

Formula for Disaster

Shirley is a single mother working two jobs to support her newborn baby. Because Shirley cannot breastfeed, she uses baby formula. One day, Shirley runs out of formula and must make an emergency trip to the grocery store to feed her hungry baby. Thankfully, she has just enough money in her bank account to buy another package and still be able to pay for this month's utilities. She heads to the checkout line with the formula, where she sees that the cashier is on the phone and is noticeably distracted. He scans the formula and, after inserting her debit card into the chip reader and entering her pin, the payment screen displays a loading icon for longer than anticipated. She asks the cashier if she is good to go, as she knows that she has enough money on her account to cover the purchase and that she entered the correct pin. The cashier quickly glances at his screen and responds that Shirley is all set and can leave with her purchase. After exiting the store, Shirley remembers her utility bill and electronically sends the remainder of her money to cover the cost. Afterwards, she checks her bank statement and realizes that her payment for the formula did not go through. Her bank app always posts transactions the second they happen, so she knows that there is no delay on a successful payment.

Now that she has paid the utility bill, Shirley lacks the money to go back and pay for the formula. She knows that the formula is a necessity and thinks that failing to return to the store to pay for it may not be theft, because she took it under the impression that the transaction was successful. She also knows that it is highly unlikely for anyone to find out that her payment did not go through and that, if they did, she would be forgiven as it was clear that it was accidental. She thinks that keeping the formula would do more good than it would in the hands of the grocery chain, as it is necessary for the health of her baby.

However, Shirley thinks that stealing is wrong. She grapples with the thought that even though she was unaware the payment was unsuccessful when she left, she is aware now. She knows that she did not pay and is physically capable of returning to the store to return the formula. She is concerned that failing to return it may transform an accident into a theft, despite her good intentions. She is torn between keeping the formula that she needs for her baby, which may be stealing, or returning it and trying to find an alternative.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it morally wrong for Shirley to keep the formula?
2. Is stealing always wrong? Are there circumstances in which stealing may be morally justified?
3. To what extent is one morally responsible for an act that is done in ignorance?

