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Robin Hood Had it Easy – The Real World is Not So Straightforward

By Stephen M. Kuebler and Jonathan Beaver
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(Photo by pixabay)

We love the story of Robin Hood, who heroically broke the law to help the poor. This trope makes sense because the story sets up very black-and-white conditions of right versus wrong.

In real life, people justify breaking rules because they say their action or outcome is not immoral, or that it achieves a greater good. There are countless examples where rules or

laws seem to forbid doing the “right” thing, and where breaking them can actually seem the best thing to do – maybe even the moral thing to do.

But real life is never so clear-cut as the Robin Hood tale. There is an ethical dilemma that comes with breaking rules, even when it appears justifiable. Breaking rules is morally ambiguous, even when the end seems to justify the means.

Imagine you are stopped at a red light at an open intersection and there are no cars in sight. Should you go through the light? Breaking the rule might seem OK because the action harms no one, so it’s not unethical, you may think. That reasoning prioritizes consequences over obligations of duty. The strict utilitarian might agree, but even the utilitarian would worry about your ability to know and control all relevant variables. Could you see a speeding vehicle in your blind spot? What about the oncoming bicyclist turning in front of you? No cases are Robin Hood simple.

Running the light might seem more justified for parents-to-be who are in labor and rushing to the hospital. Yet without some compelling reason to break the law – like the mother’s immediate risk of death from complications – breaking that traffic law is not well justified.

So what about more compelling situations, where breaking a rule may actually lead to a greater good, which makes it seem morally justified? We could play this game a long time. We wager you can imagine a scenario so fanciful, so unlikely, as to provide strong enough justification for breaking the law. The thing to notice is that these scenarios vary based on individual values and concerns. We worry about different things to different extents because of different value priorities.

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Rules exist, we hope, to protect and promote our individual well-being as members of complex and diverse communities. Rules help us arbitrate fairly among competing value priorities. Laws codify societal rules that we are expected to follow in letter and in spirit.

So when, if ever, is it right to break these rules? We routinely encounter instances where individuals, groups, corporations and governments flout a rule or law, and excuse the action by arguing it was necessary to achieve a greater good.

Imagine, for example, a county government needs to repair an unsafe and unhealthy building. It has certain earmarked funds left over in its fiscal year, but county laws prevent spending those funds on building repair. The money can’t be spent by other means, and the building desperately needs repair. Are the county leaders justified in breaking the rules and using the leftover funds to fix the building, even though it is expressly forbidden? Some would say, absolutely! The need is real, and funds will have no other use. Yet, if county leaders break the law, how does that affect public trust? Will these leaders be perceived as working for the common good or as unfair, given the rules?

Individuals may break a rule they find “stupid,” having rationalized that their action is ethical, yet others in the group may conclude the choice is unjustified. Said another way: Reasonable people can disagree on what is right. Disagreement can arise because of competing interests, differences in individual values, cultural heritage, age, gender or any number of other factors. Breaking a rule based on an individual moral code cannot be a sufficient test, because it affects others of the entire community who subscribe to the set of rules. Breaking rules is a slippery slope. Might others bend rules to their gain or for their perceived need, even when the need is less compelling?

So do you go through that traffic light? Answering that question involves your confidence that you have an unfailing grasp of the complex technical, situational, interpersonal, environmental and ethical conditions. And who has that? The Golden Rule applies here as well. We would not want others to steal our agency and break rules based on their own individual needs and values, so why should we do so ourselves?

The larger issue is that when individuals are part of a group, they agree to abide by the community’s values, and to follow the rules even when the rules contradict their individual values. This does not imply we must follow rules unquestioningly, as that enables government or inherited power systems to have unreasonable or unethical control over us. But it does mean we should engage in the process of changing rules when they no longer represent the value of the community.

So when it comes to breaking rules, we all should keep in mind that Robin Hood’s righteousness is a moral tale, and nothing in the real world is quite so straightforward.

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