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***Saving a victim from himself: the rhetoric of the learner's presence and
absence in the Milgram experiments***

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ABSTRACT

This paper contests what has remained a core assumption in social psychological and general understandings of the Milgram experiments. Analysing the learner/victim's rhetoric in experimental sessions across five conditions (N= 170), it demonstrates that what participants were exposed to was not the black-and-white scenario of being pushed towards continuation by the experimental authority and pulled towards discontinuation by the learner/victim. Instead, the traditionally posited explicit collision of "forces" or "identities" was at all points of the experiments undermined by an implicit collusion between them: rendering the learner/victim a divided and contradictory subject, and the experimental process a constantly shifting and paradoxical experiential-moral field. As a result, the paper concludes that evaluating the participants' conduct requires an understanding of the experiments where morality and non-destructive agency were not simple givens to be applied to a transparent case, but had to be re-created *anew* – in the face not just of their explicit denial by the experimenter but also of their implicit denial by the victim.

KEYWORDS: Milgram experiments, rhetoric, social identity, experience, morality, agency

1. Introduction

Stanley Milgram's "Obedience to authority" experiments are routinely referred to as being of "glaring celebrity status" (Miller, 2009, p. 20) and "part of our society's intellectual legacy" (Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 55). Indeed, from sources as diverse as academic textbooks and popular cultural products, generations are now familiar with the image of the infamous mock learning experiment: unwitting experimental participants facing the dilemma of administering possibly lethal electric shocks to a "learner" in the adjacent room; and despite ever more vigorous protests, 65% of them proceeding to do so on the simple say-so of an experimenter figure present.

What continues to be less widely known though is that the experimental condition briefly described was only one of many Milgram ran. The simple finding that obedience to an authority figure is more widespread than would be expected was always intended to be Milgram's most important message. But it was never meant to be the only message. Milgram also wanted to uncover the characteristics of the two sets of factors which his situational explanation posited to underlie behavioural (dis)obedience: one "binding" the participants into the experiment, and the other constituting "strain" on their participation and prompting them to quit (Milgram, 1963, 1965). To this end, a total of eighteen conditions of the experiments were devised, varying for example the type of protest coming from the victim, the distance between the "teacher" and the "learner", the roles deployed in the scenario, or introducing group processes (for overviews, see Milgram, 1974; Miller, 1986).¹

Examining five of these conditions, the present paper will look at two broad categories of the experiments. First, it will examine Conditions 2, 8 and 23, where interaction between the teacher/participant and the learner was "interrupted" by the wall of the room.² Condition 2 is the basic set-up already summarised above: the learner/victim is situated in an adjacent room, with communication happening through an intercom and protests being heard through the wall. Conditions

¹ For a further, unpublished, condition, see Rochat and Modigliani (1997) and Perry (2012).

² Some of the experimental conditions were renumbered for the publication of Milgram (1974). See Table 1 below for details.

8 and 23 are two of the closest variations of the basic set-up. Condition 8 features the learner referring to a heart complaint he has and establishing in the pre-experimental routine that he may quit the experiment if he chooses to. Condition 23 too involves reference to the learner's heart condition, but the main difference here is that the experiment takes place not at Yale University but a nondescript office building.

Second, Conditions 3 and 4 will be analysed. In these so-called "Proximity conditions" Milgram brought the learner/victim closer to the action. In Condition 3 experimenter, the teacher and the learner were positioned in the same room. In Condition 4, sitting now adjacent to him, the teacher even had to put/force the reluctant learner's hand on the electric plate in order to administer any electric shock beyond 150 volts.

Why are these variants of the "default" experimental set-up important? Milgram was interested in the physical closeness between the teacher and the learner as he wanted to know whether distance has any significant impact on rates of obedience. Indeed, as can be seen from Table 1 below, it did. Yet, symptomatic of the experiments in general as well as of Milgram's approach, the eye-catching findings were not matched by a convincing account for them. Milgram never quite managed to explain how exactly this physical proximity may have impacted on the teachers' conduct.

From the present perspective, this may partly be because Milgram categorically overlooked the interactions in the lab. Words there, for him, were important only inasmuch as they were uttered by the teachers/participants and could be taken to simply convey the individual cognitive processes linking binding situational factors to behavioural obedience. In contrast, for many social psychologists today words in the lab invoke the experimental triad's co-construction of meaning. And the co-construction of meaning (or, in short, *rhetoric*) is important in that it constitutes the very nature of the social psychological processes that were happening in Milgram's lab. Accordingly, the significance of the different conditions in which the experiments were run is that they involve different rhetorical possibilities within the learner-teacher-experimenter triad.

The immediate purpose of the present paper is thus to understand some aspects of the rhetoric of Milgram's lab. However, it is also hoped that the analysis to be presented will not just make a valuable contribution to "specialist" discursive-rhetorical inquiries. Co-construction of meaning, after all, is of obvious importance to experiential or social identity perspectives on the experiments too – not to mention the general issue of the participants' moral conduct that has kept exercising the public imagination for over fifty years now.

2. Departures and continuity: the "second wave" of criticism

After a relative lull from the mid-1980s, the past fifteen years have seen the lively awakening of novel critical perspectives on Milgram's experiments (cf., Gibson, 2019a, pp. 41-71; Reicher, Haslam & Miller, 2014, pp. 394-397). Indeed, genuinely transformative frameworks have been emerging as contemporary experiential, discursive-rhetorical and social identity frameworks are changing the ways we look at the experiments and human beings' capacity to commit evil. As such, it is now accepted that they constitute a true "second wave" of critical engagements (Author, a; Gibson, 2019a; Haslam & Reicher, 2017).

"Second wave" studies inevitably declare discontinuity from Milgram's perspective: nowhere more so than in inquiries concerned retrospectively with the *participants' perspective* (Brannigan et al, 2015). In what may be called the "experiential" framework, archival and present-day interview data are used to reconstruct the participants' experiences in Milgram's lab. A prevalent objective of such studies is to demonstrate a gap between what Milgram reported to have done in his experiments and what actually had happened there: the inadequate nature of Milgram's debriefing procedures, his dismissive attitude to his participants' suffering, or his misleadingly selective public reporting of the experiments (Nicholson, 2011, 2015; Perry, 2012, 2013; cf., Baumrind, 1964, 2015). Additionally, alongside accounts of doubts participants harboured or confusion they had regarding the reality of the proceedings, renewed light is cast in experiential studies on the manipulative/deceptive means

whereby Milgram brought about his “findings” (Perry, 2012; cf., Hollander & Turowetz, 2017; Russell, 2011, 2018).

Thus, similar to ethical and methodological reactions that traditionally dominated the reaction to Milgram’s work (Miller, 1986), this line of radical interrogation renders the significance of the experiments null and void on Milgram’s own terms (Brannigan et al, 2015). They are not any more indictments on Milgram’s participants or humanity. It is instead the experiments’ moral legitimacy and Milgram’s moral conduct that is in focus (Nicholson, 2011, 2015).

Other “second wave” critics stand for *methodological or epistemological* discontinuity. They focus on features of the interactions between the experimenter and the participant, duly reported by Milgram yet traditionally taken to simply represent intra-subjective thought processes pertaining to participants’ (dis)obedience (e.g., Milgram, 1974, pp. 73-76). In contrast, contemporary researchers study in their own rights the dynamics of argumentation between the experimenter and the teacher, or repertoires of discursive/argumentative characteristics offered by (dis)obedient teachers (Gibson, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Hollander, 2015; Hollander & Maynard, 2016; Hollander & Turowetz, 2017).

Doing so, this discursive-rhetorical framework offers yet another image of the “obedience experiments” that is radically different from the received one. As the focus is on interaction and argumentation, what is unfolding is something that is not quite an experiment and not quite about obedience(-traditionally-understood) (Gibson, 2013a). Instead, as the participants are “engaging the experimenter in rational debate, the experiments begin to look [...] more like a contest of persuasion and a test of rhetorical skill” (Gibson, 2014, pp. 434-43; cf., Gibson, 2013a, p. 298). Acts of “obedience” thus appear not as submissions to orders but defeats in broadly understood argumentative battles (Gibson, 2019a, 2019b; Hollander & Maynard, 2016).

The starting point of the third and arguably most comprehensive framework of the “second wave” is a similar understanding of experimental participants actively contributing to the proceedings. In

successive social identity theory-inspired publications Alex Haslam and Steve Reicher successfully integrate the first strand's concern with morality and the second strand's focus on the interactional symmetry between the teacher and the experimenter. The radical point of discontinuity is *theoretical* here. In Milgram's "agentic state" theory participants' behaviour represented blind/passive obedience to orders from an authority figure and was caused by a cognitive shift whereby participants stopped seeing themselves as responsible for their own action (Milgram, 1974, p. 133). In Haslam and Reicher's "engaged followership" model, in contrast, the act of pushing levers derives from participants' active choice of identification with the experimenter and his scientific enterprise (e.g., Haslam & Reicher, 2012, 2017, 2018; Haslam et al, 2011, 2014, 2015; Reicher & Haslam, 2011; Reicher et al, 2011, 2012, 2014; cf., Russell, 2011, 2014, 2018).

No wonder that in Haslam and Reicher's framework the image of the experiments, as well as the implicit verdict on humanity, is even more damning than in Milgram's. Participants here are no powerless "cogs" in the face of an authority, or grey bureaucrats "blithely" accepting their tasks (Milgram, 1965, p. 61). They are instead "prepared to harm others because they identify with their leaders' cause and believe their actions to be virtuous" (Haslam & Reicher, 2017, p. 59). They make choices and are, to use Haslam and Reicher's chilling quote, "*happy to have been of service*" (Haslam et al, 2015).

We thus have three radical departures from Milgram and three radically different pictures of the "experiments": one grounded in the participants' experience and focusing on the experiment's moral legitimacy; one grounded in the participants' discourse and focusing on arguments and persuasion; and one grounded in the participants' agency and focusing on their identifications. However, the main argument of this paper is that these radical departures need to be even further extended. At present, Milgram's arguably most fundamental assumption remains uncontested by the "second wave" too, and as such continues to structure our understanding of the experiments.

Namely, Milgram's original assumption that participants faced "the competing demands of two persons: the experimenter and the victim" (1963, p. 378; cf., 1965, p. 67) continues to be posited. For instance, Haslam and Reicher repeatedly state that "[Milgram's] participants are torn between different relationships, different obligations, different moralities" (Reicher & Haslam, 2011, p. 165; cf., Haslam & Reicher, 2018, p. 3; Reicher et al, 2012, pp. 317-318). Where their theoretical departure originates is precisely that they take "engaged followership" theory to do "justice to the tension between voices" (Reicher et al, 2012, p. 319), whereas "agentic state" theory "reduces a multi-vocal context to a univocal one" (Haslam & Reicher, 2018, p. 2). Such clear-cut conflict, resulting from "competing demands" or "different moralities", remains equally integral to the experiential framework, albeit with the image of an all-powerful or even sadistic experimenter (Nicholson, 2011, p. 754). And it is either explicitly posited (Hollander, 2015, p. 426) or implicitly assumed by proponents of the discursive-rhetorical paradigm too (Gibson, 2013a, 2019a).

This notion of "competing demands" or "different moralities" suggests a fundamental and fundamentally uncomplicated moral choice. As such, it represents not a simple assumption but *the* basic organising framework continuing to underpin the experiments' meaning and significance (Zimbardo, 1974). It is therefore crucial to realise that this fundamental assumption of a black-and-white moral field leaves something highly important uncontested. Whilst volumes have been written about different aspects of the figure of the experimenter and the concept of authority it actualised, there is scarcely any corresponding engagement with how the figure of the learner/victim represented the pole of morality.

As of now, in convergence again between past and present critical perspectives, the presence of the victim/learner is either simply taken for granted or, in a small minority of publications, dismissed as invalid (Mixon, 1972, 1989). Recent work coming from the discursive-rhetorical perspective is a case in point. Citing Author (a), Stephen Gibson notes that the learner's position in the room next door and his consequent unavailability for interaction deeply complicates his very role (Gibson, 2019a, pp. 127, 147). Such acknowledgment is exceptional as far as any "wave" of the Milgram reception is concerned.

However, Gibson then proceeds by contrasting this state of affairs with Condition 4 (2019a, pp. 123-147). And highlighting the heightened persistence and interactional flexibility of learner's protests, alongside both the experimenter's and the teachers' engagements with these protests, he then duly concludes that "quite simply [...] when the learner was in the same room [...] he was available for consultation and confirmation, and was able to participate in argument" (2019a, p. 146). Thus, just as the learner's problematic engagement is noted, his position as "the learner's potential ally" is immediately re-established (*Idem*).

The present paper will come to different conclusions not just from what has always been a simple assumption in the Milgram literature but also from Gibson's fine-grained empirical analysis. It will demonstrate that, *throughout all conditions*, the victim/learner's interactional engagement as the teacher's potential ally was co-existent with his simultaneous disengagement from, and even on occasion hostile engagement with, the teacher/participant. And consequently, in contrast to the received picture where it is the learner's unequivocal clash with the experimenter that constitutes the moral field, the present paper will reveal a paradoxical mixture of collision and collusion: implicit alliance as much as explicit opposition. The experimental participants' moral responsibility will therefore have to be (re)considered by taking this persistent paradoxical ambiguity of the experimental context into account.

3. Method: Data collection and analysis

3.1. Data

The sample consists of tape recordings of 170 experimental sessions conducted by Stanley Milgram for his "Obedience to authority" studies. The sessions exhaust what is available of Conditions 2, 3, 4, 8 and 23 in the Yale University Manuscripts and Archives Service.³

³ Other conditions were not purchased due to their unavailability (i.e., Condition 5, "New baseline") and budgetary restrictions (i.e., Condition 20, "Women only").

----- TABLE 1 HERE -----

3.2. Analytic perspective

Working with dynamics of presence (or engagement) and absence (or disengagement) in qualitative psychological material remains a dilemmatic exercise. Despite qualitative analysis having made impressive forays in terms of legitimacy and reach (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017), dominant qualitative perspectives remain more comfortable with what can directly be seen and what is straightforwardly present in the data. The possibility of interpreting absences continues to be perceived as posing methodological (Potter, 2012; Schegloff, 1998; 1999) or even moral dilemmas (Smith et al, 2009).

In contrast, Michael Billig's original vision of rhetorical psychology may be understood as an argument for the comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of presence and absence. Billig (1996) critiqued prevailing models of social psychological thinking by invoking two tenets. First, he argued that a proper account of human conduct should focus on the ever-present possibility of argument alongside any consensus. Second, he demonstrated the importance of the dynamic interplay between what is explicitly uttered and what is left (or pushed to be) unsaid. In line with these, although his inquiries tend to be rendered continuous with the project of discursive psychology (Augoustinos & Tileaga, 2012; Gibson, 2019a; Potter, 2010), Billig himself continued to develop a broader approach to the dynamics of textual presence and absence than mainstream accounts of discursive psychology arguably allow for (Edwards, 2007, 2012; Potter 2012; cf., Billig, 1999b). Intriguingly, this eventually prompted him to also engage with arguably the most famous explorer of motivated absence, Sigmund Freud (Billig, 1999a), and even to coin the term "psychoanalytic discursive psychology" (Billig, 2006).

Billig's rhetorical psychology may therefore be extended not towards present discursive psychology but towards psychosocial studies. Although psychoanalytic ideas are of obvious relevance here (Frosh et al, 2003; Hollway & Jefferson, 2005, 2017), what is more crucial is a non-dualistic approach to

human experience: an approach where not only subjective and objective, but conscious presence and non-conscious absence are seen not in opposition but forming a complex whole (Stenner, 2017; cf., Author b, c; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Taylor, 2015; Wetherell, 2012).

3.3. Analytic process

For the purposes of this analysis, transcriptions of the experimental tapes were examined at points where the learner's conduct becomes relevant for the participants.⁴ This was partly done for the theoretical reasons outlined above. However, such conceptual interest also served a useful methodological purpose, as it created a manageable corpus out of the original 150 hours of qualitative material. Learner's conduct often does not become interactionally consequential for participants (cf., Gibson, 2019a, pp. 169-198, 2019b), and when it does it tends to occur at a very limited number of points around his protests and involves relatively short stretches of interaction.

These sequences were then repeatedly read and reread, with the original tapes consulted to (dis)confirm analytic points. The process of analysis was led by the following question: how is learner's presence woven into or dismissed from discussions concerning the (dis)continuation of the experiment? Paying close attention to the language that was used in these sequences, a number of discursive strategies were subsequently identified and their characteristics further examined in depth. Importantly, as was mentioned above and will shortly be demonstrated, it was such close attention that revealed the necessity of understanding learner's rhetoric categorically differently from nearly the whole of existing Milgram scholarship: not simply a trigger for further discussions but a full-blown third participant in the ensuing discussions and (dis)continuations.

4. Analysis

⁴ See Appendix for transcription conventions.

4.1. Behind the brick-wall: conditions 2, 8 and 23

The first section of the analysis will focus on the learner's presence and absence in conditions that are variants of the default set-up that ended up characterising the experiments for generations. Doing so, it will demonstrate how focus on the learner's relevant conduct (or the lack of it) problematises the received image of the experiment where learner ostensibly represents or even embodies the pole of suffering, victimhood and ultimately the demands of just morality.

To begin with, however, we will encounter what may in fact seems to conform this received image of the experiment.

Extract 1.

Participant 0211, 180-volts

1		((Button sound))
2	T	Wrong, 180 volts.
3		((Buzz tone)).
4		((Buzz tone ends)).
5	L	URGH!!
6	T	Sharp needle.
7	L	I CAN'T STAND THE PAIN, LET ME OUT OF HERE!!
8	T	D'you let him out?
9	E	Please continue.
10	T	Slow, walk, dance, truck, music.

In Extract 1, there is indeed a vivid expression of physical pain on Learner's part, followed by an unequivocal demand (ll. 5, 7). Issuing an ostensible question, Teacher clearly orients to the emerging moral situation as problematic (l. 8). Yet, as the authority pole of the clash of "two competing demands" subsequently asserts itself (l. 9), he obediently re-assumes his role. Procedurally, Teacher

sustains the experiment. Morally, he sustains the puzzled outrage of generations of Milgram readers. How can a simple “Please continue” override with such ease the combined power of visceral suffering and morality?

Yet, this apparently plausible interpretation ignores the potential ambiguity in Learner’s utterance in line 7. The intended recipient of Learner’s directive is not specified. We do not hear who exactly is supposed to “let him out”.

Extract 2.

Participant 0802, 150-volts

1	L	UGH!! [EXPERIMENTER! THAT’S ALL.]
2	T	[Correct one was white horse.]
3	L	GET ME OUT OF HERE! I TOLD YOU I HAD HEART TROUBLE. MY HEART IS
4		STARTING TO BOTHER ME NOW! [GET ME OUT OF HERE, PLEASE!]
5	T	[He wants to get out.]
6	L	MY HEART’S STARTING TO BOTHER ME. I REFUSE TO GO ON! LET ME OUT!!
7	E	Please go on, teacher. As I mentioned at the very beginning of the experiment
8		even though the shocks may be painful there’s no permanent tissue damage.
9	T	He said his heart’s bothering him. If he’s having a heart attack I’m not gonna...
10		continue that! I’m sorry!
11	E	Well as I...
12	T	Well, I’m telling you that if he’s having any trouble with his heart I’m not going
13		to keep that up.

Faithful to the published standardised procedures in all sessions of the sample (Milgram, 1974. pp. 56-57), at the crucial 150-volt point in the experiment where Learner’s alternative perspective is first

unequivocally articulated, he is equally unequivocal regarding the agency he is appealing to (l. 1). It is the “EXPERIMENTER” whose intervention he seeks and who is thereby conferred the status of authority by him. This interpellation is nowhere revoked or modified during the entire course of the experiment. In fact, whenever the learner in the course of Conditions 2, 8 and 23 specifies whom he is addressing, he mentions “Experimenter” and construes therefore the teacher irrelevant. Counter-intuitive as it may sound, when we analytically or morally examine the teachers’ conduct, our inquiry is not grounded in any explicit feature of the learner’s utterances.

Indeed, a substantial number of teachers comply with such delineation of the moral field and do not arrogate the position of authority to themselves. They either seamlessly continue or simply make sure that the experimenter, as the relevant recipient of the address, heard the learner’s intervention. Others, though, either “upgrade” their resistance (Hollander, 2015; Modigliani & Rochat, 1995) or even make a sustained argument for stopping the experiment (Gibson, 2013a, 2013b, 2019a). Similar to Extract 2, the following is a common example for the latter.

Extract 3.

Participant 23nn, 180-volts

1	L	UGH! I CAN'T STAND THE PAIN! LET ME OUT OF HERE!!
2	T	I'm not gonna do this anymore on that guy.
3		(2)
4	E	Please continue, teacher. Go on.
→ 5	T	No, I refuse! Not when he's yelling like that.
6	E	The experiment requires that you go on, teacher.
7	T	I'm sorry. That man's got a bad heart. I'm not gonna be responsible for him to die of
→ 8		complications. Do you hear him yelling? I can!
9	E	As I said before, although the shocks may be painful they're not dangerous.
10	T	No, I'm sorry.
11	E	It's absolutely essential that you continue.
→ 12	T	But I can't. Not that I can't, no. The man is a grown man. He wouldn't be yelling if it
13		wasn't hurting badly.

Both participants (i.e., 0802 and 23nn) justify their arguments for stopping by repeatedly referring to Learner's state (Hollander & Maynard, 2016). There is reference to what Learner is feeling, saying or experiencing at lines 5, 10 and 12 in Extract 2, and at lines 5, 8, 12-13 in Extract 3. The agitation, frequency and repetitiveness of these references convey immediacy, enhanced by the fact that the verb tense often used is *present continuous*: he is hollering. In fact, the two teachers may be understood not simply to refer to Learner, but through these non-verbal means to re-present or embody a normative victim position (Byford, 2018). Experimenter, for his part, embodies the position of authority with curt, declarative turns. But what is the *actual victim*, on whose behalf and prompting the teachers are confronting the authority, doing?

Learner's position is essential in these extracts. Without his outburst we may not have a moral dilemma and the ensuing discussion. Yet, his act of making himself present is immediately followed by that of making himself absent. And this absence is dilemmatic not just because it may theoretically complicate what would be a straightforward normative victim position, but because it is explicitly taken up and then invoked by the teacher. Yet, when Teacher in Extract 3 says, outraged, "Do you hear him yelling?" (l. 8) – he is never yelling.

There is therefore a tension between the learner's presence and absence; or, more precisely, between the learner's explicitly demanding that his moral case be taken up and his implicitly denying the teachers' authority to do so. In numerically extremely rare yet theoretically highly significant instances, some teachers orient to this tension, and seek to diffuse it by directly including the learner in the ongoing deliberation (Hollander, 2015).

Extract 4.

Participant 0210, 150-volts

1	L	URGH!
2	T	The right answer, the right answer is...
3	L	EXPERIMENTER!
4	T	Hold on?
5	L	GET ME OUT OF HERE. I'M NOT DOING THE EXPERIMENT ANY MORE. I REFUSE
6		TO GO ON. LET ME OUT.
7	T	He asks if he could go.
8	E	Please continue.
[...]	[...]	[...]
25	T	
26		

27		Nah, I'm not willing to. I mean, I'm not doing... Take four of these that he's having
28		too much pain, I don't want to do it to him. He's feeling worse and worse instead
29	E	of easier. It'll be getting stronger, like that.
30		(1)
→ 31	T	Well as I said before, while the shocks may be painful, there's no permanent
→ 32		tissue damage. So please continue.
→ 33		No, I don't think I will. ((Movement of chords; speaks into microphone)) YOU OK
34	E	THERE?
35	T	(12)
36		It's absolutely essential that you go on mister [blank], please continue.
		I'm sorry, but I mean... I can't make the man, if he doesn't want to go on. I can't
		go against his wishes. He doesn't want to go on.

Beyond the invocations of Learner's present state familiar from Extracts 2 and 3, in lines 31-32 Teacher makes an attempt, in a manner of speaking, to break down the wall. What follows though is silence, with the rhetorical effect of Milgram's standardised procedures being that it implicitly rebuts Teacher's argument for discontinuation and bolsters Experimenter's stand for continuation. More specifically, Learner's silence does not so much present a counter-argument to Teacher's query but constitutes Teacher's very position as non-authoritative and non-relevant. It therefore does not so much dispute as, affectively speaking, humiliate.

To sum up at this point, when we broaden our account of the interactions from the teacher-experimenter dyad to a teacher-experimenter-learner triad, a different moral framework of the experiments starts to emerge. The possible alliance between teacher and learner appears to look undermined by the learner's implicit refusal to grant authority to teacher in bringing about the termination of the experiment. As a consequence, what was assumed to be "two insistent voices" (Reicher et al, 2012, p. 319) or "competing demands" (Milgram, 1963, p. 378) of experimenter and

learner looks more like an unexpected amalgam of explicit collision and implicit collusion, working in tandem to deny the teacher's moral agency.

4.2. Behind a metaphorical wall: Conditions 3 and 4

There is an obvious feature of the scene which this analysis has ignored so far. The supposedly three-way interaction is interrupted by a physical wall and we do not know what can be heard at its other side. The fact, however, that Milgram also conducted the experiment in two conditions where no physical wall separated the participants allows us to examine how the features analysed in the previous section manifest without the "confound" of the wall.

As noted in the Introduction, Conditions 3 and 4 have always been known to show relatively low obedience rates (Milgram, 1965a, 1974; see Table 1). Looking at the interactional features of the sessions brings further and hitherto unknown discrepancies to our attention.

Extract 5.

Participant 04bb, 150-volts

- 1 L UGH!! EXPERIMENTER, I DON'T WANT TO GO ON WITH THIS EXPERIMENT
- 2 ANYMORE!
- 3 T White [horse.]
- 4 L [GET ME] OUT OF HERE! I REFUSE TO GO ON!
- 5 E Please learner relax and try and [concentrate on what the teacher is saying.]
- 6 L [I DON'T WANT TO GO WITH THIS ANYMORE!!]
- 7 E Teacher, please go on.
- 8 L ((Sigh))
- 9 T Sad. Sad face, music, clown, girl.

10 ((Button sound)).

11 T That's correct. Short sentence, movie, skirt, time.

12 ((Button sound)).

13 T That's wrong. 165.

14 ((Empty clicking noise))

15 ((Repeated empty clicking noise))

16 E Learner, depress the-

17 L No, I'm not touching that plate any more! I don't want any more of these shocks!

18 E Learner, in order to receive the punishment you must depress the plate [down.]

19 L [I'M NOT] TOUCHING THE PLATE! I don't want these! I-I-I'm not touchin'... I don't

20 want these shocks any more!!

21 E Teacher, when the answer is wrong just press his hand down onto the plate and

22 administer the punishment please.

23 L I don't want these any more!

24 E Teacher, go on. You are on short please and you are about to administer the

25 punishment for short. Please continue.

Here we do have the frequent and repeated protests that are absent from previous extracts. Indeed, albeit clearly contradicting the published standardisation procedures, it is only in these Conditions that the learner's behaviour appears to match the spirit of Milgram's own description of "vehement protests throughout" (Milgram, 1965a, p. 62; cf., Author a). As noted by Gibson's recent study of Condition 4, the learner does seem very much to be present here throughout (Gibson, 2019a, pp. 131-135).

Yet something else too happens in the extract above. With Learner's frequent and repeated protests, it is now Teacher who is absent from the deliberative process. What is more, this very Teacher, who

in Extract 5 makes no contribution to the moral deliberation and “obediently” proceeds to the next questions, will in half a minute and whilst still technically at 150-volts discontinue the experiment.

Indeed, something extraordinary seems to have occurred in Condition 4 in general. In line with other conditions, disobedience predominantly came after the 150-volt shock was administered and met with the learner’s first explicit demand to be released (Packer, 2008). Fully 12 of the participants from Condition 4 examined here stopped at 150-volts: this is a substantially higher percentage than in any of the other conditions under examination (see Table 2). However, whilst *all* of the 27 participants who stopped at 150-volts in other conditions stopped *immediately* after Learner’s protest; *seven* of Condition 4’s 12 participants who technically stopped at 150-volts did so *only after proceeding to the next question*. How is it that 25.0% of Condition 4’s participants turned from exceptional non-resistance to equally exceptional disobedience, when the percentage of such extreme turn-around in other conditions is 0.0%?

----- TABLE 2 HERE -----

There is a seemingly obvious explanation. The moral dilemma specific to Condition 4 is that the teacher is not just instructed to override the learner’s expressed intention but to actually force the learner’s hand on the plate. Yet, whilst the learner cries out at 150-volts, it is not until the 165-volt shock is attempted that it becomes known/consequential that he also refuses to touch the plate. It is only then that the experimenter firmly directs the teacher to act (i.e., Extract 5, ll. 21-22). Thus, the moral dilemma that distinguishes Condition 4 from all other conditions does not come when the 150-volt shock is administered but when the 165-volt shock is about to be administered.

However, this explanation is based on a perspective that is known only to the experimenter and the confederate “learner”; only *they* know that the protests at 150-volts, in Condition 4, are only preludes to the real dilemma. How is this knowledge communicated to the teacher?

Reconsidering what seemed to be “vehement protests throughout” Extract 5 (Milgram, 1965, p. 62), we see that when Experimenter in line 7 turns to Teacher and implies the discussion be concluded, intense protests are in fact replaced by grudging acceptance (in the form of Learner’s sigh in line 8) and then clearly stop, if just for a while, indicating acquiescence in this conclusion. In other words, parallel to their fierce explicit confrontation presenting an open dilemma, an implicit agreement is also co-constructed by Experimenter and Learner. It is this consensus, resting on the authority of *both* the experimenter’s arguments and the learner’s eventual withdrawal from argumentation, that teachers of Condition 4 tend at this point not to contest when they simply move to the next question (cf., Table 2).

Not surprisingly, when the teachers do enter the fray, there are relatively more frequent and more direct attempts to (re-)engage the learner in both Condition 3 and 4 than in the conditions examined in the previous section. Equally unsurprisingly, although going once again against the letter of Milgram’s standardised procedures, these attempts are actually taken up in some form by the learner. These features not only seem to set Condition 3 and 4 once again markedly apart from the rest of the sample (cf., Gibson, 2019a, pp. 123-147); they also appear intuitively to account for the relatively high rates of disobedience in these Conditions.

However, a closer examination of the interactions exposes characteristics that yet again seem to problematise any such conclusion. In what follows, these interactions will be analysed from the two perspectives familiar from the previous section: the teacher referring to the learner’s state and thus implicitly inviting him in the deliberative process (Extract 6; cf., Extracts 2, 3), and the teacher explicitly addressing the learner (Extract 7; cf., Extract 4).

Extract 6.

0305, 300-volts

1 L URGH!!!

	2	T	Fat, neck.
	3	L	Now look! I WON'T, I SAID I DIDN'T WANT TO GO ON! SO FROM HERE ON IN I
	4		DONT ANSWER ANYTHING! I TOLD YOU BEFORE THAT, THA- THAT WAS IT!
	5	E	Please relax Mr Wallace.
	6	L	I'M NOT ANSWERING ANY MORE! I'M OUT OF THE, I'M OUT OF THIS
	7		EXPERIMENT EN[TIRELY!]
	8	E	[Please] try and relax and concentrate on what the teacher is sa[ying.]
	9	L	[NO,] I'M OUT, I'M OUT, I WON'T, I WON'T ANSWER, I WONT [ANSWER!]
	10	E	[If you] concentrate on his words, you won't have to think about
	11		it half as much.
	12	L	I won't answer, I told you before.
	13	E	Teacher, please continue.
	14	L	I will not answer.
	15		(2)
→	16	T	He's feeling the shock. (2) I don't feel it.
	17	E	As I said before, all the shocks are going to be quite painful, there's no
	18		((inaudible)), so please continue.
→	19	L	[I'm not gonna] go on, I won't answer. I won't answer.
	20	E	The experiment requires you to go on.
	21	L	I'm not part of this experiment, I told you that! I'm no longer a part of it, I wanted
	22		out way back and I will not answer any further.
	23		(2)
	24	E	Please continue teacher.

25	T	Well, I assume that these things are getting more intense, the odds are he's
26		gonna miss about six or seven more, so we get up to where severe danger shock
27		and I thought a 45 was equivalent to about 255 or something, or no,
28		about 150.
29	E	You said 250 or so I think.
30	T	What, 250, yeah so...
31	E	It's absolutely essential that you continue.
32	L	I'M NOT GOING TO [ANSWER NO MORE!]
→ 33	T	[Well, if] he says okay, I'll continue.
→ 34	L	I'm not gonna answer. I'm not gonna answer.
35	E	The experiment requires that you go on, gentlemen, so please continue.
36	L	I'm not part of the experiment.

At the beginning of Extract 6, there is no specification of the addressee of protests and, interestingly, when in line 13 Experimenter himself occasions Teacher as relevant to the proceedings, Learner continues to remain ambiguous both in his utterance and subsequent silence in lines 14-15. There is no clear sign that he too would grant the relevance to Teacher that Experimenter does.

In what follows, then, at lines 16 and 33 Teacher references Learner; first implicitly as relevant (l. 16) and then explicitly as even the *conditio sine qua non* (l. 33) of continuation. How does Learner respond?

On the one hand, in a clear contrast to earlier extracts as well as the beginning of this extract, uttering subsequent protestations (ll. 19, 34), Learner does seem to take up Teacher's "prods" and therefore to acknowledge Teacher's presence (cf., Gibson, 2019a, pp. 135-145). However, contradicting what may be interpreted as implicit temporal alignment with Teacher's "prods", his protests both in lines 19 and 34 actually orient to the content of *Experimenter's* previous turns. That is, the utterance in line

19 does not take up Teacher's notion of "feelings" (l. 16) but simply continues a line of argumentation already expressed in response to Experimenter in lines 6, 9 and 12. Moreover, Learner's utterance in line 21 *explicitly* takes up to the content of Experimenter's previous turn (i.e., "The experiment requires that you etc." versus "I am not part of the experiment."). And, similarly, at line 34, not only does Learner not take up Teacher's offer on its own terms (e.g., by saying OK), he once again repeats something which has just been said explicitly to Experimenter (l. 32)

Such ambiguous rhetoric of presence and absence, of acknowledgment and denial of the teacher's relevant authority, continues when Teacher explicitly addresses Learner.

Extract 7.

Participant 0306, 150-volts

- 1 L I'M NOT PART OF THIS EXPERIMENT!
- 2 E Please continue, teacher.
- 3 T ((Clears throat)). There's only a few left, if you want to try?
- 4 L I'M NOT GOING, I'M NOT GOING ON! (3). I'm not- you can't keep me here! Keep me
- 5 strapped in YOU CAN'T DO IT, I'M OUT! I'M NOT ANY PART OF THIS EXPERIMENT!
- 6 E Teacher, please continue.
- 7 L No.
- 8 T ((Loud sigh)). I'm in the middle here, right. ((Clears throat)). I'd rather not under [his
- 9 protest.]
- 10 L [YOU CAN] HAVE THE CHEQUE BACK IF YOU WANT! I DON'T, NO LONGER AM I PART
- 11 OF THIS EXPERIMENT!
- 12 E The experiment requires you to go on, please continue teacher.
- 13 L I'M NOT PART OF IT! (2) I'M OUT!
- 14 E Mr Wallace, please concentrate on what the teacher is saying.

15	L	How can you concentrate! I want out. I won't continue.
16	E	Please go on, teacher.
→ 17		(6)
→ 18	T	((Sigh)). (3) ((Sigh)). It's up to you Mr Wa[llace.]
19	L	[I'M NOT] GOING ON!

On the one hand, Learner appears to react to Teacher's questions in lines 3 and 19 in that he, similar to Extract 6, aligns the timing of his continued protests with Teacher's prompts. At the same time, the way he fashions his answers yet again contradicts this apparent alignment. The phrase "want to try" (l. 3) offered by Teacher is ignored in a way reminiscent to Extract 6, as response is given in terms already offered to Experimenter previously (l. 1). Moreover, whilst Learner's first "you" in lines 4-5 may appear ambiguous and therefore possibly inclusive of Teacher, it is subsequently specified in the utterance "YOU CAN HAVE THE CHEQUE BACK" to exclusively address Experimenter (ll. 10-11). That is to say, as far as Learner is concerned, Experimenter yet again continues to remain the only relevant presence in the room.

The analysis will now conclude with two instances where in a spontaneous exchange Learner seems to explicitly and unambiguously acknowledge Teacher's relevant presence. The instances are extreme rarities not just with regard to Conditions 2, 8 and 23 where no spontaneous exchange occurred between teachers and the learner, but also concerning the relatively un-standardised conditions under present discussion.

Extract 8.

Participant x0304, 195-volts

1	L	URGH!
2	T	Slow dance.
3		

4 L Let me out, let me out please. Just let me out! I don't want the money, I just wanna
5 get out!

6 E The experiment requires that you go on, learner. Now, just try and relax and it won't
7 bother you half as much. Please [continue, teacher.]

8 L [Please] take the money and let me out of here.

9 E Please continue.

10 T I can't keep doing it, if [he doesn't want to.]

11 L [Look I don'-] I don't wanna do it anymore, that's all! I don't want the money!

12 E Gentlemen, the experiment requires that you go on. Please continue.

13 L I don't wanna do it anymore.

14 T I- I can't do this to him if he won't go along with it.

15 E It is absolutely essential to the experiment that you continue.

→ 16 T I'm willing to go along with it, but, uh-

17 L - I'm not.

18 E Whether the learner likes it or not, he has no choice, he must continue until he has
19 learnt all the word pairs correctly. Please continue.

(3)

Extract 9.

Participant 0307, 150-volts

1 L I won't continue!

2 (2)

3 E Please continue.

4 (1)

5	T	I'm sorry sir I can't (2) I can't hurt him that way, not if he doesn't want to.
6	E	It's absolutely essential that you continue sir. (2) Please go on.
7		(3)
8	L	Not me.
9		(3)
10	T	I'm afraid I can't either, sir.
11	E	You have no other choice sir you must continue.
12	T	No, I- I can't do this to the man, he's feeling those- that pain.
13		(2)
14	E	As I said before, although these shocks may be painful, there's no permanent tissue
15		damage. Please continue, sir.
16	T	Well, only if he'll tell me okay.
→ 17	L	No, I'm not gonna tell you.
18	T	Then I can't do this, sir.
19	L	Well, go on! ⁵
20		(3)

As familiar by now, in Extract 8 Learner's first four utterances are either ambiguous or, by occasioning the role of money, explicitly address Experimenter. In line 16, in apparent contrast, Learner seems to directly engage with Teacher's argument. However, doing so he *does not align himself with but actually contradicts* Teacher. His interruption at line 16 positions Teacher not as someone who is making an argument for discontinuation (i.e., "but he is not, so I can't..." presumably to follow "I would be willing to do it...") but as someone who wishes to continue the experiment and who therefore is to be confronted.

⁵ The transcript creates unnecessary ambiguity here. What learner means here is "Well, go on then, *do* quit the experiment!"

Extract 9 then carries this paradox of alliance and confrontation to the extreme. On the one hand, Learner's utterance in line 17 affords Teacher the position of disobedience in line 18. On the other hand, both in line 17 and then in line 19 Learner also sounds confrontative towards Teacher. His "I am not going to tell you" (l. 17) construes Teacher as someone who would actually want to hear him (L) saying that he wants to continue; and his exhortation in line 19 construes Teacher as someone who, despite explicitly saying that he "can't do it" (l. 18), would actually be undecided. Thus, when there is acknowledgment coming from Learner regarding Teacher's role and authority to bring the experiment to a close, and when, as a consequence, there is a degree of cooperation between them, there emerges a clear confrontative edge in Learner's engagement. Just as he is acknowledged as an agent of potential liberation, Teacher becomes positioned as yet another hostile subject.

In fact, the hostile and confrontative edge that these rare spontaneous exchanges showcased appears to be *quasi-standardised* across Condition 4. Namely, varying in timing and frequency yet invariably present in each session beyond 150-volts, there is a point where the learner unambiguously addresses the teacher. This, of course, appears to constitute the most potent of "deviant cases" concerning the argument of this paper. In fact, it is a powerful example *supporting* the present argument. For learner's quasi-standardised utterance does not come during the teachers' attempts to terminate the session. Rather, it comes precisely when the teachers are already defeated and now turn to put/force learner's hand on the plate so that the next shock can be administered. By directly engaging the teacher not when he (T) is working towards the discontinuation of the experiment but when he procedurally sustains it, the learner implicitly positions him once again as a hostile subject. This is, of course, further conveyed by the predictably indignant and confrontational tone of learner's standard utterance at these points: "What are you putting my hand down for?" (e.g., 0409, 0415, 0417, etc) or "Now get your hands off me!" (e.g., 04ad, 0414, etc).

To sum up the analysis of Conditions 3 and 4, we could in the beginning note seemingly not only frequent, intense and continuous protests, but also ones that specifically address the teacher and acknowledge his attempt to discontinue the experiment on the learner's behalf (cf., Gibson, 2019a, pp. 123-147). At the same time, parallel to learner's complete silence in the deliberative process giving way to frequent utterances (and thus his complete absence becoming relative absence), what we could also see was how simple indifference to the teacher's presence was actually shifting towards downright hostility to it. Just as the learner began to acknowledge the teacher's relevant presence – so was that presence immediately construed not as a possible liberating ally of learner but a destructive ally of experimenter. Paradoxically, this continued to further undermine attempts triggered and supported by the learner's own protests to terminate the experiment, and, as such, once again aligned the learner's conduct with the experimenter's objective.

5. Discussion

This paper argued that despite radical departures from Milgram's own interpretation, a core feature of his legacy remained intact and continues to constitute the bedrock of social psychological understandings of the experiments. This received assumption posits an unwitting participant having to make a clear-cut choice between an immoral stance pushed by an experimental authority and a moral stance actualised by a learner/victim.

The paper also sought to argue that the reconsideration of this fundamental assumption is overdue. It demonstrated by the rhetorical analysis of learner's presence in and absence from the experimental interaction that whilst he explicitly appeals to a potential ally to bring the end of his suffering about, when teacher volunteers as such an ally he (L) either ignores him (T) or actually confronts him as another hostile presence. The possibility of a helpful ally, as far as the learner is concerned, remains therefore absent throughout: the only authority acknowledged by him is of a destructive nature and needs thus to be confronted. Procedurally, this means that far from simply "pulling" teachers out of

the experiment against the “push” of the experimental authority, the learner also undermined attempts to bring the termination of the procedures about and thus implicitly colluded with the very experimental objective he explicitly protested against.

In short, it is not that Milgram’s lasting assumption that participants had to rescue a victim against an oppressor is wrong. It is that this assumption overlooks that participants also had to rescue a victim *from himself*: ambivalent about siding with liberator or oppressor and, ultimately, wanting to be rescued or not.

Taking these two aspects of the learner’s conduct together has obvious significance not just for a specialist discursive-rhetorical perspective but also for social identity and experiential angles on the experiments too. To start with the “engaged followership” framework, the tension between learner’s alliance and confrontation with the teacher, and collision and collusion with the experimenter, entails that we may not find a distinct and coherent “identity”/“voice” representing morality in the experiments. What participants are supposed to identify with is instead a position that itself is self-contradictory: aiming for self-harm as much as self-liberation. As such, it may not allow for straightforward identification, support or understanding.

Second, to turn now to the experiential perspective, it may now be appreciated that the experience participants had to make sense of was less transparent and more complex than present studies so far conveyed. It is not just that the experimenter figure may have been rude to them, or manipulated, bullied, even tortured them. It was that the very victim with whom most of the participants at some point seem to have had empathy, himself humiliated them at the exact points when they tried to act on this empathy.

Third, regarding moral responsibility. Confronted with the paradoxical and occasionally hostile rhetoric of a divided subject, the participants’ moral task was not the application of a clear pre-existing framework to an equally clear case. Indeed, both the moral law and moral agency in the experiments were ultimately denied from all present angles (explicitly by the experimenter and implicitly by the

learner). And this did not just mean that the task that participants faced was to re-create or re-find moral conduct anew (cf., Arendt, 2003; Eco, 1988; Greco & Stenner, 2017). They had to re-create it whilst their efforts to do so were constantly suffocated, confronted, humiliated.

And yet, to conclude finally on another paradoxical note, *they all managed to do it*. That is, the heroic nature of the moral task participants faced in the experiments was actually demonstrated in this paper by citing extracts from sessions where *all teachers* (bar Extract 1's) eventually disobeyed at the very voltage we have encountered them. How is it that at the very points where we can identify the real and poignant difficulties the teachers faced, they are actually moments away from freedom? How is it that when they seemingly clash with the experimenter, they have already won against the combined forces of the sadistic oppressor and the divided victim? It would appear that the crucial point that marks the start of disobedience comes not when we spot it in teachers' successfully arguing towards discontinuation, but *before* these clear signs come about. The following task of the rhetorical perspective showcased in this paper is therefore to examine how/why not participants' arguments could or could not emerge from participants' initial silence. Undoubtedly, any such inquiry would also have to revisit the conventional understanding of the other cornerstone of the experiments: authority.⁶

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Author a

⁶ The obvious overlap has to be noted between the present paper's understanding of rhetorical psychology and the "extended rhetorical perspective" with which Stephen Gibson has (for the moment) concluded his decade-long empirical engagement with the Milgram experiments (Gibson, 2019a, pp. 169-198, pp. 202-204, 2019b).

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Author c

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APPENDIX:

Transcription conventions

In the excerpts from these transcripts presented below, speakers are identified as E (Experimenter), T (Teacher) and L (Learner). Other transcription conventions are as follows:

(2) Numbers in parentheses indicate a timed silence, with the number indicating the amount in seconds.

URGH! Capitals indicate utterances that are noticeably louder than the surrounding talk.
Exclamation marks indicate increased urgency in the delivery of the utterance.

I don't, I A comma indicates a pause of less than a second.

I- A dash indicates a sharp cut-off of the preceding utterance.

((Sigh)) Double parentheses highlight non-verbal sounds.

[Experimenter] Square brackets indicate overlapping talk.

volts. A full-stop (period) indicates a 'stopping' intonation, rather than the end of a grammatical sentence per se.

- Why? A question mark indicates a questioning intonation, rather than a grammatical question as such.
- ... Three dots indicate ellipsis: the speaker stops talking where we would expect them to continue

TABLES

Table 1

Constitution and characteristics of the data sample

	Description of condition	No of participants in sample (and as reported by Milgram [1974])	Rate of obedience in sample (and as reported by Milgram [1974, pp. 35, 60])
Condition 2: "Voice feedback"	Learner situated in different room	40 (40)	62.5 (62.5)
Condition 3: "Proximity"	Learner situated in same room	41 (40)	42.5 ³ (40.0)
Condition 4: "Touch-Proximity"	Learner situated in same room, next to Teacher; Teacher has to force Learner's hand on electric plate following 150 Volts	30 (40)	34.5 ⁴ (30.0)
Condition 8 ¹ : "The victim's limited contract"	A variation of Condition 2: pre-experiment routine explicitly establishes Learner's right of withdrawal	34 (40)	41.2 (40.0)
Condition 23 ² : "Bridgeport"	Identical to Condition 2 but taking place at an out of town office building instead of Yale University	36 (40)	50.0 (47.5)

Notes

¹ This was reported in Milgram (1974, pp. 63-66) as Experiment 9.

² Experiment 10 in Milgram (1974, pp. 66-70.)

³ Out of 40 participants, as 0305 is interrupted by Milgram coming in

⁴ Out of 29 as 0410's tape is interrupted

Table 2

Teachers' disobedience at 150-volts; Milgram's criterion versus alternative criterion

	Number of participants in sample	Overall rate of disobedience (per total participants)	Number of participants in the experiment at 150-volts	Disobedience at 150-volts 1: Not administering the 165-volt punishment (per total participants at 150-volt)	Disobedient at 150-volts 2: Not asking the next question after the 150-volt protest (per total participants at 150-volts)	Ratio of Disobedience 2: Disobedience 1
Condition 2	40	15 (37.5%)	39	5 (12.8%)	5 (12.8%)	1
Condition 3	40	23 (57.5%)	39	10 (25.6%)	10 (25.6%)	1
Condition 4	29	19 (65.5%)	28	12 (42.9%)	5 (17.8%)	0.42
Condition 8	34	20 (61.8%)	30	6 (20.0%)	6 (20.0%)	1
Condition 23	36	18 (50.0%)	34	6 (17.6%)	6 (17.6%)	1