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No moral system can rest solely on authority. It can never be sufficient justification for performing any action that someone commands it. (A J Ayer, 1910-1989) Discuss.

It is true that “no moral system can rest solely on authority”. Any moral system that claims to be based on unquestioning obedience to the commands of an authority has in fact altogether disposed of any kind of system of morality. One must consider the formation of one's morality, and whether it is even possible to completely avoid the influence of authority. While absolute obedience to an authority is harmful to the self and to society, both can benefit from a wiser, more experienced authority on a certain subject.

A system of morality consists of the principles that govern one's actions. In its most fundamental sense, morality embodies one's sense of right and wrong. One could argue that one's system of morality is based upon one's innate ability to reason. Descartes, for instance, claimed not only that man has this innate sense of right and wrong, but also that "the power of judging rightly and of distinguishing the true from the false... is naturally equal in all men". If the reason, perhaps the 'conscience', of an individual is the sole basis of their moral system, one could argue that there is no place for the external influence of authority - or indeed for any external influence. Yet one cannot deny the role of experience in the formation of a moral system. While an individual might claim independence of thought, it is clear that their parents, for instance, have played a large part in moulding their perception of the world around them. It is impossible to avoid the influence of one's environment on one's moral system. If one is to believe that everyone is born with a sense of right and wrong, there must be a justification for their varying systems of morality. While humans have the faculty of reason, which allows them to form systems of morality, the conclusions which they reach are influenced by their sensory experience of the world. John Locke, in his "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" writes that there are "two... fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring" - that is, "our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves". External influence, including the influence of authority, is unavoidable.

However, resting one's moral system solely on authority restricts one's morality to that one external influence, and places this authority above one's own reason. We substitute an independent system of thought with that of another's, thereby eliminating an individual moral system altogether. Blind obedience reduces humans to mere machines, with the sole purpose of carrying out commands. Samuel P. Ginder once said that "If moral behaviour were simply following rules, we could program a computer to be moral." Morality must be more than submitting one's will to another's because they have instructed it. Those who claim that blind obedience is a legitimate line of reasoning neglect the fact that it is not a line of one's own reasoning at all, but the unquestioning adoption of another's. While blind obedience is not a moral system, it is possible for the moral system of an authority, acted upon by another, to produce behaviour that benefits society, which can lead observers to consider the obeyer as moral. Perhaps this is the origin of the myth that there is an inherent virtue in following orders. However, the behaviour in question is not moral. If an individual chooses to blindly submit their will to the moral system of an authority, they allow another to control actions for which they still have a moral responsibility. The final defence of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi leader who played a key part in the systematic murder of around six million Jews, was that he “was just following orders”. Even if Eichmann's actions were merely the carrying out of commands from his superiors, this did not completely absolve him from moral responsibility. Indeed, one could argue that a conscious decision to blindly submit one's will to that of one's superiors is amoral in and of itself, in that it seeks to evade moral responsibility. Stanley Milgram, an American social psychologist and

author of “Behavioural study of Obedience”, said, “The disappearance of a sense of responsibility is the most far-reaching consequence of submission to authority”.

The wilful ignorance of one's own conscience for blind obedience to an authority has been the root of evil throughout history. All dictatorships depend on this eradication of independent thought. Blind obedience to an authority not only damages the freedom and morality of the individual, but endangers the progression of society. On a practical level, it is unwise for every member of a society to blindly carry out the commands of one authority. Any errors made by that authority are magnified on a huge scale. Mao Zedong, Communist dictator of China in the years 1949-1976, clearly exemplifies the danger of unchecked authority. Mao's plans to bring about a “Great Leap Forward” were overly idealistic, designed to illustrate the superiority of his belief in mass mobilisation, and ignored simple economic truths. In his role as unchallenged dictator of China, he was subject to little criticism, and any opposition was quashed. His underlings' sole aim was to blindly carry out his orders, rejecting their own independent reasoning. As a result, the errors in Mao's programme were amplified to an enormous extent. The estimated death toll of the Great Famine that followed is 30 million. Society should welcome different schools of thought, as this variation has a balancing effect, and tends to moderate changes in commonly accepted morality.

While one should seek a system of morality based upon independent thought, one should also welcome the inevitable *influence* of authority. It is important to form our own ideas, and to govern ourselves, using the faculty of reason with which we are born. However, we can learn much from the ideas that have already been formed by others, including those in authority. It would be foolish, perhaps impossible, to commit only to those ideas of which we are the author. C. S. Lewis once said that “Believing things on authority only means believing them because you've been told them by someone you think trustworthy. Ninety-nine per cent of the things you believe are believed on authority. I believe there is such a place as New York. I haven't seen it myself. I couldn't prove by abstract reasoning that there must be such a place. I believe it because reliable people have told me so”. It is with our independent thought that we can consider the ideas of others, and choose to adopt or dismiss them. One must accept that the ideas of someone who is an authority on a certain subject have more bearing than the ideas of someone who isn't. While it is healthy, for instance, to question the advice of a doctor, one seeks their advice in the knowledge that they have studied medicine, and will therefore have a greater understanding of the workings of the human body than one who hasn't. In the same sense, it is reasonable to hold the advice of a moral leader or philosopher who has devoted much of their life to the formation of a coherent moral system in greater esteem than one who hasn't. Lactantius held that the authority of philosophers “is of greater weight, and their judgement more to be relied on, because they are believed to have paid attention... to the investigation of the truth”. We use our reason and experience to form our own judgement on the advice, perhaps instruction, of an authority. The danger lies in failing to question this advice, and in binding oneself to their commands.

A moral system that rests solely on obedience to authority is not a moral system at all. Unquestioning obedience is an attempt to bypass one's own morality. An individual who claims that they are justified in performing an action simply because "someone commands it" seeks to evade moral responsibility, and thereby disposes of a moral system altogether. Society benefits from the balancing effect of independent thought, and varying systems of morality. However, while a moral system cannot rest *solely* on authority, one must consider whether authority can serve any function in the search for morality. Although an authority's command provides no justification for an action, the teaching role of a recognised expert in a given field is useful in the formation of an individual's moral system. Allowing authority to be exercised *over* an individual's moral system is fraught, but an individual's consideration of the teachings of one who is an authority *on* an issue can benefit their

own moral reasoning. Authority can therefore play a part in a system of morality, but by no means should it be the foundation of it.

Bibliography

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