

Guilt: A Riddle, A Story, A Question

Guilt is an interesting concept in ethics, in particular the difference between “feeling guilty” versus “being guilty”.

Riddle

Riddles are great warm-up activity for P4C. Solving them requires intellectual risk-taking and collaborative thinking.

The greedy, I eat.
Thieves, I rob.
Murderers, I stab.
Nobody wants me,
But those who never have me, nobody wants.
What am I?

The answer is guilt.

TIPS: Asking “what made you think that” before saying if a guess was right or wrong is good practice in giving reasons. It’s a good idea after a few guesses to announce that you will truthfully answer yes/no questions as well, as that both speeds up the solving and requires skilful choice of questions to home in on the answer.

Story

The story (on the next page should you wish to print copies for readers) is the simple account of two children who break a window while playing football at their grandparents. Everyone involved ends up feeling guilty for something, which can lead to an interesting discussion about criteria for being guilty, and the distinction between that and feeling guilty.

Questions

Who was right to feel guilty? (Maybe nobody – but leave it for them to reject the assumption implicit in the question.)

When should you feel guilty? (“When” here really means “when” – not just which sorts of situation, but for how long, or until what has happened?)

TIP: Creating criteria for when you should feel guilty is quite a challenging exercise. You can get the group to test their criteria against other imagined examples, and refine them.

Krang! Ting-ling-ling-ling. Ling.

The glass shattered to the floor, and the football dropped and rolled back guiltily from the scene of the crime. John, who had kicked the ball, and his sister Lucy, who was in goal, stared through the window that wasn't there, and their grandmother stared back.

John's grandad came out of the house, and looked at the window frame and the glass spread over the driveway. "Stupid kids!" he shouted. "You can pay for that out of your pocket money."

"Sorry," said John. "It was an accident."

"Well, you shouldn't be kicking that ball around here anyway."

"I should have saved it," said Lucy. "I'm a rubbish goalkeeper."

"It's my fault," said John's grandmother. "I said to be careful, but I should have told them to play away from the house."

John got a broom and swept the glass into a pile. His grandad got some gloves and took the remaining glass out of the frame, and then cut a piece of wood to cover the hole until the glaziers could come.

John felt guilty about breaking the window.

Lucy felt guilty about not making the save.

Their dad picked them up later and heard what had happened. He felt guilty about leaving them at their grandparents where there wasn't much to do.

Their grandad felt guilty about shouting at them.

Their grandmother felt guilty about asking them to be careful, because that was a daft thing to ask kids if they're playing football.