

Evaluate Essay 1

'Stealing is always wrong.' Discuss with reference to unpaid downloading of music from the internet.

There are many forms of stealing. Although most reasonable people would agree that some forms of theft such as burglary or mugging are always wrong,¹ other areas are less clear cut. In this essay, I shall look at downloading music from the internet as a grey area.

Stealing has probably existed since the beginning of time, and certainly as long ago as the Old Testament, where it was banned by the commandments. All religions regard stealing as wrong, so you would think that there were universally understood principles about what is stealing and what is not. However, this is not the case. This is also true of many other types of ethical issue. Despite this long-standing agreement that stealing is wrong, many people steal. In fact, it is a very common crime, so it is worth considering why this has persisted for so long.²

Before the internet became popular, people used to tape music from the radio. Lee (2006) says no one was bothered by this because it was impossible to catch people.³ Everyone knew that it happened but record sales remained high so it clearly had no real impact on artists and labels.⁴ Because of this, although home taping was technically illegal, it was only record companies who were worried about profits who could really call it 'stealing'. Nobody knows how much music was copied and it still continues to this day.

Lee goes on to say that just because it is possible to catch people who download from the internet it doesn't make it any worse than people making copies from the radio.⁵ Carla (2006) agrees with Lee and says that downloading music from the internet is a 'useful service to music'. She states that without this service the world of music would be 'extremely bland and middle of the road'. Hibbs (2006)⁶ says that more and more people are downloading music without paying, and sharing it with their friends. Because everyone is doing it, it cannot be a bad thing and cannot be considered wrong.⁷

The real reason downloading from the internet gets classed as stealing is because big music companies do not like to see big profits escaping from them. Spratt (2004) states that record companies are not even that bothered about ordinary people downloading from the internet. They are only worried about companies who make and sell pirate copies of their recordings. So why do they continue to prosecute file sharers? This can only be about greed, especially as it is the poorest people who have to download for free as they cannot afford to pay for legal downloads.⁸

Cuttle (2007)⁹ says that people should pay for the products that they consume and if they cannot pay then they should go without. He sees downloading music for free as stealing. Kahliney (2006) agrees with this. He says that small companies cannot afford to lose money through people downloading their music for free. Even a few copies have a bad effect on companies who only employ a few staff and they might have to make people redundant.¹⁰ The type of music these companies produce tends to be quite obscure and unpopular so there is little effect on the majority of music listeners.¹¹

Carla (2006) says that new bands are often overlooked by the major record companies and are only picked up by small, independent companies.¹² These companies are often only able to distribute music on a limited basis. Many have very small staff and resources and cannot get out on the road to sell the music to shops across the country, never mind worldwide. Bigger producers can employ sales teams to take the product out to the market, either promoting it in shops, or even arranging tours to schools to promote the music to school children. School children buy records in the largest numbers so a band that is promoted well to children is likely to rise up the charts and become better

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known to the general public. It is unrealistic to expect that every band can tour the schools, as schools limit how many bands can visit in a term as they have other things to fit into the school day, and, furthermore, many bands couldn't afford the costs of going on tour. This is where downloading performs a service to the small artist.¹³ When people download music for free, it actually helps to get it heard by a range of people who would not know about it otherwise.¹⁴

The public, especially people with little money, should not have to lose out because of the interests of big business. Business is only motivated by profits. It's in the interest of big business to prevent people downloading. Their argument is all about money, at the end of the day. They were not so bothered about copying from the radio because the quality of the reproductions was bad. If they really had a moral concern about stealing, they would have objected as much to taping as they do about downloading.¹⁵

There are some forms of stealing that are clearly always wrong, such as mugging a person or robbing their house. We have seen in this essay that stealing is a long-standing ethical problem, and that even though there have long been strictures against stealing, the moral position has not prevented people from stealing. This essay has looked at some areas which are much less clear cut. There are arguments for and against why downloading from the internet might be considered wrong. These depend on what viewpoint you take – companies worried about profit will always see it as wrong but ordinary music listeners think they are providing a helpful service. We also have to think about the artists, both what they can earn and also whether it is good to have their music heard by a wider audience.¹⁶ Not everyone will agree with the arguments presented by either side. This is an interesting debate and one that will doubtless continue for many years.¹⁷