



RIGHT VERSUS WRONG : KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE

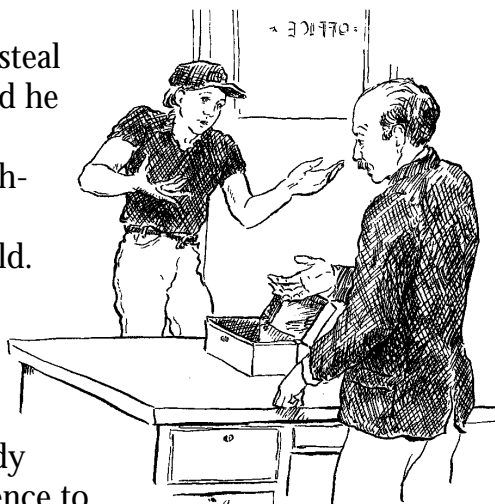
The world, as we know, is full of wrongdoing. Crime, family violence, drug abuse, employee fraud—each of these problems represents a collection of individual acts of wrong. And each individual wrong begins with someone's decision to do something other than right.

So how do we know if someone has done the wrong thing? Usually, in deciding whether someone is doing right or wrong, we seek answers to two questions: How well developed is this person's sense of ethical values? and, Does this person's actions reflect those values?

What do we mean by a well-developed sense of ethical values? If three-year-old Colin, standing next to Grandma's special candy jar, has chocolate smeared over his hands and face but denies dipping into the sweets, we might decide that he is doing something wrong. Most of us agree that you're supposed to get permission before taking something from someone else and that you're supposed to tell the truth about what you do. However, since Colin is only three, his sense of ethical values is probably not very developed. An older child or adult would be expected to understand that the action was wrong.

Does this person's actions reflect those values? Colin's actions do not represent a sense of respect or honesty, even though some people may find his actions "cute." He is still forming a sense of values and experimenting with what is important. While we will probably draw attention to his choices and coach him about a better way to behave, we might be more understanding than if his ten-year-old brother did the same thing. We are aware that Colin's sense of right and wrong is still forming.

But what if Colin, as a high-school student, were to steal money from the student council treasury and pretend he had nothing to do with the theft? When asking the question, "How well developed is Colin's sense of ethical values?" we would probably have much higher expectations than we did when he was three years old. That is, we would expect the older Colin to know that it is wrong to steal from the student council. The action of taking money without permission goes against a value we all would expect him to uphold. In fact, the reaction of adults to Colin's candy jar behavior at age three may well make a big difference to



his choices as a teenager. If he is never told that taking candy and lying about it are wrong, he might conclude, when older, that stealing money and pretending he didn't are acceptable choices.

FOUR WAYS TO TELL RIGHT FROM WRONG

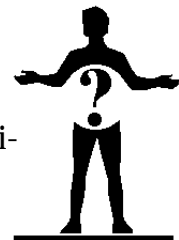
Most of us faced with a choice between the right, the wonderful, and the good on the one hand, and the wrong, the terrible, and the bad on the other, will choose to do the right thing. However, we're sometimes tempted to do wrong, and it often takes moral courage to make the right choice. In the case of Colin as a high-school student, for example, there was probably a reason that tempted him to steal the money. He lacked the moral vision and strength to make a good ethical decision.

Sometimes it's helpful to use the process below to determine if a choice would be right or wrong. It involves four tests that act together. While one test by itself may not leave you completely convinced, answering yes to all four of the following questions will probably leave no doubt in your mind that an action is wrong.

(1) **THE LEGAL TEST:** Is this choice against the law? It is wrong, we say, to pass a stopped school bus, take a candy bar without paying the shopkeeper, cut trees on your neighbor's property, or toss an empty soda bottle into the road. More significant, it is wrong to bribe public officials, refuse to pay the rent, pass bad checks, or beat your spouse. These kinds of wrongdoing involve breaking the law. You can break the law by mistake (you may not know a law exists) or on purpose (you may not agree to follow it).



(2) **THE GUT-FEELING TEST:** Does this choice go against a gut feeling? Often our intuition can determine right from wrong before our brains can think it through. Physical reactions, such as gut feelings, often indicate a need for more thought before taking action.



(3) **THE FRONT-PAGE TEST:** Would you feel good if your choice were on the front page of the local newspaper? In imagining this, you are holding up your choice to be considered by everyone you know. What would your parents think? What would your friends at school think? How would you feel if your teachers read about your decision?

(4) **THE ROLE-MODEL TEST:** Name a person you respect highly—perhaps a parent, teacher, relative, or local community figure. If this person had to make the decision you are about to make, would she or he make the same decision you're considering? Sometimes imagining how someone else would decide can help clarify your choices.





Your choice is probably wrong if it doesn't pass any of the four tests. However, these tests must be considered in combination. For example, cases of civil disobedience involve an illegal action which "passes" the other three tests. As our standards for ethical behavior shift, our definition of wrong can change, too. For example, in the early 1900s a woman might have looked to the front-page test (among others) to decide that smoking in public was wrong. Today, a woman might not be swayed by the front-page test, but the attitude of a role model might dissuade her from smoking.