

Is It Stealing?

You are about to go on a dream vacation, and decide you need to purchase a camera. Being a novice at taking pictures, and still mindful of your meager budget (thanks to Wall Street, China, the Republicans, the Democrats, the Climate Change Deniers, or anyone else you wish to blame), you purchase a camera that is both functional and within your price range. The vacation goes well, and you capture many wonderful moments on film (sorry, digital files). When you return home, you realize that there is little chance you will be using a camera again anytime soon.

After careful consideration, you decide to return the camera to the department store. There is nothing wrong with the camera. However, the store has a very liberal return policy, and so you take advantage of it. They ask you if the camera was defective. You lie, claim that it was, and are reimbursed. In effect, you were able to take every picture free.

You feel good about the money you just made during the transaction. However, when you return home a thought occurs to you. Did you cheat the store?

The department store can no longer sell the camera as a new item, since it was used. However, since it is not broken and worked properly, it could pass for a new item.

Let us assume that you had a friend that worked at that very store. After you returned from vacation, and returned your camera, your friend informed you that the store's new cameras were not always genuinely new. Sometimes the store took returned merchandise, cleaned them up, and presented them as new for sale. You then remember that there were a few minor nicks on your camera when you bought it. Suddenly, you wonder if you paid a new-item price for a product that was actually used, and if the store made money from you by lying about the product's condition.

Would you feel cheated?

What is the difference in the scenarios above? In both circumstances, someone lied to make money. Is the deception more acceptable to the individual because businesses turn plenty of profit, and it is only a minor monetary loss to them?

Perhaps it is unfair to compare a person to a business. A better scenario would involve two individuals.

What if you advertise that you are selling your old sofa? You receive a phone call, and the caller says he has a relative who is staying with him and he wants to buy it. The sofa is a bit old and worn, and you both agree on a price of seventy-five dollars. For an additional twenty-five dollars, you offer him a potato chip in the shape of Elvis, but he declines. The next day he pulls up in a pickup truck with a friend, they hand you an envelope of money, load the sofa onto the truck, and drive away. You believe that is the last time you will ever see your old furniture.

A week later, there is an unexpected knock on your door. It is the same man. He explains that his relative departed, and he no longer needs the sofa. With an air of impudence, he wants to return it, and requests his seventy-five dollars back. You argue that if you return his money, then you will have loaned him the sofa for nothing, which is tantamount to stealing. He replies that the events were the exact opposite of stealing. Stealing is taking something that does not belong to you without paying for it. He paid for something that did not belong to him and returned it.

His explanation confuses you, and you are reluctant, but he offers you an apple shaped like Winston Churchill, and you return his money. As he quickly drives away laughing, you wonder if the man's actions toward you were similar to your actions to the department store. Later, you speculate that he had planned the scheme all along, and so you throw away his rotten apple.

You are not sure if the man's actions were technically "stealing," yet you feel genuinely swindled nonetheless. Your attention quickly turns to the upcoming family reunion. You smile in anticipation, as you cannot wait to show off your expensive new grill. Sure, it cost over a thousand dollars, but you will just return it the following day and receive a full refund. Those department stores sure are suckers.

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