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## Dirty Hands

### Chapter Summary

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This chapter explores the problem of “dirty hands and its relation to social roles. The term “dirty hands” is borrowed from the political theory of Machiavelli who argued that social roles bring with them certain special obligations which are different from the obligations of private life. In one’s public role as a political leader, Machiavelli suggested, one may have to get one’s hands dirty insofar as the demands of that role involve making decisions viewed as unpopular, even unethical, from other perspectives.

This basic position is also expressed in the work of Albert Carr. With respect to the context of business, Carr contends that in one’s role as a business person it is sometimes necessary to deceive and bluff. While getting one’s hands dirty in this way may bring feelings of uneasiness, for Carr, bluffing and deception are justified on the ground that the context of business is a zero-sum game and should, accordingly, be viewed as a form of gamesmanship involving a special ethic—that of winning.

Much of this chapter is devoted to critically analyzing this basic position. The authors claim that Carr’s position is far too extreme. By insisting that how businesses *do* act is how they *should* act, Carr exempts business from ethics altogether. People working in professions are held to certain high standards of ethical conduct. Why should it be any different for people working in business? And

can one even sustain such a sharp distinction between a public and private morality in the first place? These are difficult questions and the authors recognize that they have no easy answers. Dirty hands may well be necessary to some extent—but to what extent? By taking us through a variety of different permutations, examples and analyses, by critically scrutinizing the distinction between public and private morality, the authors attempt to get some clarity on this difficult problem.

They conclude with the suggestion that, while survival in the competitive world of business does sometimes require making difficult decisions (for example, laying off employees in hard times to reduce costs), ultimately “good ethics is good business,” not merely because being ethical is conducive to self-interested money making. The point cuts deeper than this: ethics by definition is about doing something because it is right. Failure to appreciate this important insight is surely a fundamental stumbling block to producing an ethical world—and a business world exempt from ethics altogether, in which dirty hands becomes the justifiable norm, in which business is always only about self-interested gamesmanship, runs the risk of becoming “the last refuge of scoundrels.”

## Key Terms

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**dirty hands** a situation in which, even if someone does the morally right thing, that person has also done something that is morally wrong. The moral wrongness does not evaporate simply in virtue of the rightness of the act (p. 59)

**private morality** the morality and moral requirements and considerations present in one’s personal affairs, whether or not those affairs are private (p. 59)

**public morality** the morality and moral requirements and considerations present when one has a public persona, role or position (p. 59)

## Study Questions

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### Multiple Choice Questions

1. For Machiavelli, ethics in public life demands that one \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) abandon one’s private aspirations in one’s public role
  - b) be ethical because one is publicly accountable
  - c) comply with public regulations
  - d) is completely indifferent to ethics
2. According to Albert Carr, people in business \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) follow stringent ethical guidelines
  - b) integrate their private morality into their public responsibilities
  - c) perform as circumstances require and expect
  - d) justify their actions on the basis of self-interest

3. The major point that Carr misses in his theory is that \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) altruism belongs in people's private lives
  - b) humans are not well adapted to the game of business
  - c) people who are naturally successful in business have lower ethical standards than average people
  - d) the real people who conduct business cannot leave their private values at home
  
4. The fact that dirty hands are sometimes unavoidable is not grounds for abandoning ethical standards of conduct in business altogether because \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) business is about making money not ethics
  - b) doing so would exempt business from ethics altogether
  - c) competitors may not be ethical
  - d) dirty hands are never truly unavoidable
  
5. The ethical manager's decision-making abilities are circumscribed by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) his fiduciary duties to the corporation
  - b) the state of the economy
  - c) popular opinion
  - d) his private life
  
6. Political leaders and business managers are often interpreted through the lens of dirty hands because they share in common \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) a quest for personal power
  - b) justifying an action by a good to be achieved
  - c) unethical motives
  - d) identical private morality requirements
  
7. Private morality refers to \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) what one does at home
  - b) what one holds privately to be the case
  - c) what is your own business
  - d) moral considerations present in one's personal affairs
  
8. Public morality refers to \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) public norms
  - b) the moral requirements of a social role
  - c) norms that are not private
  - d) the morality of the public
  
9. Dirty hands sometimes involves a situation where \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) doing the right thing brings large profits
  - b) doing the right thing amounts to a win-win situation
  - c) doing the right thing also brings a moral cost
  - d) doing the right thing brings moral censure

10. According to the author, if a client tells a lawyer that he plans to commit a crime the lawyer has an obligation \_\_\_\_\_.
- to not disclose the information
  - to not disclose the information if it pays
  - to disclose the information
  - to change the client's mind
11. Ethics is about \_\_\_\_\_.
- doing the right thing despite the personal cost
  - self-serving
  - doing the right thing for financial gain
  - making business decision that have no negative effects
12. According to Bernard Williams, a "morally disagreeable remainder" describes a situation in which \_\_\_\_\_.
- others do not disagree with you
  - a business disagrees with prevailing moral norms
  - there are conflicting and incommensurable values involved
  - a business makes an unethical decision
13. The problem with the notion that "ethics is only good when it is good for business" is that it \_\_\_\_\_.
- gives incentive to business
  - reduces ethics to self-interest
  - satisfies the public's interest that business act ethically
  - creates wealth for shareholders
14. Self-interest is not an ethical reason for acting because \_\_\_\_\_.
- ethics is about doing the right thing despite the costs
  - one has not made one's profit ethically
  - business is about making profits
  - one must only comply with the law
15. The perception that business is not subject to the same agreed upon standards of common decency is based on the idea that \_\_\_\_\_.
- markets have nothing to do with morals and so require no constraints
  - business creates wealth for society
  - business is subject to regulations the way professions are
  - business is larger than any single person's individual morality

### True and False Questions

- According to Albert Carr, there is an inconsistency between managers who are tough at work but caring and sensitive at home.
- According to Albert Carr, applying the golden rule is not realistic in the business world.

3. For Machiavelli, a ruler must avoid dirty hands.
4. Carr suggests that the way businesses act is the way they ought to act.
5. Dirty hands are inescapable in business but never in private life.
6. According to Thomas Nagel, moral hierarchy is the same in public and private life.
7. Bernard Williams contends that in public life it is sometimes right to do something that is not moral.
8. The game metaphor used in relation to business brings with it the possibility of exempting business from ethics altogether.
9. Moral choices almost always involve win–win situations.
10. According to Bernard Williams, a morally disagreeable remainder describes a situation where one must do wrong to do right.
11. Lord Devlin’s view of the law is on par with Carr’s view of business.
12. Agent neutrality is sufficient to cleanse dirty hands.
13. It has been argued that in the ordering of priorities keeping promises is of higher priority in public life than in private life.
14. Since there are strong prudential reasons for business to be ethical, prudence lies at the basis of ethics.
15. The case of Arsenic and Old Lace illustrates the notion that good ends make for good means.

### Short Answer Questions

1. Why does Carr think that the context of business brings with it a special ethic, and what exactly does this ethic involve?
2. Why do critics disagree with Carr’s conception of social responsibility in business?
3. What is the relationship between private morality and public morality, and how does the phenomenon of dirty hand fit into this?
4. What does Bernard Williams mean by a “morally disagreeable reminder”?
5. Why might it be argued that utilitarianism does not account for the problem of dirty hands?

## Essay Questions

1. Explain in detail and then critically evaluate the arguments for and against the view that business involves a special ethic. Which position do you think is right and why?
2. It is often said that being ethical is prudent. Why is prudence not a sufficient basis for an ethic? And why, despite not being a profession, does business have a strong need for an ethic?
3. Explain the phenomenon of dirty hands. Do you think dirty hands are inevitable in a social role? Do you think the analogy between dirty hands in politics and business is a good one? What are the consequences of dirty hands in business?

## Answers to Study Questions

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### Multiple Choice Questions

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|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. <b>a</b> (p. 49) | 6. <b>b</b> (p. 57)  | 11. <b>a</b> (p. 64)     |
| 2. <b>c</b> (p. 49) | 7. <b>d</b> (p. 59)  | 12. <b>c</b> (p. 55)     |
| 3. <b>d</b> (p. 50) | 8. <b>b</b> (p. 59)  | 13. <b>b</b> (p. 63)     |
| 4. <b>b</b> (p. 52) | 9. <b>c</b> (p. 59)  | 14. <b>a</b> (pp. 63–64) |
| 5. <b>a</b> (p. 56) | 10. <b>a</b> (p. 61) | 15. <b>a</b> (p. 63)     |

### True or False Questions

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|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. <b>F</b> (p. 49)     | 6. <b>F</b> (p. 55)  | 11. <b>F</b> (p. 53) |
| 2. <b>T</b> (p. 50)     | 7. <b>T</b> (p. 55)  | 12. <b>F</b> (p. 58) |
| 3. <b>F</b> (p. 49)     | 8. <b>T</b> (p. 52)  | 13. <b>F</b> (p. 59) |
| 4. <b>T</b> (pp. 52–53) | 9. <b>F</b> (p. 62)  | 14. <b>F</b> (p. 63) |
| 5. <b>F</b> (p. 51)     | 10. <b>T</b> (p. 62) | 15. <b>T</b> (p. 57) |

### Short Answer Questions

1. Carr argues that the competitive world of business is like a game, analogous to poker; that is, just like in poker, the aim is to *win* and so a certain degree of bluffing and deception is necessary in this unique context. Carr also contends that one can draw a distinction between one's private morality (the morality one adheres to at home) and a public morality (the morality implicit in the practice of business). Thus when at work one leaves one's private morality at home and plays by the rules of the business game. (p. 50)
2. Critics of Carr insist that Carr's sharp distinction between a private and public morality is specious. Business is conducted by real people who cannot simply leave their private morality at home. And even if they could, this would be a mistake: a business world built on such a morality would be inefficient and, ultimately, exempt from ethics altogether. (p. 50)
3. Machiavelli argued that when in a public role, for instance the role of a political leader, one must sometimes make decisions which involve dirty hands; that is, decisions which are unpopular, often even unethical seen from the perspective of one's ordinary, private life. In short, dirty hands are the inevitable requirement and outcome of being in a public, social role. Business is no exception: business people must often make difficult and, and from the perspective of common morality, unethical decisions in order to survive. (p. 50)
4. A "morally disagreeable remainder" captures the notion that sometimes our decisions involve dilemmas; that is, no matter the choice made, there will always remain something which is morally problematic and with which others (and indeed oneself) will disagree. In other words, a morally disagreeable remainder captures the notion that sometimes there are features of a situation which involve a conflict of rights, duties, and obligations. (p. 55)

5. Utilitarianism asks us to judge the rightness of an action in terms of the overall happiness or welfare that results from an action. On this view, an action that maximizes net happiness is right and an action that produces more overall unhappiness is wrong. Thus there cannot be a problem of dirty hands, for on a utility analysis there cannot be a conflict of rights and duties. (p. 61)

## Essay Questions

Answers will vary.