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Leadership Capstone

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Ethical Lens Paper

Spikeball, in case you did not know, is a casual sport that seems to have taken over college campuses lately. It involves four players, a net, and a vibrant yellow ball about the size of a large onion. The net is shaped like a miniature trampoline and sits on the ground, held up by yellow pillars that are connected by black tubes to form the circular shape. Describing the plastic that forms this creation as cheap would be generous. Thus, using cheap plastic for something that is beyond its intent can cause that plastic to fail. This is exactly what happened to me on one of those glorious spring days last year as a group of friends and I had just finished a barn-burning round of Spikeball. As we were heading back to the car, we were throwing the net up in the air and catching it as it came screaming down. One fateful throw, however, did not meet the soft hands of one of us but rather collided with the unforgiving ground causing one of those pesky black tubes to snap without hesitation. This would not have been a concern if we had not borrowed the Spikeball set from one of our roommates that was currently out of town.

Gazing upon the snapped plastic laying on the ground launched all of us into a moment of intense deliberation. We were very clearly to blame for what had just happened but what was the next course of action? Is it worth replacing an entire Spikeball set for one cheap piece? Spikeball sets are expensive and replacement parts are not available. Do we tell our roommate? His absence gave us the opportunity to really weigh our options and decide whether it was worth telling him immediately or attempting to solve the issue first. While we assumed that the Spikeball set was not of great significance to him, it was his belonging and he seemed to enjoy having it. Another concern arose as we began to wonder whether our actions would lead to him losing trust in us and not wanting to share items with us again, a generally minor consideration but he was our roommate and coexisting depends on a certain level of trust and damaging that would be disappointing to say the least. So what’s to do?

We ultimately decided not to tell him. We drove from sporting goods store to sporting goods store for multiple hours searching for a replacement set until we ultimately shelled out the $70 for another set of cheap plastic. We then threw in a replacement for the broken piece into his set therefore covering up any damage that had been done and the rest of the new set has sat, quietly in my closet for nearly a year. I feel good about our decision to make his set complete again, but I am less sure about our decision to not tell him, he has yet to find out and we still all live together happily which inspires some confidence in that decision. However, if we had told him about it he may have just told us not to buy a new one and we would have saved the money and still been content with our attempts to act morally.

In analyzing the decision we made on that day, the ethical lens that causes me to hesitate a bit is the Responsibilities Lens. The responsibilities lens is described as the path of the thinker and requires a consideration or focus on universal ideals and principles the separate right from wrong (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017). I think the most prevalent principle in this situation is the idea that as human beings, we have a moral obligation to take responsibility for our actions and accept the consequences of those actions should there be consequences. In this aspect we actually did a pretty good job in relation to the responsibilities lens because we were united by the principle I mentioned above and we were willing to accept the consequences whether that meant telling our roommate or buying a new Spikeball set. Additionally, this lens requires the consideration of what would be a caring response which we showed by extensively deliberating what to do and making an extra effort to replace something that was not ours. However, this lens and the thinking behind it gets much deeper than this. Kantian ethics provides support for this lens and revolves around the idea that ethics must be unconditional and universal (Kantian Ethics (Main Concepts), n.d.). This thinking implies that lying, regardless of the purpose, intention, or result of the lie, is unethical and this is where our actions begin to get fuzzy. Of course, we did not directly tell my roommate that we broke his Spikeball set and he has never asked us which would force us to make this decision but in a way, not telling him feels like a bit of a lie and Kant would say that is unethical despite my roommate being entirely unaware of the situation.

A remedy to this situation, according to the responsibilities lens suggests that, if we told our roommate and replaced the Spikeball set we would be acting according to our duties and entirely ethically. A blind spot of the responsibilities lens is the belief that motives justify the method (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017) and that is essentially the mindset we have maintained but in doing so, we are likely giving into an ethical blind spot. Telling my roommate would ensure that we are appreciating the honesty and transparency that is required of this lens and Kantian ethics.

A secondary lens, however, that may not have seen issue with our lack of disclosure is the Results Lens and the ideals of the Utilitarian philosophy. The Results Lens is described as the path of the hero and relies on the consideration of long-term results that create mutual good and support a good life (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017). These ideals seem to support the decision we made to replace the Spikeball set but not tell our roommate. By replacing the broken piece, we considered the good of our roommate and he still has a functioning set and by not telling him we avoided any non-beneficial conflict that could have been a detriment to the dynamic of the household. Likewise, the Utilitarian philosophy is grounded in the principle of creating the greatest good for the greatest number of people and also places a special emphasis on happiness as the ultimate goal (Mill, 1863). Our consideration of this philosophy I think is best explained by the reasoning provided by my other roommate who was involved in the incident. He reasoned that if we tell him and do not replace the set he would be mad, if we told him and did replace the set he would be disappointed, but if we replaced the set and did not tell him, he would be none the wiser and would have no reason to be anything but happy. Given that Utilitarianism describes happiness as the ultimate goal, I believe our actions were justified.

That being said, however, one of the blind spots of the results lens is a being satisfied with too little good (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017). In this situation it is possible that as a group we reached a conclusion that simply replacing the part was enough moral good and therefore we did not need to tell our roommate so long as we took care of the problem. This is fine but the entirely ethical thing to do may have been to tell him as well and thus we may have settled for too little good. However, our prioritization of happiness is more consistent with the utilitarian thinking presented above and thus I think the results lens supports our conclusion.

Another lens that places special emphasis on happiness is the Reputation Lens. The Reputation Lens is described as the lens of the saint and focuses on community and the pursuit of a virtuous character (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017). The thought process I described above briefly explains our commitment to community. In general, the dynamic at our house is pretty frictionless but there are certain things that can introduce a little bit of discomfort to the community. Our realization was that if we were to tell our roommate he likely would be disappointed regardless of whether or not we replaced the set and it could cause a loss of trust that could have extended into other aspects of our relationship as roommates. This frame of mind is ultimately what led us to decide not to tell our roommate and thus far it has maintained the peaceful nature that exists in our household. The philosophy that supports this lens replies primarily on Aristotle’s virtue ethics which describes the idea of Eudaimonia or human flourishing and states that happiness is the ultimate goal of human existence (Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, n.d.). As I mentioned above, the group’s primary motivation for not telling my roommate was because we believed that not telling him would maintain the current state of happiness. It certainly crossed our minds that not telling him may not be the purest way to go about things, but we understood that we could likely save some stress for everyone involved by avoiding confrontation.

Nevertheless, this lens also exposes some flaws with our approach. The Reputation Lens is based largely on the community determining the values and virtues that it finds significant and moral (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017). By not telling my roommate we were essentially saying that small lies and deception are not looked down upon in our community. Likewise, lying to someone you are close to is not at all consistent with good character. The blind spot that is associated with this lens is described as having unrealistic role expectations (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017). It is possible that my expectations as leader in this situation and my roommate’s role were misinterpreted because we did not communicate with him but I feel like that is not much of a role expectation but rather an assumption.

The final lens in consideration is the Relationships Lens which is described as the path of the citizen and relies heavily on fairness or giving a voice to the less advantaged (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017). The emphasis on community that exists in this lens once again makes me question our decision not to tell my roommate because any community would likely place value on the virtues of honesty and transparency, and we disregarded that in a sense. The requirement of this lens to essentially give a voice to the voiceless was not entirely missed however. Multiple times throughout out discussion about what to do we considered what our roommate would want in this situation. That is when we evaluated what values are important to him and decided that he would want a new Spikeball set despite the cost of a new one. This decision indicates our commitment to justice in the situation because we were taking responsibility for and accepting the consequences of our actions, but we may have missed slightly on our consideration of fairness. These ideas are further elaborated by John Rawls concept of a veil of ignorance which asks us to consider what kind of society we would consider safe to enter if we could be born into any society in the world (John Rawls and "The Veil of Ignorance", n.d.). Rawls ideas force us to think about the biggest issues facing society and address those problems in order to create a systems in which we would all feel comfortable living in. I think Rawls thinking is entirely more sophisticated than this situation requires but the ideals are still applicable. I, for example, would prefer not to live in a society in which the people that know what is going on are able to deceive those that do not and I think transparency should be demanded by those that are in power.

This thinking in mind exposes some of the holes in our thinking. According to this lens we were correct in taking the time to process and consider all of our options while placing special emphasis on what we assumed our roommate would feel. However, we had the ability to include our roommate in the decision-making process and we did not which is not the most fair or equitable process. At the moment we did not see this issue which is an indication of the blind spot associated with this lens which is an overconfidence in the process (Overview of the Four Ethical Lenses, 2017). We felt good about the decision we made and did not really stop to reconsider and in doing so we may have missed a bit on fairness. The proper solution according to this lens would have been to ensure that everyone has a voice in the process and tell my roommate and ask him what we should do.

Another perspective we can use to analyze this decision is Kidder’s ethical checkpoints which suggest nine steps to take in order to make an ethical decision. The first two steps are to recognize that there is a problem and determine an actor (Johnson, 2018). which we did quickly in taking responsibility for breaking the set and realizing that we were the ones that caused the problem. The next step is to gather the relevant facts (Johnson, 2018) which is a step that is also present in the Baird model that was used to frame this issue. Gathering the relevant facts required us to evaluate what had just happened and assume how that would make our roommate feel, a step that we spent a significant amount of time deliberating. Steps four is to test for right-versus-wrong issues which basically asks whether or not the decision you are about to make creates any poor gut-level reactions (Johnson, 2018). In this scenario we understood the consequences of not telling our roommate but we also felt as though we knew him well enough that this would not offend him and therefore we avoided any negative feelings. The next two steps are to test for right-versus-right values in the case that ethical dilemmas can place two core values in opposition and apply ethical standards (Johnson, 2018). These were best displayed in our situation by our decision to prioritize the happiness and well-being of the group rather than telling our roommate. This felt like a bit of a tough decision but our values and standards as a group are more consistent with keeping things easy going and ensure happiness for everyone. Step seven is to look for a third way and step eight is to make the decision (Johnson, 2018) and I actually think we arrived at the third way by proposing not to tell my roommate but still replace the Spikeball set and this was ultimately the decision we committed to. Finally, Kidder’s checkpoints conclude with a requirement to reflect on the decision we made (Johnson, 2018). To be honest, this is the first time I have really taken the time to reflect on the situation and while some ethical holes have certainly been exposed, I do not feel as though our decision was unethical and I am content with the way things have played out so far.

I took a Business Ethics and Legal Studies class during my sophomore year and during the ethics portion of the class our teacher proposed the idea that “you learned everything you needed to know about ethics when you were 5,” while this simplified outlook on life is still my favorite ethical outlook, the topics we have explored in this class certainly add another layer to ethics. I do not feel as though I have been exposed to any ethical situations that have forced me to make a decision that can truly effect people and have lasting consequences but I now feel prepared to address such a situation if one arises. All in all, I feel content with the decision we made and the actions we took but maybe one day I will tell my roommate. This situation may seem a little trivial and insignificant, but I think it is an indicator that there are ethics in our everyday lives and many times we make decisions that are worth a little more consideration than we initially give them.

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