

to him, it would be wasted in a week of outrageous partying. On the other hand, a very fine orphanage in your town needs such a sum to improve and expand its recreational facilities, something that would provide happiness to many children for years to come. It seems clear that on utilitarian grounds you should give the money to the orphanage, because this action would result in greater net happiness.

Many people would balk at this conclusion, contending that it would be wrong to break your promise, even if doing so would bring about more good than keeping it. Having made a promise, you have an obligation to keep it, and a deathbed promise is particularly serious. Furthermore, the deceased woman had a right to do with her money as she wished; it is not for you to decide how to spend it. Likewise, having been bequeathed the money, the nephew has a right to it regardless of how wisely or foolishly he might spend it. Defenders of utilitarianism, however, would insist that promoting happiness is all that really matters and warn you not to be blinded by moral prejudice.

Critics of utilitarianism respond that it is utilitarianism that is morally blind because it not only permits but sometimes even requires us to perform immoral actions. Philosopher Richard Brandt states the case against act utilitarianism this way:

Act-utilitarianism . . . implies that if you have employed a boy to mow your lawn and he has finished the job and asks for his pay, you should pay him what you promised only if you cannot find a better use for your money. . . . It implies that if your father is ill and has no prospect of good in his life, and maintaining him is a drain on the energy and enjoyments of others, then, if you can end his life without provoking any public scandal or setting a bad example, it is your positive duty to take matters into your own hands and bring his life to a close.<sup>3</sup>

In the same vein, ethicist A. C. Ewing concludes that “[act] utilitarian principles, logically carried out, would result in far more cheating, lying and unfair action than any good man would tolerate.”<sup>4</sup>

Defenders of act utilitarianism would reply that these charges are exaggerated. Although it is theoretically possible, for example, that not paying the boy for his work might maximize happiness, this is extremely unlikely. Utilitarians contend that only in very unusual circumstances will pursuit of the good conflict with our ordinary ideas of right and wrong, and in those cases—like the deathbed promise—we should put aside those ordinary ideas. The anti-utilitarian replies that the theoretical possibility that utilitarianism may require immoral conduct shows it to be an unsatisfactory moral theory.

- 3. Is utilitarianism unjust?** Utilitarianism concerns itself with the sum total of happiness produced, not with how that happiness is distributed. If policy X brings two units of happiness to each of five people and policy Y brings nine units of happiness to one person, one unit each to two others, and none to the remaining two, then Y is to be preferred (eleven units of happiness versus ten), even though it distributes that happiness very unequally.

Worse still from the critic’s point of view, utilitarianism may even require that some people’s happiness be sacrificed in order to achieve the greatest overall amount of happiness. Sometimes the general utility may be served only at the expense of a single individual or group. For example, under the right of **eminent domain** (see Case 3.1), the government may appropriate private property for public use (after compensating the owner). Thus, the government may legally purchase your house from you to widen a highway—even if you don’t want to sell the house or want more money than the government is willing to pay. The public interest is served at your private expense. Is this just?

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**SUMMARY**

In an organizational context, utilitarianism provides an objective way to resolve conflicts of self-interest and encourages a realistic and result-oriented approach to moral decision making. But critics contend that (1) utilitarianism is not really workable, (2) some actions are wrong even if they produce good results, and (3) utilitarianism incorrectly overlooks considerations of justice and the distribution of happiness.

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Or consider the Dan River experiment, part of the long-running controversy over the cause of brown lung disease. Claiming that the disease is caused by the inhalation of microscopic fibers in cotton dust, textile unions fought for years for tough regulations to protect their workers. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) responded by proposing cotton dust standards, which would require many firms to install expensive new equipment. A few months before the deadline for installing the equipment, officials at Dan River Mills, a textile manufacturer in Danville, Virginia, asked the government to waive the requirements for a time so that the company could conduct an experiment to determine the precise cause of brown lung disease. Both the state of Virginia and the U.S. Department of Labor allowed the extension. In response, the textile workers union contended, “It is simply unconscionable to allow hundreds of cotton mill workers to continue to face a high risk of developing brown lung disease.”<sup>5</sup>

Suppose that the Dan River project did expose workers to what is considered a high risk of contracting lung disease. If so, then a small group of individuals—633 textile workers at ten locations in Danville, Virginia—were being compelled to carry the burden of isolating the cause of brown lung disease. Is that just?

Although their critics would say no, utilitarians would respond that it is, if the experiment maximizes the total good of society. Does it? In fact, the results of the experiment were inconclusive, but if the project had succeeded in identifying the exact cause of the disease, then thousands of textile workers across the country would have benefited. Researchers might also have discovered a more economical way to ensure worker safety than by installing expensive new equipment, which in turn would have profited both consumers and the textile industry. Certainly, utilitarians would consider the potentially negative impact on workers, but only as one factor among others. At the time of the decision, after the interests of all affected parties have been weighed, if extending the deadline is likely to yield the greatest net benefit or utility, then doing so is just—even though workers might be injured.

### THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SELF-INTEREST AND UTILITY

Both self-interest and utility play important roles in organizational decisions, and the views of many businesspeople blend these two theories. To the extent that each business pursues its own interests and each businessperson tries to maximize personal success, business practice can be called egoistic. But business practice is also utilitarian in that pursuing one’s economic interests is thought to benefit society as a whole, and playing by the established rules of the competitive game is seen as advancing the social good. The classical capitalist economist Adam Smith (1723–1790) held such a view. He argued that leaving business and businesspeople free to pursue their self-interest will serve the good of society. Indeed, Smith believed that only through egoistic pursuits could the greatest economic benefit for the whole society be produced. The essence of Smith’s position can be seen in the following passage from the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), in which Smith underscores the interplay between self-interest and the social good and between egoism and utilitarianism:

Every individual is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command. It is his own advantage, indeed, and not that of the society, which he has in view. But the study of his own advantage, naturally, or rather necessarily, leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to the society. . . .

As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can . . . to employ his capital . . . [so] that its produce may be of the greatest value, every individual necessarily

Business practice is egoistic, but Adam Smith and others believe that it is also utilitarian because the pursuit of self-interest promotes the good of society.

labors to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. . . . He intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its product may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it.<sup>6</sup>

Many today would agree with Smith\* that the pursuit of self-interest is central to our economic system because it provides the motivating force that turns the wheels of commerce and industry. Although acknowledging that business is part of a social system and that certain ground rules are needed and should be followed, they would argue that society is best served by the active pursuit of self-interest within the established rules of business practice. Thus what we might call **business egoism**—the view that it is morally acceptable (or even morally required) for individuals to pursue their economic interests when engaged in business—is defended on utilitarian grounds.

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## KANT'S ETHICS

Most of us find the ideal of promoting human happiness and well-being an attractive one and, as a result, admire greatly people like Mother Teresa (1910–1997), who devoted her life to working with the poor. Despite the attractiveness of this ideal, many moral philosophers are critical of utilitarianism—particularly because, like egoism, it reduces all morality to a concern with consequences. Although nonconsequentialist normative theories vary significantly, adopting different approaches and stressing different themes, the writings of the preeminent German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) provide an excellent example of a thoroughly nonconsequentialist approach to ethics. Perhaps few thinkers today would endorse Kant's theory on every point, but his work has greatly influenced subsequent philosophers and has helped shape our general moral culture.

Kant sought moral principles that do not rest on contingencies and that define actions as inherently right or wrong apart from any particular circumstances. He believed that moral rules can, in principle, be known as a result of reason alone and are not based on observation (as are, for example, scientific judgments). In contrast to utilitarianism and other consequentialist doctrines, Kant's ethical theory holds that we do not have to know anything about the likely results of, say, my telling a lie to my boss in order to know that it is immoral. "The basis of obligation," Kant wrote, "must not be sought in human nature, [nor] in the circumstances of the world." Rather it is *a priori*, by which he meant that moral reasoning is not based on factual knowledge and that reason by itself can reveal the basic principles of morality.

### GOOD WILL

Chapter 1 mentioned Good Samaritan laws, which shield from lawsuits those rendering emergency aid. Such laws, in effect, give legal protection to the humanitarian impulse behind emergency interventions. They formally recognize that the interventionist's heart

Kant believed that moral reasoning is not based on factual knowledge and that the results of our actions do not determine whether they are right or wrong.

\*Chapter 4 examines Smith's position in more detail.

was in the right place—that the person’s intention was irreproachable. And because the person acted from right intention, he or she should not be held liable for any inadvertent harm except in cases of extreme negligence. The widely observable human tendency to introduce a person’s intentions in assigning blame or praise is a good springboard for engaging Kant’s ethics.

Nothing, said Kant, is good in itself except **good will**. This does not mean that intelligence, courage, self-control, health, happiness, and other things are not good and desirable. But Kant believed that their goodness depends on the will that makes use of them. Intelligence, for instance, is not good when exercised by an evil person.

By *will* Kant meant the uniquely human capacity to act from principle. Contained in the notion of good will is the concept of duty: Only when we act from a sense of duty does our action have **moral worth**. When we act only out of feeling, inclination, or self-interest, our actions—although they may be otherwise identical with ones that spring from the sense of duty—have no true moral worth.

Suppose that you’re the owner of a small convenience store. Late one night a customer pays for his five-dollar purchase with a twenty-dollar bill, which you mistake for a ten. Only after the customer leaves do you realize you short-changed him. You race out the front door and find him lingering by a vending machine. You give him the ten dollars with your apologies, and he thanks you warmly.

Can we say that you acted from good will? Not necessarily. You may have acted from a desire to promote future business or to cultivate a reputation for honesty. If so, you would have acted in accordance with, but not from, duty. Your apparently virtuous gesture just happened to coincide with what duty requires. According to Kant, if you do not will the action from a sense of your duty to be fair and honest, your action lacks moral worth. Actions have true moral worth only when they spring from a recognition of duty and a choice to discharge it.

What determines our duty? How do we know what morality requires of us? Kant answered these questions by formulating what he called the “categorical imperative.” This extraordinarily significant moral concept is the linchpin of Kant’s ethics.

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#### SUMMARY

Kant’s theory is an important example of a purely nonconsequentialist approach to ethics. Kant held that only when we act from duty does our action have moral worth. Good will is the only thing that is good in itself.

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## THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

We have seen that egoists and utilitarians allow factual circumstances or empirical data to determine moral judgments. In contrast, Kant believed that reason alone can establish the moral law. We need not rely on empirical evidence relating to consequences and to similar situations. Just as we know, seemingly through reason alone, such abstract truths as “Every change must have a cause,” so we can arrive at absolute moral truth through nonempirical reasoning and thereby discover our duty. For Kant, the moral law must hold in all circumstances, free from any internal contradiction. If we can formulate this law or rule, he thought, everyone would be obliged to follow it without exception.

Kant believed that there is just one command (imperative) that is categorical and thus necessarily binding on all rational agents, regardless of any other considerations. From this one categorical imperative (that is, from this universal command), we can derive all the specific commands of duty. Kant’s **categorical imperative** says that we should always act in such a way that we can will the maxim of our action to be a universal law. So Kant’s answer to the question “What determines whether an act is right?” is that an act is morally right if and only if we can will it as a universal law of conduct.

The obvious and crucial question that arises here is, “When are we justified in saying that the maxim of our action could become a universal law of conduct?”

By **maxim**, Kant meant the subjective principle of an action, the principle (or rule) that people in effect formulate in determining their conduct. For example, suppose

building contractor Martin promises to install a sprinkler system in a project but is willing to break that promise to suit his purposes. His maxim can be expressed this way: “I’ll make promises that I’ll break whenever keeping them no longer suits my purposes.” This is the subjective principle—the maxim—that directs his action.

Kant insisted that the morality of any maxim depends on whether we can logically will it to be a universal law governing everyone’s conduct. Could Martin’s maxim be universally acted on? That depends on whether the maxim as law would involve a contradiction. The maxim “I’ll make promises that I’ll break whenever keeping them no longer suits my purposes” could not be universally acted on because it involves a contradiction of will. On the one hand, Martin is willing that it be possible to make promises and have them honored. On the other, if everyone made promises without intending to keep them, then promises would not be honored in the first place, because it is in the nature of promises that they be believed. A law that allowed promise breaking would contradict the very nature of a promise. Similarly, a law that allowed lying would contradict the very nature of serious communication, for the activity of serious communication (as opposed to joking) requires that participants intend to speak the truth. I cannot, without contradiction, will both serious conversation and lying. By contrast, there is no problem, Kant thinks, in willing promise keeping or truth telling to be universal laws.

Consider, as another example, Kant’s account of a man who, in despair after suffering a series of major setbacks, contemplates suicide. While still rational, the man asks whether it would be contrary to his duty to take his own life. Could the maxim of his action become a universal law of nature? Kant thinks not:

His maxim is this: From self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life when its continued duration threatens more evil than it promises satisfaction. There only remains the question whether this principle of self-love can become a universal law of nature. One sees at once a contradiction in a system of nature whose law would destroy life by means of the very same feeling that acts so as to stimulate the furtherance of life. . . . Therefore, such a maxim cannot possibly hold as a universal law of nature and is, consequently, wholly inconsistent with the supreme principle of all duty.<sup>7</sup>

When Kant insists that a moral rule be consistently universalizable, he is saying that moral rules prescribe categorically, not hypothetically. A *hypothetical* prescription tells us what to do if we desire a particular outcome. Thus, “If I want people to like me, I should be nice to them” and “If you want to go to medical school, you must take biology” are **hypothetical imperatives**. They tell us what we must do on the assumption that we have some particular goal. If that is what we want, then this is what we must do; but if we don’t want to go to medical school, then the command to take biology does not apply to us. In contrast, Kant’s imperative is *categorical*: It commands unconditionally. It is necessarily binding on everyone, regardless of his or her specific goals or desires, regardless of consequences. A categorical imperative takes the form of “Do this” or “Don’t do that”—no ifs, ands, or buts.

**Universal Acceptability**

There is another way of looking at the categorical imperative. Each person, through his or her own acts of will, legislates the moral law. The moral rules that we obey are not imposed on us from the outside. They are self-imposed and self-recognized, fully internalized principles. The sense of duty that we obey comes from within; it is an expression of our own higher selves.

Thus, moral beings give themselves the moral law and accept its demands on themselves. But that is not to say we can prescribe anything we want, for we are constrained by reason and its requirements. Because reason is the same for all rational beings, we all

If you make a promise that you don’t intend to keep, it is impossible to will the maxim governing your action as a universal law.

.....  
**SUMMARY**

Kant’s categorical imperative states that an action is morally right if and only if we can will the maxim (or principle) represented by our action as a universal law. For example, a person making a promise with no intention of keeping it cannot universalize the maxim governing his action because if everyone followed this principle, promising would make no sense. Kant believed that the categorical imperative is binding on all rational creatures, regardless of their specific goals or desires and regardless of the consequences.

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give ourselves the same moral law. In other words, when you answer the question “What should I do?” you must consider what all rational beings should do. You can embrace something as a moral law only if all other rational beings can also embrace it. It must have **universal acceptability**.

To see whether a rule or principle is a moral law, we can thus ask if what the rule commands would be acceptable to all rational beings. In considering lying, theft, or murder, for example, you must consider the act not only from your own viewpoint but also from the perspective of the person lied to, robbed, or murdered. Presumably, rational beings do not want to be lied to, robbed, or murdered. The test of the morality of a rule, then, is whether all rational beings looking at the matter objectively and impartially could accept the rule regardless of whether the action in question was performed by them or done to them. This is an important moral insight, and most philosophers see it as implicit in Kant’s discussion of the categorical imperative, even though Kant (whose writings are difficult to understand) did not make the point in this form.

The principle of universal acceptability has important applications. Suppose a man advocates a hiring policy that discriminates against women. For this rule to be universally acceptable, the man would have to be willing to accept it if he were a woman, something he would presumably be unwilling to do. Or suppose the manufacturer of a product decides to market it even though the manufacturer knows that the product is unsafe when used in a certain common way and that consumers are ignorant of this fact. Applying the universal-acceptability principle, the company’s decision makers would have to be willing to advocate marketing the product even if they were themselves in the position of uninformed consumers. Presumably they would be unwilling to do this. So the rule that would allow the product to be marketed would fail the test of universal acceptability.

### Humanity as an End, Never as Merely a Means

In addition to the principle of universal acceptability, Kant explicitly offered another, very famous way of formulating the core idea of his categorical imperative. According to this formulation, as rational creatures we should always treat other rational creatures as ends in themselves and never as only means to our own ends. This formulation underscores Kant’s belief that every human being has an inherent worth resulting from the sheer possession of rationality. We must always act in a way that respects this humanity in others and in ourselves. When brokers at the Dallas office of Prudential Securities encouraged unnecessary buying and selling of stocks by their clients in order to reap a commission (a practice called “churning”), they failed to do this. They were treating their clients simply as a means to their own ends and not respecting them as persons, as ends in themselves.<sup>8</sup>

As rational beings, humans would act inconsistently if they did not treat everyone else the way they themselves would want to be treated. Here we see shades of the Golden Rule. Indeed, Kant’s moral philosophy can be viewed as a profound reconsideration of this basic nonconsequentialist principle. Because rational beings recognize their own inner worth, they would never wish to be used as if they were entities possessing value only as means to an end.

Kant maintained, as explained first, that an action is morally right if and only if we can will it to be a universal law of conduct. We now have two ways of reformulating his categorical imperative that may be easier to grasp and apply:

*First reformulation:* An action is right if and only if its underlying principle is universally acceptable, that is, acceptable to all rational parties whether the action is done by them or to them.

*Second reformulation:* One must always act so as to treat other people as ends in themselves.

Two alternative formulations of the categorical imperative.

### KANT IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Like utilitarianism, Kant's moral theory has application for organizations.

*First*, the categorical imperative gives us firm rules to follow in moral decision making, rules that do not depend on circumstances or results and that do not permit individual exceptions. No matter what the consequences may be or who does it, some actions are always wrong. Lying is an example: No matter how much good might come from misrepresenting a product, such deliberate misrepresentation is always wrong. Similarly, it would be wrong to expose uninformed workers to some occupational health risk on the grounds that it advances medical knowledge.

*Second*, Kant introduces an important humanistic dimension into business decisions. One of the principal objections to egoism and utilitarianism is that they permit us to treat humans as means to ends. Kant's principles clearly forbid this. Many would say that respect for the inherent worth and dignity of human beings is much needed today in business, where encroaching technology and the pressure of globalization tend to dehumanize people under the guise of efficiency. Kant's theory puts the emphasis on organizational decision making where it belongs: on individuals. Organizations, after all, involve human beings working in concert to provide goods and services for other human beings. The primacy Kant gives the individual reflects this essential aspect of business.

*Third*, Kant stresses the importance of motivation and of acting on principle. According to Kant, it is not enough just to do the right thing; an action has moral worth only if it is done from a sense of duty—that is, from a desire to do the right thing for its own sake. The importance of this point is too often forgotten. Sometimes when individuals and organizations believe that an action promotes the interests of everyone, they are actually rationalizing—doing what is best for themselves and only imagining that somehow it will also benefit others. Worse still, they may defend their actions as morally praiseworthy when, in fact, they are only behaving egoistically. They wouldn't do the morally justifiable thing if they didn't think it would pay off for them. By stressing the importance of motivation, a Kantian approach serves as a corrective to this. Even an action that helps others has moral value for Kant only if the person doing it is morally motivated—that is, acting on principle or out of moral conviction.

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#### SUMMARY

There are two alternative formulations of the categorical imperative. The first is that the action must be acceptable to all rational parties whether it is done by them or done to them. The second is that one must always treat other people as ends, never merely as means.

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### CRITICAL INQUIRIES OF KANT'S ETHICS

1. **What has moral worth?** According to Kant, the convenience store owner who returns the ten dollars to the customer is doing the right thing. But if his action is motivated by self-interest (perhaps he wants to get a reputation for honesty), then it does not have moral worth. That seems plausible. But Kant also held that if the owner does the right thing out of instinct, habit, or sympathy for the other person, then the act still does not have moral worth. Only if it is done out of a sense of duty does the action have moral value. Many moral theorists have felt that Kant was too severe on this point. Do we really want to say that giving money to famine relief has no moral worth if one is emotionally moved to do so by pictures of starving children rather than by a sense of duty? We might, to the contrary, find a person with strong human sympathies no less worthy or admirable than the person who gives solely out of an abstract sense of duty.
2. **Is the categorical imperative an adequate test of right?** Kant said that a moral rule must function without exception. Critics wonder why the prohibition against actions such as lying, promise breaking, and suicide must be exceptionless. They say that Kant failed to distinguish between saying that a person should not except himself or herself from a rule and that the rule itself cannot specify exceptions.



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Is the categorical imperative an adequate test of right? A moral rule must function without exception, according to Kant. How applicable is that tenet to torture?

If stealing is wrong, it's wrong for me as well as for you. "Stealing is wrong, except if I do it" is not universalizable, for then stealing would be right for all to do, which contradicts the assertion that stealing is wrong. But just because no one may make of oneself an exception to a rule, it does not follow that the rule itself cannot specify exceptions.

Suppose, for example, that we decide that stealing is sometimes right, perhaps in the case of a person who is starving. Thus, the rule becomes "Never steal except when starving." This rule seems just as universalizable as "Never steal." The phrase "except. . . ." can be viewed not as justifying a violation of the rule but as building a qualification into it. Critics in effect are asking why a qualified rule is not just as good as an unqualified one. If it is, then we no longer need to state rules in the simple, direct, unqualified manner that Kant did.

In fairness to Kant, it could be argued that his universalization formula can be interpreted flexibly enough to meet commonsense objections. For example, perhaps we could universalize the principle that individuals should steal rather than starve to death or that it is permissible to take one's own life to extinguish unspeakable pain. Yet to qualify the rules against stealing, lying, and taking one's life seems to invite a non-Kantian analysis to justify the exceptions. One could, it seems, universalize more than one moral rule in a given situation: "Do not lie unless a life is at stake" versus "Lying is wrong unless necessary to avoid the suffering of innocent people." If so, then the categorical imperative would supply at best a necessary, but not a sufficient, test of right. But once we start choosing among various alternative rules, then we are adopting an approach to ethics that Kant would have rejected.

3. **What does it mean to treat people as means?** Kant's mandate that individuals must always be considered as ends in themselves and never merely as means expresses our sense of the intrinsic value of the human spirit and has profound moral appeal. Yet it is not always clear when people are being treated as ends and when merely as means. For example, Kant believed that prostitution is immoral because, by selling their sexual services, prostitutes allow themselves to be treated as means. Prostitutes,

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#### SUMMARY

Kant's ethics gives us firm standards that do not depend on results; it injects a humanistic element into moral decision making and stresses the importance of acting on principle and from a sense of duty. Critics, however, worry that (1) Kant's view of moral worth is too restrictive, (2) the categorical imperative is not a sufficient test of right and wrong, and (3) distinguishing between treating people as means and respecting them as ends in themselves may be difficult in practice.

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however, are not the only ones to sell their services. Anyone who works for a wage does so. Does that mean that we are all being treated immorally, because our employers are presumably hiring us as a means to advance their own ends? Presumably not, because we freely agreed to do the work. But then the prostitute might have freely chosen that line of work, too.

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## OTHER NONCONSEQUENTIALIST PERSPECTIVES

For Kant, the categorical imperative provided the basic test of right and wrong, and he was resolutely nonconsequentialist in his application of it. You know now what he would say about the case of the deathbed promise: The maxim permitting you to break your promise cannot be universalized, and hence it would be immoral of you to give the money to the orphanage, despite its bringing about more happiness. But nonconsequentialists are not necessarily Kantians, and several different nonutilitarian moral concerns emerged in the discussion of the deathbed promise example.

Critics of act utilitarianism believe that it is faulty for maintaining that we have one and only one moral duty. A utilitarian might follow various principles as rules of thumb, but they are only calculation substitutes. All that matters morally to utilitarians is the maximization of happiness. Yet this idea, many philosophers think, fails to do justice to the richness and complexity of our moral lives.

### PRIMA FACIE OBLIGATIONS

One influential philosopher who argued this way was the British scholar W. D. Ross (1877–1971).<sup>9</sup> Ross rejected utilitarianism as too simple and as untrue to the way we ordinarily think about morality and about our moral obligations. We see ourselves, Ross and like-minded thinkers contend, as being under various moral duties that cannot be reduced to the single obligation to maximize happiness. Often these obligations grow out of special relationships into which we enter or out of determinate roles that we undertake. Our lives are intertwined with other people's in particular ways, and we have, as a result, certain specific moral obligations.

For example, as a professor, Rodriguez is obligated to assist her students in the learning process and to evaluate their work in a fair and educationally productive way—obligations to the specific people in her classroom that she does not have to other people. As a spouse, Rodriguez must maintain a certain emotional and sexual fidelity to her partner. As a parent, she must provide for the individual human beings who are her children. As a friend to Smith, she may have a moral responsibility to help him out in a time of crisis. Having borrowed money from Chang, Rodriguez is morally obligated to pay it back. Thus, different relationships and different circumstances generate a variety of specific moral obligations.

In addition, we have moral duties that do not arise from our unique interactions and relationships with other people. For example, we ought to treat all people fairly, do what we can to remedy injustices, and make an effort to promote human welfare generally. The latter obligation is important, but for a nonconsequentialist like Ross, it is only one among various obligations that people have.

At any given time, we are likely to be under more than one obligation, and sometimes these obligations can conflict—that is, we may have an obligation to do *A* and an obligation to do *B*, where it is not possible for us to do both *A* and *B*. For example, I promise to meet a friend on an urgent matter, and now, as I am hurrying there, I pass

Ross believed that we have various moral duties that cannot be reduced to one single obligation to maximize happiness.

an injured person who is obviously in need of help. Stopping to aid the person will make it impossible for me to fulfill my promise. What should I do? For moral philosophers like Ross, there is no single answer for all cases. What I ought to do will depend on the circumstances and relative importance of the conflicting obligations. I have an obligation to keep my promise, and I have an obligation to assist someone in distress. What I must decide is which of these obligations is, in the given circumstance, the more important. I must weigh the moral significance of the promise against the comparative moral urgency of assisting the injured person.

Ross and many contemporary philosophers believe that all (or at least most) of our moral obligations are *prima facie* ones. A **prima facie obligation** is an obligation that can be overridden by a more important obligation. For instance, we take the keeping of promises seriously, but almost everyone would agree that in some circumstances—for example, when a life is at stake—it would be not only morally permissible, but morally required, to break a promise. Our obligation to keep a promise is a real one, and if there is no conflicting obligation, then we must keep the promise. But that obligation is not absolute or categorical; it could in principle be outweighed by a more stringent moral obligation. The idea that our obligations are *prima facie* is foreign to Kant's way of looking at things.

Consider an example that Kant himself discussed.<sup>10</sup> Imagine that a murderer comes to your door, wanting to know where your friend is so that he can kill her. Your friend is in fact hiding in your bedroom closet. Most people would agree that your obligation to your friend overrides your general obligation to tell the truth and that the right thing to do would be to lie to the murderer to throw him off your friend's trail. Although you have a genuine obligation to tell the truth, it is a *prima facie* obligation, one that other moral considerations can outweigh. Kant disagreed. He maintained that you must always tell the truth—that is, in all circumstances and without exception. For him, telling the truth is an absolute or categorical obligation, not a *prima facie* one.

Ross thought that our various *prima facie* obligations could be divided into seven basic types: duties of fidelity (that is, to respect explicit and implicit promises), duties of reparation (for previous wrongful acts), duties of gratitude, duties of justice, duties of beneficence (that is, to make the condition of others better), duties of self-improvement, and duties not to injure others.<sup>11</sup> Unlike utilitarianism, Ross's ethical perspective is pluralistic in recognizing a variety of genuine obligations. But contrary to Kant, Ross does not see these obligations as absolute and exceptionless. On both points, Ross contended that his view of morality more closely fits with our actual moral experience and the way we view our moral obligations.

Ross also saw himself as siding with commonsense morality in maintaining that our *prima facie* obligations are obvious. He believed that the basic principles of duty are as self-evident as the simplest rules of arithmetic and that any person who has reached the age of reason can discern that it is wrong to lie, to break promises, and to injure people needlessly. However, what we should do, all things considered, when two or more *prima facie* obligations conflict is often difficult to judge. In deciding what to do in any concrete situation, Ross thought, we are always "taking a moral risk."<sup>12</sup> Even after the fullest reflection, judgments about which of these self-evident rules should govern our conduct are only "more or less probable opinions which are not logically justified conclusions from the general principles that are recognised as self-evident."<sup>13</sup>

Ross's pluralistic ethical perspective differs from utilitarianism. Ross also rejected Kant's belief that our moral obligations are absolute and exceptionless.

## ASSISTING OTHERS

Nonconsequentialists believe that utilitarianism presents too simple a picture of our moral world. In addition, they worry that utilitarianism risks making us all slaves to the maximization of total happiness. Stop and think about it: Isn't there something that you could