

**EPISODE**

Virtues and Vices

**SUB CATEGORY**

Education

**TITLE**

Yardsticks: Telling right from wrong

**EXCERPT**

“Right” and “Wrong” are two separate ideas from each other. How can one tell them apart then? For this question, we have to further examine the role of the different stakeholders in shaping their views and character.

**CONTENT**

How do you decide on what is right and wrong? After all, “right” and “wrong” are subjective value judgements that are formed over a lifetime of the interactions spent with people and they tend to change as you age or when society changes over time. Just like how a thermometer is used to measure temperature, a yardstick is used to distinguish right from wrong. As such, yardsticks are needed to guide individuals in coming to a conclusion on whether this is right or not.

**Family**

Speak to any parent and they would all agree that they would want their children to grow up knowing right from wrong, with the moral courage to act on what they know. Parents provide advice and guidance to their children by teaching them the values and ethics in life on top of their academic studies. There is also a high possibility that their parents’ beliefs on what is right and wrong will affect the decision of their children too.

**Social institutions**

For many, education acts as a yardstick for us to be able to discern what is right from what is wrong. As we become more educated, we will become more aware about our surroundings. We learn what is the appropriate way to behave and conduct ourselves. Through moral education, we are able to better understand and differentiate the right from the wrong. For instance, Civics and Moral Education replaced religious education in Singapore schools in 1991 to instil social responsibility and a sense of morality in students. This shapes character and the courage to uphold the right values when necessary.

Additionally, schools provide a safe environment to learn the repercussions of their choices and actions made under the guidance of their teachers. But in practice, this might not be so absolute and straightforward as compared to what they learn in theory. Students might be caught in a dilemma on what is socially acceptable like the problem of telling white lies. As a result, these students will try to reason themselves out or rather, coming up with excuses to justify their actions and this questions the consistency and reliability of schools in shaping the moral compass of individuals.

**Social expectations**

The manner in which society expects you to behave and conduct yourself plays a part in telling you what is right from wrong. For example, you are not supposed to litter at public spaces and you have to obey laws and rules. These actions are supposedly “right” and if you fail to follow them, you may end up in

trouble. Over time, the exposure to such societal expectations will shape our mindsets to recognise the right from the wrong, indirectly influencing our actions and behaviours in the long run.

Additionally, social media has given rise to a new age of public vigilantism. It is when individuals take the law into their own hands and carry out punishments since they think that these are 'right' things to do. But at times, vigilantes may misidentified the perpetrator and as a result, this causes unnecessary harassment to innocent individuals and leads to bullying.

So now, is this really the right thing to do? As observed, these individuals believe that they are righteous and are doing the right thing. However for the victims who were misidentified, they may feel wronged and these harms inflicted on them may not be justified. Therefore, it is difficult to properly define what is right and wrong.

In conclusion, the line separating what is right and what is wrong may not be clearly defined especially in the case of controversial issues. As such, yardsticks without a clear measurement unit may not be accurate in determining the outcome of such issues and it would be unfair to come to a decision on "what is right" or "what is wrong" solely based on these yardsticks.