

Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

The Spectator Online

Newspapers

3-13-2021

Somewhat Informed: "Please Continue" is a Chilling Reminder of the Limits of Human Empathy

Andru Zodrow
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online>

Recommended Citation

Zodrow, Andru, "Somewhat Informed: "Please Continue" is a Chilling Reminder of the Limits of Human Empathy" (2021). *The Spectator Online*. 256.

<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online/256>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Newspapers at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Spectator Online by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.



Somewhat Informed: “Please Continue” is a Chilling Reminder of the Limits of Human Empathy

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

Stanley Milgram was an assistant professor at Yale in the early 1960s interested in testing how compliant humans are when told to execute an action by a perceived authority. In the post-WWII world, the international community was struggling to understand how the horrors of the Holocaust could be organized in such an efficient and bureaucratic manner. Milgram’s experiment proved that the average person is willing to cause others immense pain when they are acting under the commands of an institutional structure. “Please Continue” by Frank Basloe recounts the story of the Milgram experiment with a powerful theatrical flair.



The show centers around James Sanders, a Yale student who presides over a new experiment proposed by Professor Milgram. The premise is simple: a volunteer will be brought into a room and told they are participating in an experiment which tests the impact of punishment upon memorization skills. They will be under the false impression that an individual is linked to an electric shock machine in another room, and everytime they answer a question incorrectly the subject will be responsible for shocking them at increasing voltage. Sanders is surprised by how willing the volunteers are to enact punishment upon others when told.

“Please Continue” derives its brilliance from creating thematic duality. Sanders is justifiably concerned by the human impulse to follow orders, even when doing so leads to acts of immense cruelty. He defends his work by telling himself that he is simply following Professor Milgram’s instructions. It is this devastatingly ironic tension that entralls the viewer.

Sanders is a sympathetic and intelligent protagonist from the audience’s perspective. The audience member is forced to consider whether they would really handle the situation any differently, given that Sanders himself cannot escape the moral grey zone.

In addition to the main plot line in which Sanders grapples with his own responsibility, a secondary plot entails the immense guilt felt by another Yale student, Francis Dunleavy, after a horrific abuse ritual is conducted by him and fellow members of his university. Dunleavy is haunted by the chants of his friends to continue the abuse and is repulsed by the efforts of his co-conspirators to blame the abuse on pressure from the group. While the plot involving Dunleavy never overlaps with Sanders, they find themselves in the same situation: considering their own personal moral failings when the misdeeds have become codified and normalized.

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, "Please Continue" is an important play for those concerned with the problems surrounding ethical conduct in the 21st century. During an era in which a great deal of normalized injustice occurs due to the distribution of these wrongs over entire legal and institutional systems, it is more important than ever for Americans to consider how they can counteract systemic injustices, rather than perpetuate suffering. Milgram's experiments highlighted the human inclination to attribute wrongdoing to systems or authorities without a recognition of their own culpability. This is a problem which has only become more pronounced as the global economic system and the internet have made ethical conduct more difficult to judge.

"Please Continue" concludes with the overlapping chants of young students calling on their peers to continue the abuse of an innocent person and the screams necessary to conduct the Milgram experiment. It is a powerful ending, as it reminds audiences of the diverse circumstances in everyday life in which we are pressured to act unjustly by those who we consider important or powerful.

In an interview with the Ensemble Studio Theatre, Basloe mentions that the setting of the play in the early 1960s is important not only because it is the period in which the Milgram experiment took place, but because it was a time in which the international community continued to grapple with the genocidal campaign wrought by the Nazis during WWII. The primary defense from war criminals and the organizers of the Holocaust was the phrase, "I was just following orders." Milgram's research proved that it isn't just monsters that appeal to authority figures when attempting to justify the wrongs they have enacted in the world—in fact, most people do when placed in stressful conditions.

Basloe's play poses the challenge to viewers to break the cycles of injustice which are caused by flimsy appeals to hierarchical power structures. Whether this challenge is met will depend on the capacity of citizens to recognize when their actions are part of a broader unjust mechanism and whether they will find the strength of will and character to say no when asked to please continue.