

Confronting the Scofflaw Cyclist

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You've probably seen "the comment." It goes something like this. A news article reports that a cyclist was injured, or maybe even killed. The cyclist was following the law. The driver was not. Maybe the driver was just being careless. Maybe the driver was deliberately targeting the cyclist for harassment, or worse.

It doesn't matter, because "the comment" always follows the same logic: "When cyclists stop breaking the law..." Regardless of what actually happened, regardless of the fact that *this particular cyclist* was following the law and *this particular driver* was not, some aggrieved motorist feels obliged to point out that cyclists break the law.

This is [the myth of the scofflaw cyclist](#).

Now, let's talk about myths for a moment.

Typically, people will use the word "myth" to mean a falsehood. That, however, is not an accurate meaning of "myth." A myth is actually a story that explains the world according to the perspective of the story-teller. Every culture, for example, has a myth about how the world was created, and how the people of that particular culture came to be in this world.

So by "myth," I don't mean that it's falsehood that cyclists break the law. Of course it's true that some cyclists break the law. But it's also true that some cyclists obey the law. Some drivers break the law. Some drivers obey the law. Some pedestrians break the law. Some pedestrians obey the law.

The truth is, motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians are all really just human beings getting around by different means, and all three groups break the law, each in their own way. Motorists speed. Cyclists run stop signs. [Pedestrians jaywalk](#).

The problem is, if somebody wants to explain why one of those groups—cyclists, for example—are a cultural outsider that should be discriminated against, the truth is too complex, too messy, to support that conclusion. So a myth, the myth that cyclists are scofflaws, explains why they are unworthy of protection, unworthy of justice, unworthy of compassion.

The myth explains why they should be discriminated against. The myth explains why drivers should not be held accountable for their own actions.

You see, it's because cyclists break the law.

Now as I said, a myth is not the same thing as a falsehood. Many cyclists do run stop signs, and there is no question that running stop signs irritates drivers. And there are some explanations for that irritation that don't rely upon bias against cyclists. For one thing, it violates a basic cultural sense of fairness. A motorist stops at a stop sign, and some cyclist comes zipping by and unlawfully runs the stop. It seems unfair. And besides violating their sense of fairness, running stop signs is something that drivers perceive as "dangerous." And it is dangerous; when a driver runs a stop sign, the odds that somebody will be injured or killed are substantially increased.

But many cyclists don't perceive running stop signs as being particularly dangerous *when done by a cyclist*. They see it as being more akin to a pedestrian not stopping at a stop sign. But cyclists *do* see speeding as being particularly dangerous. And motorists do not.

And this gets to the reality about scofflaw behavior—motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians alike condemn unlawful behavior that they see as being particularly dangerous, while more or less condoning unlawful behavior that they do not see as being particularly dangerous. And each group has its own, different perception of dangerous behavior. The problem is, cyclists and drivers are not in agreement about which laws should be obeyed and which should be disobeyed. Drivers think that it is important to stop at stop signs and red lights (although almost no drivers will come to a complete stop at stop signs), and resent that many cyclists treat stop signs as yield signs. Cyclists think it is important to observe the speed limit, while most drivers think it is safe to violate the speed limit within a certain amount.

Thus, many cyclists selectively obey the rules of the road. This means that they will obey those laws that they think are important to obey, and will violate those laws that they think are not important (or that they think are misguided or dangerous) to obey. And although drivers are irritated by this, drivers do the exact same thing—they selectively obey the laws that they think are important to obey, and they disobey the laws that they think are not important to obey.

In one sense, what is really at issue here are conflicting ideas about whether a bicycle is exactly like a motor vehicle and should therefore be subject to exactly the same laws, or whether a bicycle is fundamentally different—a human-powered vehicle—and should have laws that reflect that difference.

Motorists and cyclists who believe that all vehicles on the road should be subject to the exact same laws are taking the position that, for purposes of the law, a bicycle is exactly like a motor vehicle. Conversely, cyclists who believe that a bicycle is fundamentally different from a motor vehicle believe that the law should reflect the differences, while still recognizing the cyclist's right to the road. And then there are the motorists who believe that the law should reflect the fundamental differences between bicycles and motor vehicles. Unlike the cyclists who hold this view, these are the motorists tend to believe that cyclists should not be allowed on the road at all—even if the law says that bicycles do belong on the road.

These are the drivers who vehemently object to the presence of cyclists on the road. These are the drivers who never miss an opportunity to point out

that cyclists are scofflaws. These are the drivers who never pass up the chance to argue that cyclists are unworthy of being treated fairly. These are the drivers who believe that when a law-abiding cyclist is injured or killed, careless drivers should not be held accountable for their actions. It's not that they object to lawbreaking, it's that they object to the law.

And when they take the law into their own hands, these are the drivers who harass, bully, and even assault law-abiding cyclists for riding on the road, as the law allows.

Their rationale?

The myth of the scofflaw cyclist.