2
Obedience: Ancient and Modern

What is to be done on the one hand with rulers who will not give any reason for their orders, and on the other with people who cannot understand the reasons when they are given? The government of the world, political, industrial, and domestic, has to be carried on mostly by the giving and obeying of orders under just these conditions...Such obediences are as necessary to the continual operation of our social system as the revolution of the earth to the succession of night and day. But they are not so spontaneous as they seem: they have to be very carefully arranged and maintained...The more obedient a man is to accredited authority the more jealous he is of allowing any unauthorized person to order him about.

Bernard Shaw, Saint Joan

And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.’

Matthew, 12:25

[T]he kind of character produced in American democratic society can not be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority.

Stanley Milgram, Obedience to Authority

Knowing when to disobey legitimate authority is an acute problem for those who live in modernity’s wake. The political and social requirement
to obey government must be weighed against the knowledge that this fundamental requirement of civilized societies can lead, indeed has lead, to some of the worst crimes committed against human beings. While the chapters that follow will consider the theoretical resources available for disobeying authority and justifying disobedience, here we will examine the dilemma of obedience.

The reasons for disobeying government are as ancient as the reasons for civic obedience. This chapter explores the nature of civic behavior and misbehavior in the ancient and modern world in an attempt to provide competing narratives concerning the relation between subject and master, citizen and government. What emerges from the analysis provided here is the notion that, unsurprisingly, the nature of the requirements of civic obedience has changed. While earlier models required a self to examine what it was doing when political and divine commands came into conflict, the structure of modernity is such that the political, economic and social environment is structured towards the ‘hyperconformism’ of individuals (Hogan, 2001).

2.1 In the beginning...

The very first act of civilization began with an act of disobedience – the stealing of fire from the Gods. When Prometheus stole the forbidden object from heaven and brought it to earth, Zeus could not undo what had been done. A mortal action succeeded in disempowering divine rule. This might be regarded as the very first, at least in mythic form, act of disobedience to authority.

In the Hebrew Bible, a similar act of disobedience is repeated in the story of ‘The Fall’ when the acquisition of knowledge, something that also cannot be undone (though we can, of course, pretend not to know) resulted in the banishment of the first couple from their idyllic paradise. God had threatened Adam with death if he ate from the tree of knowledge. Yet, the serpent, a being half way between God and man, informed them that the threat was empty. After eating the forbidden fruit, it turned out that the serpent was right: they did not die. Instead, they became reflexive beings, and were able to discriminate between good and evil (Daube, 1972, p. 61).

Much of the world’s mythic literature tells stories of the perils of disobedience, the consequences of man overstepping the bounds and the nature of divine providence. The Story of Job is perhaps the archetypal story of obedience to authority, one that also provides suffering with meaning. As a result of a wager between God and Satan, Job loses his