Ethics at Work

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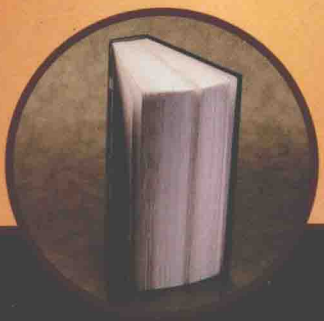

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Preface

Ethics at Work is designed specifically for the classroom. It can be used profitably in courses in business ethics, in general or applied ethics courses, and in courses on business and society. We intended it to be intellectually challenging, yet straightforward and free of jargon. We sought to achieve a high level of theoretical sophistication but grounded our discussions in case studies. We tried to write an honest book, one that acknowledges both the importance and limitations of applying ethical theories in the workplace. We hope we have written a book that will promote serious reflection about ethical challenges in the contemporary world of work.

Three guiding convictions were central as we set about writing *Ethics at Work*. First, we believe that ethical problems arising at work are a distinctive set of problems that challenge individual women and men to make difficult personal choices. Secondly, there are persuasive, competing theoretical perspectives on these problems. Understanding some of the most important of these perspectives is important for making and justifying personal ethical decisions at work. Finally, we hold that understanding an ethical theory requires development of the ability to apply the theory to particular cases.

The literature on business ethics is young and still evolving. We see two errors in much of it and have taken great care to avoid them in this text. First, many writers on the subject begin with the assumption that the principal problem of business ethics is capitalism. On this account, the commercial, profit-driven, private sector of our economy is the source of most of our ethical conflicts at work. The second error follows: If the problem is the economic system, the ethical analysis must be systemic as well. The central role of the individual woman and man at work is therefore deemphasized.

In our view, the essential problems of business ethics arise because we are *at* work, because we assume special roles in our jobs, and because many of the things expected of us in these roles differ widely from what is expected at home or with friends. No doubt, the particular

character of our economic system causes some ethical conflicts and it surely affects the expression of many others. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the structure of work itself is responsible for a host of ethical problems that affect not only the private, for-profit sector but government and the nonprofit sector as well. In the text, we draw cases and examples of ethical problems from all three workplaces.

As a consequence, we treat ethical problems at work as problems of people, not of systems. Systems can set the horizon for choice, but individuals at work must make their own ethical choices. Sometimes these choices concern particulars, sometimes they concern policies, but in the final analysis they are choices of men and women at work. We assumed throughout that people at work need and want direction in making and justifying difficult ethical choices.

Providing that direction involves an appeal to ethical theories. Theories are ways of looking at particulars. They help to organize, prioritize, and justify. They give us perspective and lead us toward choice. Rarely do they dictate a single choice, however. Ethical theories help in probing ethical problems but do not resolve them. So it is with *Ethics at Work*—theories are used as tools for analysis, but most conclusions are left to the reader.

The task of bringing ethics to work is made more complex by the fact that there are differing ethical theories that offer comprehensive and competing perspectives. We could have chosen one such theory and used it throughout the book. That would have been simpler, but it would have misrepresented an important reality: theoretical disagreement among thinkers in ethics. We chose to capture part of this reality by using two of the most compelling contemporary theories and developing two different versions of each. Thus on most issues in the text, we take the reader through four ethical perspectives shaped by the theories we use.

The basic insights of the two theories are straightforward. The first, utilitarianism, holds that we are obliged to maximize happiness by our choices. When we apply that insight case-by-case, the resulting perspective is act utilitarianism. When we apply it to rules that govern cases, the result is rule utilitarianism. The alternative theory, contractarianism, holds that we must be fair by upholding the social contracts we have with others. When the stress is on agreements actually made with others, we call the resulting perspective a less restrictive contractarianism. When we appeal to keeping hypothetical agreements that we would have made if we were free of bias, we call the resulting view a more restrictive contractarianism.

Throughout *Ethics at Work* we ask if a given choice produces happiness in this case and as a rule and if it is fair in light of actual and hypothetical social contracts. Thus, the text is also a study of ethical theories at work. At several key points, we invite the reader to appraise

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the effectiveness of each perspective in helping to deal with ethical problems at work.

Organization and Use of the Text

The chapters of the text follow an appropriate sequence for a course in ethics. The first two chapters are introductory. Chapter One sets the problem of deciding what is the right thing to do in the particular context of work, and Chapter Two discusses whether there are any easy ways out of this problem. The next three chapters are theoretical, laying out the utilitarian and contract approaches as ways of deciding both what acts we should perform and what character traits we should cultivate. Chapters Six through Twelve apply these theories to cases. They contain twenty-eight detailed case studies in which all four ethical perspectives are used. Chapter Thirteen concludes the text by investigating which of the four approaches, if applied, would probably yield the most rewarding career. This chapter also addresses the question of whether it could be more rewarding still to take an unethical approach to one's career.

Fifty exercise sets, which are integrated into the text, challenge readers to develop their understanding of the theories and problems at hand by extending discussions from the text into related areas. Many of the exercises require considerable time and thought. Some of these might be best carried out in groups or in class discussion, so that the ideas and background knowledge of many individuals can be brought to bear on particular problems. Additionally, Appendix One contains innovative exercises designed specifically for groups. We provide enough exercises that instructors may select those most suitable for their classes rather than assign all of them.

Acknowledgments

Our development of cases and exercises that reflect the practical demands of work was assisted by perspectives we received from others. We conducted numerous interviews with women and men in varied lines of work. We interviewed a small-business entrepreneur, a policeman, an architect, a director of a nonprofit community agency, a department head of an insurance company, a systems communication coordinator, and an executive secretary, to give a few examples. We asked each of our interviewees questions such as: What do you do in your job and what is your work organization like? What ethical prob-

lems do you encounter at work? Which are the most serious and the most common? Which involve the public or others outside the organization? Have you ever—or ever considered—blowing the whistle on some unethical practice at work? When you know what's right, what factors at work make it hard to do what's right?

Our interviewees were exceptionally candid. Their experiences are reflected in the pages of this book. We are most grateful to them.

We are also grateful to our families and our universities for supporting us in this effort. Among those who were particularly helpful in arranging interviews or in providing technical information concerning specific occupations are John Kerrigan, Doug Cederblom, and Derrel Cederblom. The students in the University of Nebraska-Omaha class in business ethics of fall 1988 helped us sharpen the classroom effectiveness of *Ethics at Work*. We are also indebted to Nanci J. Borg and to Creighton University's Center for Health Policy and Ethics for assistance in preparing the text.

Special thanks are due to our editor, Kenneth King, for his encouragement and advice throughout the project, and to Angela Mann and the Wadsworth staff for shaping the manuscript into book form. We would like to thank the reviewers for their many suggestions. They are Carol Campbell, University of Charleston/The River School; Vivien Schmidt, University of Massachusetts, Boston; John C. Modschiedler, College of Du Page; Frank Fair, Sam Houston State University; and Robert M. Johnson, Castleton State College.

Finally, we are grateful for the opportunity to work together on this project. If every working experience were so happy and fair, there would be far fewer ethical problems at work.

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