What people need so hungrily is the feeling of something moving, the feeling that they are going to be lifted again out of the rather ordinary run of their own thoughts into a life which they would never be able to enter by themselves. So that the basis of that kind of impulse to obedience is a hunger for variety. It is the same kind of thing as that which makes people take up foreign travel, light journalism and light anything which means movement, stir and life.

There is a fifth bad quality. These, in a sense, are all good qualities, but there is a bad quality which again tends to come out in relation to obedience not in corporate situations but in personal. Anyone who has ever managed a school, particularly of women and girls, will come across this kind of situation and usually it fills them with despair. There is a strange strain in human nature which bears the technical term of masochism, meaning the delight that certain natures take in being punished. To those who are not masochistic it seems a very odd thing to like, but as a very brilliant man, T. E. Lawrence, recently wrote, "Pleasure and pain is a matter of opinion", and there are a great many situations which to most people are humiliating but to certain people are actually productive of pleasure. One always knows those people who seem to like getting hit and trodden upon and who are perpetually putting themselves in the position of being humiliated by the person whom they particularly wish to give them

orders. There is an impulse to a rather slavish kind of obedience, particularly in young people which is difficult to handle because it comes from none of the rather sturdier qualities but from what Nietzsche calls the slave nature, love of being a slave, love of being the under-dog. I unhesitatingly condemn this thoroughly morbid manifestation of obedience; it should be discouraged in every possible way.

We come now to a very curious point. If you think over what I have said, of all the qualities of obedience none can apply to children. Children are ipso facto not mature. They are not in control of themselves. Small children are not subject to any of these motives except the one of personal loyalty. It is impossible for a child of 5 to have a feeling of surrender. He has hardly got it to material things; certainly not to people. So that you come to a funny paradox, a paradox that perplexed me to a very severe degree through a great deal of mental pain and discomfort for years before I came to what I think is, not the way round but the real meaning of the situation.

If what I have said is right, we should never exact obedience from children because they cannot give it. On the other hand, that is manifestly absurd: it is impossible to run any kind of household without obedience from children. Then are we all wrong? No, I do not think we are. Then, where are we?

The Adult's Point of View

First of all, to look at it from the parents' point of view, in order to have any peace at all in any household with a large number of children, or at any rate with more children than two, it is essential to have obedience. I feel perfectly clear that a certain minimum of obedience is an absolute basic structure in life both for children and for grown-ups, and for these reasons: it is necessary in any organization, in any home, to get on with life. There is a good deal to be done. It is the same question as that of personal economy. If you are going to spend time every day re-reasoning over some problem of whether the child is or is not to do certain things, the by the simple book-keeping effort, your effort and your knowledge is not going to be free for other things which are far more important. So that a certain minimum of accepted obedience on both sides – that is to say, exacted by the parent and accepted by the child – seems to me a basic skeleton scaffolding for any harmonious growth on either side.

If what I have just said about obedience as a quality is true, then it is a very valuable and very important quality for any adult person to possess for the sake of their own harmony; but what I have tried to bring out is that to train yourself in the capacity to obey, – whether you lose it or not, is an entirely different matter – in the capacity to accept and to carry out instructions, is to put yourself into a position of interior harmony, of interior peace and of interior comity of effort. You are, therefore, robbing your children if you are going to bring them up in circumstances in which they have not had the opportunity progressively to learn this quality of obedience.

The Child's Point of View

Let us turn the coin round and look at the matter from the point of view of the child. Why does a child fail to obey? is a problem I put myself in different ways certainly two or three times every day. Here is a certain incident happening in a certain group of children, and here is a child not falling in with the circumstances that it should have. Why did it not do so? Why has it failed at this moment to obey? the answers one gets are, I am afraid, rather startling

and humiliating to the adult but the answers, most of them, are one of two: first the adult's failure to give coherent orders. Very few adults realize how little the orders they give are understood by children. I do not mean to say that children do not know what the English words mean; they do, but the order has no sense. It does not belong, it does not grow out of anything or go to anything and, as I tried to show at the commencement of my lecture, the capacity to carry out an idiotic order like my piccadilly one is only achieved in real maturity. No child, who is functioning healthily and freely is able to obey an order which it does not understand. It has not any qualities ready to do it; it has not control or knowledge of itself; it has not enough psychic freedom, trust or experience. So that when a child fails to obey an order – I am speaking from technical and scientific experience of analysing something like 600 or 700 examples of this kind of thing – in every case there is an element in the child's mind that the order has been stupidly given.

Secondly, the order may be capricious or conflicting; the order, from the child's point of view, has appeared to conflict with another order given it by somebody of equal authority a little while ago, or the same authority yesterday, or a similar authority to-day. Again, another reason for conflict in the child's mind is that orders are so often given – and the child senses this perfectly clearly – to bring out the fact that the adult is the orderer and the child is the obeyer. Every child resents that, to the marrow of its bones. It is no use; we cannot remake human nature. Every now and again I have to say to a parent or a teacher: "I am very sorry but you will never get Jane to obey Miss Jones; it cannot be done." The head mistress usually asks why, and I say, "Because Miss Jones is a petty tyrant and the orders she gives are only to give herself the satisfaction of knowing she is grown-up and that Mary is a child and that it is Mary's job to obey." You cannot get a child healthily and fully to obey that kind of order, and I do not think there is any reason why it should.

It is essential, in order that a child may start on its long toilsome road uphill towards self-control, that the orders given by the grown-up should be clear, coherent and considerate. In that last word a great deal lies. We all know teachers and parents who never have any difficulty with the obedience of their children. We all know teachers, parents and nannies with whom the children go wrong almost before they have crossed the threshold. If you take those to pieces, which it is my job so often to do, in the most minute detail, you will find that in the person who has no difficulty there is an instinctive considerateness. Such a person thinks that the child is doing and perhaps waits a moment before giving an order. On the other hand, there are those like a certain doctor in a small hospital to which I went. That doctor was extraordinarily unpopular, and I could not understand why. He was always helpful and would go out of his way to explain something. But one day I happened to be in the matron's room waiting for something when one of the junior nurses came in with some collars he wanted ironed. It was a most unfortunate time to make that request. The dinners were just being served. On the other hand, that doctor did a good deal of night work. Moreover, he had to be obeyed. He wanted the collars ironed before something happened early in the afternoon. Matron said, "There, you see what it is: he has every right to have his collars ironed but by some ill-omened genius he always chooses the moment to ask for something to be done when it is most inconvenient for the staff." Therefore, he was unpopular and although he was competent everyone was hoping that he would eventually be removed.

We are apt to do the same with children: to give them orders when they are busy thinking of something else and we do not look at what we want done from their point of view: When

anybody says a child is not obeying, the general assumption is that he is being naughty. My assumption is, that whatever he is being, he is not being naughty because as an actual fact few children wish to be naughty. Most children have a great hunger to be good. If a child is not obeying it is necessary to take the situation as a whole, as a totality. What sort of child is it? What kind of satisfactions is it getting? Where is it in relation to authority? How does the whole thing work out? You will find that one standard quality comes out: A child who is deprived of affection, particularly at home, is a child who is truculent at school. I could cite many cases of that type. Every child has a natural birth-right of affection; not smarminess, not demonstration particularly, not any of the rather troublesome kind of affection, but genuine affection. After all, we have no right to put a child into the world if we cannot give it during its early life anything as fundamental as that affection. Practically every time a child has been referred to me from school for truculence, I have found the basis of the trouble is that at home the child is not getting its bare minimum of affection.

About a month ago I saw a most pathetic child who had become quite impossible at a school that was well run by good wise people. I agreed that the child was impossible. She could not be dealt with in any way at all. Eventually I got into touch with the home and found that while the family were proud of the little girl, to a certain extent, there were certain things about her home life, certain things she could do in the house that they were pleased to have her do, yet the mother herself was entirely without the quality of maternity. She herself was adolescent in character. She had never grown to the stage when she could be maternal. Therefore, the child had never been given that sureness of interest. The child went to the parents' room twice in the day and had a kind of duty conversation: "Well, my dear, what have you been doing?" and so on. If the child dashed into the room with some toy, she would only need a mere turn of the body, a raising of the eyes and "Oh, isn't that topping!" and the mother could go on with her job, provided her voice and her eyes had been genuine. She would have had that momentary spark of contact that the child needed in order to convince it that it was in the mother's life. If a child does not get that it pays back on every authority it comes across its revenge for not getting what it feels rightly is its birth-right.

Children can too easily obey. it is quite easy, in certain circumstances, to get the Samuel Butler kind of child: the child who will obey everybody in authority right through life. That child always, and absolutely certainly, develops into one of two types of individuals: she may, as one type, become an individual who can never stand on her own feet. I had occasion to telephone a woman friend of mine and ask if her if she could do something with me one evening. She said if I would hold the line she would go and see. When she came back to the telephone I said: "I did not know you had an engagement that evening." "Oh, no, I haven't; I just ran in to ask mother." She was 40 years of age and could not decide for herself. That is not exceptional. I know a large number of women who never take the smallest step anywhere without asking their lawyer, or the parson, or father's best friend, or their uncle, or their mother. They are not individuals at all, they are a composite of other peoples opinions. The other type becomes the rebel, who springs to attention, so to speak, if anything even touching an order is given him. He at once, as it were prickles all over, and comes out at you. You know those people and they, of course, are the backbone of every lost cause.

Let us now take children's difficulties so that we may have them in mind, at any rate, when we try to thrash out with any child this very thorny problem. First of all, a child is driven by impulse, and the impulse that drives the child is much stronger than that which drives the

adult and is much shorter-lived. Therefore an order given to a child may come at a moment at which the child has a strong driving impulse in another direction. That is something which never happens to adults. The adult's life goes so much more slowly. Except as regards the policeman in the street, we are always given a large leeway, but in spite of that we do not find things too easy to do. I wonder how many of us have all our letters answered at this moment; all our mending done and all the things dealt with that we should have done. Yet nobody is going to chide us for it and we have a lot of time. Nevertheless, we expect children who are driven by stronger impulses to be able to drop that impulse on the instant and turn round and do whatever they are ordered to do.

The child's second difficulty is that it is totally unable to see the whole of the situation. The child is in a position in which it can only see the order which you have just given it, and that order may seem to the child incomprehensibly stupid and pointless. The grown-up usually can see the reason of an order and is infuriated with the child. The adult sees the order as a spear-head, with a wedge behind it, the wedge being all the reasons that drive it. The child sees it as a pricking little point travelling along with nothing behind it. It has, from the child's point of view, just come into mummy's mind at that particular moment, irrespective of anything else, that she would like the door shut, or that the child should wash its hands, but the child argues: "Why should I shut that door. In five minutes' time or less I shall want to go out again". Why should I say 'Please'? A silly word, anyway, isn't it?" There was one delightful little girl who was bothered over the word 'Please', and when she went to stay with her aunt she thought she had discovered a beautiful solution. The first evening she was brought down to the drawing room she went first to her granny and then to her auntie and said to each: "Thank you, Please; Thank you, Please; Thank you, Please" many times over and added; "Will that do for three days?" From the child's point of view it is like commas. It really is like that.

The third of the child's difficulties is that it forgets. We expect a child to keep an order in its heads for ten or fifteen minutes. The small child cannot. So often when we think children infuriating, they are not; they have just forgotten. When that happens next time remember the number of times people say, "Do ring up Mayfair 2469, won't you?" and the reply comes, "Oh yes; Mayfair 4296." We adults cannot remember numbers but we perpetually ask the child to do things just as difficult.

As I have said, orders can be both bad and silly. We are apt to forget that in order for a child to do what it is told it must have a little power in hand. A child's difficulty is that it is so often tired. It has exhausted itself in doing its creative work, and is not at that particular moment free to put in the amount of self-discipline necessary to go and do something you want it to do. Again, we never do it ourselves. We say "Oh bother!" or "Yes, dear, I will go and fetch it in a few minutes – when I have finished my cigarette". How often does a grown-up, when asked to do something by another grown-up, get up promptly to do it? Watch in a club or family and see how often that happens. The only thing we really do at once is answer the telephone and, after all, that has rather an insistent quality.

So that with children our difficulties are (a) that we do not respect the very quality we are trying to inculcate. We look upon obedience not as a high and noble quality which takes a great number of years to acquire, but merely as a drop of oil in our personal machine. (b) That we have so little reverence for children that we try perpetually to ask them to do things we ourselves would never be able to carry out.

The Teacher's Point of View

Finally, from the teacher's point of view, the teacher so often misses such marvellous opportunities to help the children to get a grasp of the question of obedience as a whole. In one original school, probably a school which is under considerable difficulties one way and another, every time there is a certain amount of difficulty in the class, the schoolmaster says:

"You know that was a most interesting incident that happened the other day. After all, why should you have obeyed me?" And the children begin to talk out, rather as I have tried tonight, the relationship between human beings that renders obedience on one side necessary and desirable and orders on the other side necessary. I had the good fortune to meet one of the senior boys from that school when he was going on to another school, and I found that boy had a knowledge of government and an understanding of the problems connected with orders, with government, and with the interrelation of human beings that I very rarely see in grown-up people.

The whole problem of obedience in schools can be made not a matter of friction between elder and younger but one of the most valuable parts of the whole school teaching. There is a certain girls' school I know, run very largely on personal corporate government lines where, again, the children go out with a real understanding of democracy, with an understanding as to why obedience is necessary in a community; what its strengths are and what its weaknesses are. The teacher who has to administer laws which are not his or her own has perhaps, by that very limitation, a greater opportunity than other grown-ups to do something towards creating a social system in which the good types of command and obedience will be there and not the bad. It is, I believe, the peculiar genius of the British people to be able to create and to maintain the correct, the wholesome and the supremely worthwhile forms of command and obedience.