

Experiment 1919

by Richard Tornello © 2009

Two figures stand at a console in a dimly-lit room, their eyes fixed on a glowing array of flatscreen restraints made to hold a human subject in place. Some show graphs and charts that display data in real time -- voltages, heartbeat, respiration, temperature, electroencephalographic tracings. Their clothing conceals everything except their eyes, and even these are half-hidden by protective goggles.

They have worked together for years, but neither knows the other's name. Call them A and B...

A: "Did you see that spike? Wow, that had to hurt."

B: "No kidding. Who's next? Get the clean up crew in there so we can plug the next one in and keep going. We have a bunch more to move. We'll look at the data later. You have the video running to record the reactions?"

A: "Yeah but that was a real spike there. I haven't seen one like that in a while."

B: "I guess we hit a nerve." He (or she? A has never quite decided) laughs. By noon that day.

B: "OK, how many have we been through?"

A: "A dozen. You want to make it a baker's dozen, then go to lunch?"

B: "You are a sick one... Sure, why not." Into a microphone mounted on the console, he(?) says, "One more, please. Then we'll take a break." In the sound-proof and shock-proof booth the cleanup begins. The body is removed, sliding bonelessly into an easy-seal bag with convenient carrying handles. The ceiling and wall spigots spray the disinfectant and water. The spray is strong enough to peel the skin off a living animal. The room is coated with a non-stick application that allows for quick cleanup and turn around time. It was invented by the company that designed the flushing system for ball turret gunners killed in aerial combat during the early planetary battles.

That clean up application was a god send for this experimental exercise. It would normally take hours to clean up after each test. With this system, it took maybe fifteen minutes, including drying time.

A: "Let's go over today's results. Twenty subjects terminated as per State orders." He (or she? -- B isn't sure, either) thinks, Luckily for our purposes, nobody has any say in how the condemned are terminated once the paperwork is sealed. The families have no say at this point. These people belong to The System now, as they should. They violated the edicts of the State -- now they pay the price, and serve a useful purpose at last.

A (dictating into a personal voice recorder): "In order to further the understanding of the human mind so that we as scientists may contribute to the welfare of our State and The System, we have

begun a new set of experiments. No other tests like these have ever been conducted. But the technology now exists, and thank The System, we have over two million subjects to ensure the accuracy and statistical validity of our results.

"Our goal is to record the functioning of the brain, catalog the unspoken thoughts and detail the level of that thought throughout the entire process. Eventually, we will be able to recognize patterns that apply across multiple subjects under the same stimuli -- perhaps even to the point of truly 'reading minds'. "We will be using a variety of methods that are tried and true. One goal is to make the termination process more humane. The System is not an abomination. We do have a higher goal in mind here."

B: "What does the brain/mind really say in these conditions, what does it actually feel, what does it emit as far as electrical and chemical reactions to the stimuli given? How long does the mind continue to function in a meaningful way? These questions must be answered. And we are now able to do it. Thank The System."

Six weeks later

Reports of significant progress have brought a great honor to the laboratory: a visit from a high-ranking Officer of the State. A and B have heard that the Official may report directly to those at the very apex of The System. The Official wears clothing similar to that worn by A and B, but the fabric is obviously of much finer quality. His face is entirely visible, as is appropriate for someone of superior genetic stock.

B: "We now have the ability to synthesize actual voice simulation from brain waves. This gives us an actual representation of the body's thoughts while the designated activity is being carried out. We are the first. This will be a breakthrough in neuroscience and psychology, not to mention the criminal justice system."

A: "We ran a few this morning. The first ever. It was fascinating. Here's a sample, thank The System." (Speaking to a Technician:) "Skip the preliminary and go direct to the event, please."
The Technician: "Yes sir."

A: "The recording is clear, but the synthesized voice is uninflected. Emotional content is probably clear from the context, of course."

B: "Did the brain recognize its own death? We're about to discover this for the first time."
The Technician: "From the first series. Termination by puncturing or laceration of the torso and limbs, leading to rapid exsanguination. The subject was sedated, but not fully anesthetized."
Synthesized voice (diminishing in volume and with increasing intervals between words):
"SHOCK!"

SHOCK! PAIN! Pain! Pain ... pain ..."

The Technician: "The subject has no coherent thoughts, only a sharp but rapidly abating pain response as blood flow to the brain declines."

B: "Apparently sedation has no internal effect. Next please." The Technician: "The second series involved termination by electrocution. Conductors were attached at the usual points on the head, wrists, and ankles."

Synthesized voice: "Pain! Pain, fire, burning -- oh my god it..."

The Official: "Enough!"

A: "Sir, all the others like that were pretty much the same, although that particular example is unusually coherent and seems to include a possible religious reference. In general, however, the only thoughts -- if they qualify as thoughts -- are expressions of overwhelming pain and anguish and..." The Official: "I said enough! You will terminate this study. You will not ever speak about it. Do you understand?"

A: "Yes sir. I understand that you may have found our results to be somewhat disturbing. But please remember, we were following the expressed orders of the Council."

The Official: "You are to dismantle this facility. All data and recordings are to be placed under seal, to be accessible only with authorization by a majority of the Council. I will be back in a week to check." The Official strides out of the room, accompanied by his entourage of data recorders and bodyguards. Only A, B, and the Technician remain in the room.

B: "What's with him? He could use an enema or something. The System ordered these experiments. He should know that. We can't just stop because he says so -- not when we are learning so much!"

A: "I know, I know. We'll try hanging and see if that is any different. I'll take care of him. I have a direct line to the Core." (To the Technician:) "Prepare subject number 1920."

THE END