

CCCA ETHICS LENS

HEALING THE HEART OF MEDICINE: TRUSTING OUR MORAL COMPASS

Article #3: FOLLOWING YOUR MORAL COMPASS VERSUS FOLLOWING ORDERS



When a woman puts on her uniform to begin a shift as a police officer, she represents the police force for which she works. But she also embodies the very institution of law enforcement as established by the legal and constitutional rules of the land. She is obligated to enforce those laws and to follow them herself.

Once she has donned that uniform, complete with the weapons she may need to protect her safety and those of the citizens she serves, does she cease to be the mother of her two young children she leaves at home? Or is she still both? Perhaps it depends on the circumstances? Is she allowed to behave like a mother and protect her children while she is still on duty? Or when forced to choose, is she required to forgo her status as a mother and maintain her role to protect the public first? Do we expect her to protect the children of others before protecting her own? Is that realistic? Would parents with children of their own answer differently than those without children? How would our hypothetical answers compare to our actual behaviours in real life?

What if she were a physician? Once clad in her white coat, is she obligated to follow the edicts of her licensing body or hospital board unquestioningly? Suppose a patient demands that she prescribe a medication or perform a procedure with which she is uncomfortable, but that these authorities deem is a required element of the privileges she has been granted? What then?

In essence we are asking, how do we balance our individual autonomy with the roles we accept to perform in society? Do we sacrifice our uniqueness and submit only to the rules of that organization when we become part of that organization? Or are we allowed, or even obligated, as sentient beings to always consider our moral compass first before we simply 'follow orders'?

We may object to individuals wandering outside of the societally determined boundaries that define the responsibilities they agree to undertake for the good of the collective. However, the alternative, only ever 'following orders', has frequently been shown historically to be disastrous. Nazi Germany immediately comes to mind.

So how do we solve this moral conundrum? Is there only one answer? Or, as with so many ethical problems, do the solutions depend on the distinct context of each situation? If so, how do we decide what are the most important details to consider, and what principles to use, for each circumstance?

Suppose the police officer is told to deal with peaceful protesters in a way that collides with her ethical sense that they have something important to say and are doing so well within the boundaries of the law? Or the physician obstetrician who feels morally uncomfortable recommending an experimental injection involving gene therapy to her pregnant patients who are unlikely to benefit directly from the inoculation, because she is told to do so by the people who control her license to practise?

These reflections are challenging, and we may fail to find a moral position that fully satisfies in every case. We may be left with a nagging concern that our perspective, and therefore our conclusion, contains an important bias of which we are unaware. Or perhaps we may be left with a sense that if the details were even a little different, we might come to a very different conclusion, and that can be unsettling. We call that 'moral residue'.

Often without realizing it, we have been dealing with such difficult scenarios during the pandemic. Must a police officer enforce laws strictly without applying the discretion that a moral compass can sometimes provide? Must a health care worker always 'fall in line' with what their employers or licensing bodies dictate, or are they allowed to engage their own moral compass without fear of losing their job?

These are not simply theoretical musings, these are very real and very important questions that those who safeguard our most valued institutions, including police and health care workers, have had to contemplate during the pandemic. Perhaps they should not be expected to do so on their own, without the rest of us who profit from their dedication weighing in and supporting them in such sobering reflections.

It might be wise for all of us to appreciate the gravity of the following question: do we expect our family and friends to simply 'follow orders' or do we want them to use their moral compass when acting for our benefit? The answers are not easily found, but they define the kind of society in which we want to live, so we all have a duty to help search for the best ones.

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