

5.1 Is it right or is it wrong?

In this topic you will learn the difference between making an ethical decision based on absolutist morality and on relativist morality.

ACTIVITY

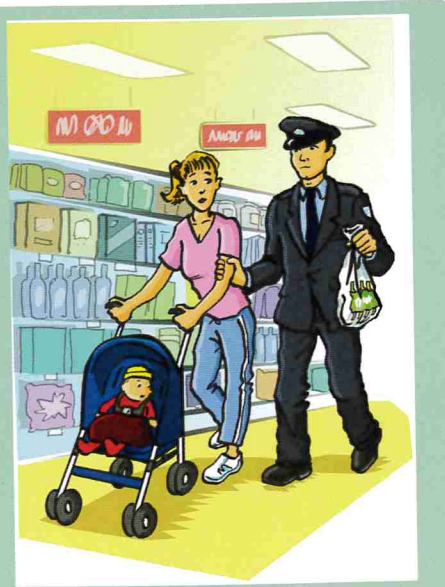
A02 skills

Decide whether the girl in the picture's actions were right or wrong.

What have you based your verdict on? If you couldn't decide, why was that?

The girl in the picture, Bekky, is sixteen and lives in a bedsit with five-month-old Josh. Bekky is desperately short of cash because her boyfriend hasn't sent her any money for weeks. The baby keeps crying because he's hungry. The supermarket Bekky stole baby food from made 5.7 million pounds profit last year.

Do you want to change your judgement of Bekky's action?



■ This girl has been arrested for stealing from the supermarket.

Making ethical judgements

Making any ethical judgement about something involves us deciding what is right and what is wrong. To do that we have to have some sort of moral code to measure things against. This immediately raises the question: how do we know what is right and wrong?

Stealing is wrong



Whether or not you took any notice of the sob story about Bekky, stealing is wrong. There are absolutely no two ways about it! We were all taught as children that you can't go around taking things that don't belong to you and every day life has reinforced that rule since. 'Do not steal' is also number eight of the Ten Commandments. What else do you need to tell you stealing is bad?

A moral judgement that relies on a fixed truth like this is **absolutist**. An absolutist rule says some things are basically right, or in this case wrong, no matter what the circumstances: there is no room for manoeuvre. What makes an ethic **deontological** is that it pays no regard to consequences, as the name makes clear, coming from the Greek for duty. Stealing is always wrong. It makes no difference who does it, what the reasons were, what culture they live in or whether it took place hundreds of years ago. Stealing is just one of those things which is universally wrong and everybody knows that even if they don't obey the rules.

Absolutism

STRENGTHS

- It provides a universal code to measure everything against.
- Absolutism enables us to have a UN Declaration of Human Rights.
- It is easier to apply than relativism.
- Life contains many situations which people instinctively take an absolutist approach to; for example, cruelty to a baby is wrong.

WEAKNESSES

- It doesn't consider different circumstances or cultural attitudes.
- How does anyone know what the absolute morals are?
- It is not concerned with the motive or outcome of an action.

Yes, but be reasonable!

When you read Bekky's problems then weigh her 'crime' up against the amount of money the supermarket makes every day, you might decide she was justified. Her actions might well have saved a baby's life. Surely that is a good outcome and far more important than the £3.65 worth of goods she stole?

A moral judgement that takes circumstances into consideration is **relativist** because it is related to the situation and not to any fixed rules. It also means that no action is good or bad in itself, only by weighing up the whole situation can a judgement be made.

Relativist arguments

Relativist morality has become more popular in the West in recent times. The idea goes back to the ancient Greeks: Protagoras (c480–411 BCE) said nothing was absolutely good or bad, but everybody decides for themselves according to the time and place in which they are living. Others have added religion and culture to the things that help us define what is good and bad.

Supporters of relativism point to the modern clash of cultures between liberal western attitudes and Islamic attitudes towards revealing clothing or cohabitation. The west regards them as a harmless expression of individuality whereas Islamic society considers them wrong because they can lead to immoral behaviour, a breakdown of family life and eventually of society.

Relativism

STRENGTHS

- It is flexible.
- It focuses on people.
- It allows people to take responsibility.

WEAKNESSES

- Judgements are always **subjective**.
- No two people may agree on a judgement.
- Relativism does not allow a society to progress, e.g. some things like genocide have always got to be wrong.
- It is more difficult to apply than absolutism

FOR DEBATE

A02 skills



Outline two scenarios where you would like to use an absolutist judgement, then two scenarios where you would want to use a relativist judgment. Give your reasons.

STRETCH & CHALLENGE

A01 skills

It is possible to make an ethical judgment that is both absolutist and **teleological**. Look at Bekky's story again and suggest an absolutist teleological rule that might be applied in this case.

FOR DEBATE

A01+A02 skills



What did Protagoras mean when he said, 'Man is the measure of all things'? Do you think that is a good arrangement?

KEY WORDS

Deontological: refers to an action that is inherently right or wrong. No account is taken of circumstances or outcome.

Teleological argument: concerned with the purpose or ultimate goal of something.