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## Preface

Our goal is to provide students with a textbook that is up to date and comprehensive in its coverage of legal and regulatory issues—and organized to permit instructors to tailor the materials to their particular approach. This book engages students by relating law to everyday events with which they are already familiar (or with which they are familiarizing themselves in other business courses) and by its clear, concise, and readable style. (An earlier business law text by authors Lieberman and Siedel was hailed “the best written text in a very crowded field.”)

This textbook provides context and essential concepts across the entire range of legal issues with which managers and business executives must grapple. The text provides the vocabulary and legal acumen necessary for businesspeople to talk in an educated way to their customers, employees, suppliers, government officials—and to their own lawyers.

Traditional publishers often create confusion among customers in the text selection process by offering a huge array of publications. Once a text is selected, customers might still have to customize the text to meet their needs. For example, publishers usually offer books that include either case summaries or excerpted cases, but some instructors prefer to combine case summaries with a few excerpted cases so that students can experience reading original material. Likewise, the manner in which most conventional texts incorporate video is cumbersome because the videos are contained in a separate library, which makes access more complicating for instructors and students.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction to Law and Legal Systems

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Distinguish different philosophies of law—schools of legal thought—and explain their relevance.
2. Identify the various aims that a functioning legal system can serve.
3. Explain how politics and law are related.
4. Identify the sources of law and which laws have priority over other laws.
5. Understand some basic differences between the US legal system and other legal systems.

Law has different meanings as well as different functions. Philosophers have considered issues of justice and law for centuries, and several different approaches, or schools of legal thought, have emerged. In this chapter, we will look at those different meanings and approaches and will consider how social and political dynamics interact with the ideas that animate the various schools of legal thought. We will also look at typical sources of “positive law” in the United States and how some of those sources have priority over others, and we will set out some basic differences between the US legal system and other legal systems.

## 1.1 What Is Law?

*Law* is a word that means different things at different times. *Black’s Law Dictionary* says that law is “a body of rules of action or conduct prescribed by controlling authority, and having binding legal force. That which must be obeyed and followed by citizens subject to sanctions or legal consequence is a law.” <sup>[1]</sup>

### Functions of the Law

In a nation, the law can serve to (1) keep the peace, (2) maintain the status quo, (3) preserve individual rights, (4) protect minorities against majorities, (5) promote social justice, and (6) provide for orderly social change. Some legal systems serve these purposes better than others. Although a nation ruled by an authoritarian government may keep the peace and maintain the status quo, it may also oppress minorities or political opponents (e.g., Burma, Zimbabwe, or

Iraq under Saddam Hussein). Under colonialism, European nations often imposed peace in countries whose borders were somewhat arbitrarily created by those same European nations. Over several centuries prior to the twentieth century, empires were built by Spain, Portugal, Britain, Holland, France, Germany, Belgium, and Italy. With regard to the functions of the law, the empire may have kept the peace—largely with force—but it changed the status quo and seldom promoted the native peoples' rights or social justice within the colonized nation. In nations that were former colonies of European nations, various ethnic and tribal factions have frequently made it difficult for a single, united government to rule effectively. In Rwanda, for example, power struggles between Hutus and Tutsis resulted in genocide of the Tutsi minority. (Genocide is the deliberate and systematic killing or displacement of one group of people by another group. In 1948, the international community formally condemned the crime of genocide.) In nations of the former Soviet Union, the withdrawal of a central power created power vacuums that were exploited by ethnic leaders. When Yugoslavia broke up, the different ethnic groups—Croats, Bosnians, and Serbians—fought bitterly for home turf rather than share power. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the effective blending of different groups of families, tribes, sects, and ethnic groups into a national governing body that shares power remains to be seen.

## **Law and Politics**

In the United States, legislators, judges, administrative agencies, governors, and presidents make law, with substantial input from corporations, lobbyists, and a diverse group of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) such as the American Petroleum Institute, the Sierra Club, and the National Rifle Association. In the fifty states, judges are often appointed by governors or elected by the people. The process of electing state judges has become more and more politicized in the past fifteen years, with growing campaign contributions from those who would seek to seat judges with similar political leanings.

In the federal system, judges are appointed by an elected official (the president) and confirmed by other elected officials (the Senate). If the president is from one party and the other party holds a majority of Senate seats, political conflicts may come up during the judges' confirmation processes. Such a division has been fairly frequent over the past fifty years.

In most nation-states (as countries are called in international law), knowing who has power to make and enforce the laws is a matter of knowing who has political power; in many places, the people or groups that have military power can also command political power to make and enforce the laws. Revolutions are difficult and contentious, but each year there are revolts against existing political-legal authority; an aspiration for democratic rule, or greater “rights” for citizens, is a recurring theme in politics and law.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Law is the result of political action, and the political landscape is vastly different from nation to nation. Unstable or authoritarian governments often fail to serve the principal functions of law.

#### EXERCISES

1. Consider Burma (named Myanmar by its military rulers). What political rights do you have that the average Burmese citizen does not?
2. What is a nongovernment organization, and what does it have to do with government? Do you contribute to (or are you active in) a nongovernment organization? What kind of rights do they espouse, what kind of laws do they support, and what kind of laws do they oppose?

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[1] *Black's Law Dictionary*, 6th ed., s.v. “law.”

## 1.2 Schools of Legal Thought

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Distinguish different philosophies of law—schools of legal thought—and explain their relevance.
2. Explain why natural law relates to the rights that the founders of the US political-legal system found important.
3. Describe legal positivism and explain how it differs from natural law.
4. Differentiate critical legal studies and ecofeminist legal perspectives from both natural law and legal positivist perspectives.

There are different schools (or philosophies) concerning what law is all about. Philosophy of law is also called jurisprudence, and the two main schools are legal positivism and natural law.

Although there are others (see [Section 1.2.3 "Other Schools of Legal Thought"](#)), these two are the most influential in how people think about the law.

### **Legal Positivism: Law as Sovereign Command**

As legal philosopher John Austin concisely put it, “Law is the command of a sovereign.” Law is only law, in other words, if it comes from a recognized authority and can be enforced by that authority, or sovereign—such as a king, a president, or a dictator—who has power within a defined area or territory. Positivism is a philosophical movement that claims that science provides the only knowledge precise enough to be worthwhile. But what are we to make of the social phenomena of laws?

We could examine existing statutes—executive orders, regulations, or judicial decisions—in a fairly precise way to find out what the law says. For example, we could look at the posted speed limits on most US highways and conclude that the “correct” or “right” speed is no more than fifty-five miles per hour. Or we could look a little deeper and find out how the written law is usually applied. Doing so, we might conclude that sixty-one miles per hour is generally allowed by most state troopers, but that occasionally someone gets ticketed for doing fifty-seven miles per hour in a fifty-five miles per hour zone. Either approach is empirical, even if not rigorously scientific. The first approach, examining in a precise way what the rule itself says, is sometimes known as the “positivist” school of legal thought. The second approach—which relies on social context and the actual behavior of the principal actors who enforce the law—is akin to the “legal realist” school of thought (see [Section 1.2.3 "Other Schools of Legal Thought"](#)).

Positivism has its limits and its critics. New Testament readers may recall that King Herod, fearing the birth of a Messiah, issued a decree that all male children below a certain age be killed. Because it was the command of a sovereign, the decree was carried out (or, in legal jargon, the decree was “executed”). Suppose a group seizes power in a particular place and commands that women cannot attend school and can only be treated medically by women, even if their condition is life-threatening and women doctors are few and far between. Suppose also that this command is carried out, just because it is the law and is enforced with a vengeance.

People who live there will undoubtedly question the wisdom, justice, or goodness of such a law, but it is law nonetheless and is generally carried out. To avoid the law's impact, a citizen would have to flee the country entirely. During the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, from which this example is drawn, many did flee.

The positive-law school of legal thought would recognize the lawmaker's command as legitimate; questions about the law's morality or immorality would not be important. In contrast, the natural-law school of legal thought would refuse to recognize the legitimacy of laws that did not conform to natural, universal, or divine law. If a lawmaker issued a command that was in violation of natural law, a citizen would be morally justified in demonstrating civil disobedience. For example, in refusing to give up her seat to a white person, Rosa Parks believed that she was refusing to obey an unjust law.

## Natural Law

The natural-law school of thought emphasizes that law should be based on a universal moral order. Natural law was "discovered" by humans through the use of reason and by choosing between that which is good and that which is evil. Here is the definition of natural law according to the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*: "Natural law, also called the law of nature in moral and political philosophy, is an objective norm or set of objective norms governing human behavior, similar to the positive laws of a human ruler, but binding on all people alike and usually understood as involving a superhuman legislator." <sup>[1]</sup>

Both the US Constitution and the United Nations (UN) Charter have an affinity for the natural-law outlook, as it emphasizes certain objective norms and rights of individuals and nations. The US Declaration of Independence embodies a natural-law philosophy. The following short extract should provide some sense of the deep beliefs in natural law held by those who signed the document.

## The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America

July 4, 1776

*When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among*

*the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed....*

The natural-law school has been very influential in American legal thinking. The idea that certain rights, for example, are “unalienable” (as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and in the writings of John Locke) is consistent with this view of the law. Individuals may have “God-given” or “natural” rights that government cannot legitimately take away. Government only by consent of the governed is a natural outgrowth of this view.

Civil disobedience—in the tradition of Henry Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, or Martin Luther King Jr.—becomes a matter of morality over “unnatural” law. For example, in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. claims that obeying an unjust law is not moral and that deliberately disobeying an unjust law is in fact a moral act that expresses “the highest respect for law”: “An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law....One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.” <sup>[2]</sup>

Legal positivists, on the other hand, would say that we cannot know with real confidence what “natural” law or “universal” law is. In studying law, we can most effectively learn by just looking at what the written law says, or by examining how it has been applied. In response, natural-law thinkers would argue that if we care about justice, every law and every legal system must be held accountable to some higher standard, however hard that may be to define.

It is easier to know what the law “is” than what the law “should be.” Equal employment laws, for example, have specific statutes, rules, and decisions about racial discrimination. There are always difficult issues of interpretation and decision, which is why courts will resolve differing



views. But how can we know the more fundamental “ought” or “should” of human equality? For example, how do we *know* that “all men are created equal” (from the Declaration of Independence)? Setting aside for the moment questions about the equality of women, or that of slaves, who were not counted as men with equal rights at the time of the declaration—can the statement be empirically proven, or is it simply a matter of a priori knowledge? (*A priori* means “existing in the mind prior to and independent of experience.”) Or is the statement about equality a matter of faith or belief, not really provable either scientifically or rationally? The dialogue between natural-law theorists and more empirically oriented theories of “what law is” will raise similar questions. In this book, we will focus mostly on the law as it is, but not without also raising questions about what it could or should be.

### **Other Schools of Legal Thought**

The historical school of law believes that societies should base their legal decisions today on the examples of the past. Precedent would be more important than moral arguments.

The legal realist school flourished in the 1920s and 1930s as a reaction to the historical school. Legal realists pointed out that because life and society are constantly changing, certain laws and doctrines have to be altered or modernized in order to remain current. The social context of law was more important to legal realists than the formal application of precedent to current or future legal disputes. Rather than suppose that judges inevitably acted objectively in applying an existing rule to a set of facts, legal realists observed that judges had their own beliefs, operated in a social context, and would give legal decisions based on their beliefs and their own social context.

The legal realist view influenced the emergence of the critical legal studies (CLS) school of thought. The “Crits” believe that the social order (and the law) is dominated by those with power, wealth, and influence. Some Crits are clearly influenced by the economist Karl Marx and also by distributive justice theory (see [Chapter 2 "Corporate Social Responsibility and Business Ethics"](#)). The CLS school believes the wealthy have historically oppressed or exploited those with less wealth and have maintained social control through law. In so doing, the wealthy have perpetuated an unjust distribution of both rights and goods in society. Law is politics and is thus

not neutral or value-free. The CLS movement would use the law to overturn the hierarchical structures of domination in the modern society.

Related to the CLS school, yet different, is the ecofeminist school of legal thought. This school emphasizes—and would modify—the long-standing domination of men over both women and the rest of the natural world. Ecofeminists would say that the same social mentality that leads to exploitation of women is at the root of man’s exploitation and degradation of the natural environment. They would say that male ownership of land has led to a “dominator culture,” in which man is not so much a steward of the existing environment or those “subordinate” to him but is charged with making all that he controls economically “productive.” Wives, children, land, and animals are valued as economic resources, and legal systems (until the nineteenth century) largely conferred rights only to men with land. Ecofeminists would say that even with increasing civil and political rights for women (such as the right to vote) and with some nations’ recognizing the rights of children and animals and caring for the environment, the legacy of the past for most nations still confirms the preeminence of “man” and his dominance of both nature and women.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Each of the various schools of legal thought has a particular view of what a legal system is or what it should be. The natural-law theorists emphasize the rights and duties of both government and the governed. Positive law takes as a given that law is simply the command of a sovereign, the political power that those governed will obey. Recent writings in the various legal schools of thought emphasize long-standing patterns of domination of the wealthy over others (the CLS school) and of men over women (ecofeminist legal theory).

#### EXERCISES

1. Vandana Shiva draws a picture of a stream in a forest. She says that in our society the stream is seen as unproductive if it is simply there, fulfilling the need for water of women’s families and communities, until engineers come along and tinker with it, perhaps damming it and using it for generating hydropower. The same is true of a forest, unless it is replaced with a monoculture plantation of a commercial species. A forest may very well be productive—protecting groundwater; creating oxygen; providing fruit, fuel, and craft materials for nearby inhabitants; and creating a habitat for animals that are also a valuable resource. She criticizes

the view that if there is no monetary amount that can contribute to gross domestic product, neither the forest nor the river can be seen as a productive resource. Which school of legal thought does her criticism reflect?

2. Anatole France said, “The law, in its majesty, forbids rich and poor alike from sleeping under bridges.” Which school of legal thought is represented by this quote?
3. Adolf Eichmann was a loyal member of the National Socialist Party in the Third Reich and worked hard under Hitler’s government during World War II to round up Jewish people for incarceration—and eventual extermination—at labor camps like Auschwitz and Buchenwald. After an Israeli “extraction team” took him from Argentina to Israel, he was put on trial for “crimes against humanity.” His defense was that he was “just following orders.” Explain why Eichmann was not an adherent of the natural-law school of legal thought.

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[1] *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “natural law.”

[2] Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

## 1.3 Basic Concepts and Categories of US Positive Law

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. In a general way, differentiate contract law from tort law.
2. Consider the role of law in supporting ethical norms in our society.
3. Understand the differing roles of state law and federal law in the US legal system.
4. Know the difference between criminal cases and civil cases.

Most of what we discuss in this book is positive law—US positive law in particular. We will also consider the laws and legal systems of other nations. But first, it will be useful to cover some basic concepts and distinctions.

### Law: The Moral Minimums in a Democratic Society

The law does not correct (or claim to correct) every wrong that occurs in society. At a minimum, it aims to curb the worst kind of wrongs, the kinds of wrongs that violate what might be called the “moral minimums” that a community demands of its members. These include not only violations of criminal law (see [Chapter 6 "Criminal Law"](#)) but also torts (see [Chapter 7](#)

"Introduction to Tort Law") and broken promises (see Chapter 8 "Introduction to Contract Law"). Thus it may be wrong to refuse to return a phone call from a friend, but that wrong will not result in a viable lawsuit against you. But if a phone (or the Internet) is used to libel or slander someone, a tort has been committed, and the law may allow the defamed person to be compensated.

There is a strong association between what we generally think of as ethical behavior and what the laws require and provide. For example, contract law upholds society's sense that promises—in general—should be kept. Promise-breaking is seen as unethical. The law provides remedies for broken promises (in breach of contract cases) but not for all broken promises; some excuses are accepted when it would be reasonable to do so. For tort law, harming others is considered unethical. If people are not restrained by law from harming one another, orderly society would be undone, leading to anarchy. Tort law provides for compensation when serious injuries or harms occur. As for property law issues, we generally believe that private ownership of property is socially useful and generally desirable, and it is generally protected (with some exceptions) by laws. You can't throw a party at my house without my permission, but my right to do whatever I want on my own property may be limited by law; I can't, without the public's permission, operate an incinerator on my property and burn heavy metals, as toxic ash may be deposited throughout the neighborhood.

### **The Common Law: Property, Torts, and Contracts**

Even before legislatures met to make rules for society, disputes happened and judges decided them. In England, judges began writing down the facts of a case and the reasons for their decision. They often resorted to deciding cases on the basis of prior written decisions. In relying on those prior decisions, the judge would reason that since a current case was pretty much like a prior case, it ought to be decided the same way. This is essentially reasoning by analogy. Thus the use of precedent in common-law cases came into being, and a doctrine of stare decisis (pronounced STAR-ay-de-SIGH-sus) became accepted in English courts. *Stare decisis* means, in Latin, "let the decision stand."

Most judicial decisions that don't apply legislative acts (known as statutes) will involve one of three areas of law—property, contract, or tort. Property law deals with the rights and duties of

those who can legally own land (real property), how that ownership can be legally confirmed and protected, how property can be bought and sold, what the rights of tenants (renters) are, and what the various kinds of “estates” in land are (e.g., fee simple, life estate, future interest, easements, or rights of way). Contract law deals with what kinds of promises courts should enforce. For example, should courts enforce a contract where one of the parties was intoxicated, underage, or insane? Should courts enforce a contract where one of the parties seemed to have an unfair advantage? What kind of contracts would have to be in writing to be enforced by courts? Tort law deals with the types of cases that involve some kind of harm and or injury between the plaintiff and the defendant when no contract exists. Thus if you are libeled or a competitor lies about your product, your remedy would be in tort, not contract.

The thirteen original colonies had been using English common law for many years, and they continued to do so after independence from England. Early cases from the first states are full of references to already-decided English cases. As years went by, many precedents were established by US state courts, so that today a judicial opinion that refers to a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century English common-law case is quite rare.

Courts in one state may look to common-law decisions from the courts of other states where the reasoning in a similar case is persuasive. This will happen in “cases of first impression,” a fact pattern or situation that the courts in one state have never seen before. But if the supreme court in a particular state has already ruled on a certain kind of case, lower courts in that state will always follow the rule set forth by their highest court.

### **State Courts and the Domain of State Law**

In the early years of our nation, federal courts were not as active or important as state courts. States had jurisdiction (the power to make and enforce laws) over the most important aspects of business life. The power of state law has historically included governing the following kinds of issues and claims:

- Contracts, including sales, commercial paper, letters of credit, and secured transactions
- Torts

- Property, including real property, bailments of personal property (such as when you check your coat at a theater or leave your clothes with a dry cleaner), trademarks, copyrights, and the estates of decedents (dead people)
- Corporations
- Partnerships
- Domestic matters, including marriage, divorce, custody, adoption, and visitation
- Securities law
- Environmental law
- Agency law, governing the relationship between principals and their agents.
- Banking
- Insurance

Over the past eighty years, however, federal law has become increasingly important in many of these areas, including banking, securities, and environmental law.

### Civil versus Criminal Cases

Most of the cases we will look at in this textbook are civil cases. Criminal cases are certainly of interest to business, especially as companies may break criminal laws. A criminal case involves a governmental decision—whether state or federal—to prosecute someone (named as a defendant) for violating society’s laws. The law establishes a moral minimum and does so especially in the area of criminal laws; if you break a criminal law, you can lose your freedom (in jail) or your life (if you are convicted of a capital offense). In a civil action, you would not be sent to prison; in the worst case, you can lose property (usually money or other assets), such as when Ford Motor Company lost a personal injury case and the judge awarded \$295 million to the plaintiffs or when Pennzoil won a \$10.54 billion verdict against Texaco (see [Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort Law"](#)).

Some of the basic differences between civil law and criminal law cases are illustrated in [Table 1.1 "Differences between Civil and Criminal Cases"](#).

Table 1.1 Differences between Civil and Criminal Cases

	Civil Cases	Criminal Cases
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	Civil Cases	Criminal Cases
<i>Parties</i>	Plaintiff brings case; defendant must answer or lose by default	Prosecutor brings case; defendant may remain silent
<i>Proof</i>	Preponderance of evidence	Beyond a reasonable doubt
<i>Reason</i>	To settle disputes peacefully, usually between private parties	To maintain order in society
		To punish the most blameworthy
		To deter serious wrongdoing
<i>Remedies</i>	Money damages (legal remedy)	Fines, jail, and forfeitures
	Injunctions (equitable remedy)	
	Specific performance (equity)	

Regarding plaintiffs and prosecutors, you can often tell a civil case from a criminal case by looking at the caption of a case going to trial. If the government appears first in the caption of the case (e.g., *U.S. v. Lieberman*, it is likely that the United States is prosecuting on behalf of the people. The same is true of cases prosecuted by state district attorneys (e.g., *State v. Seidel*). But this is not a foolproof formula. Governments will also bring civil actions to collect debts from or settle disputes with individuals, corporations, or other governments. Thus *U.S. v. Mayer* might be a collection action for unpaid taxes, or *U.S. v. Canada* might be a boundary dispute in the International Court of Justice. Governments can be sued, as well; people occasionally sue their state or federal government, but they can only get a trial if the government waives its sovereign immunity and allows such suits. *Warner v. U.S.*, for example, could be a claim for a tax refund wrongfully withheld or for damage caused to the Warner residence by a sonic boom from a US Air Force jet flying overhead.

### Substance versus Procedure

Many rules and regulations in law are substantive, and others are procedural. We are used to seeing laws as substantive; that is, there is some rule of conduct or behavior that is called for or some action that is proscribed (prohibited). The substantive rules tell us how to act with one another and with the government. For example, all of the following are substantive rules of law and provide a kind of command or direction to citizens:

- Drive not more than fifty-five miles per hour where that speed limit is posted.
- Do not conspire to fix prices with competitors in the US market.
- Do not falsely represent the curative effects of your over-the-counter herbal remedy.
- Do not drive your motor vehicle through an intersection while a red traffic signal faces the direction you are coming from.
- Do not discriminate against job applicants or employees on the basis of their race, sex, religion, or national origin.
- Do not discharge certain pollutants into the river without first getting a discharge permit.

In contrast, procedural laws are the rules of courts and administrative agencies. They tell us how to proceed if there is a substantive-law problem. For example, if you drive fifty-three miles per hour in a forty mile-per-hour zone on Main Street on a Saturday night and get a ticket, you have broken a substantive rule of law (the posted speed limit). Just how and what gets decided in court is a matter of procedural law. Is the police officer's word final, or do you get your say before a judge? If so, who goes first, you or the officer? Do you have the right to be represented by legal counsel? Does the hearing or trial have to take place within a certain time period? A week? A month? How long can the state take to bring its case? What kinds of evidence will be relevant? Radar? (Does it matter what kind of training the officer has had on the radar device? Whether the radar device had been tested adequately?) The officer's personal observation? (What kind of training has he had, how is he qualified to judge the speed of a car, and other questions arise.) What if you unwisely bragged to a friend at a party recently that you went a hundred miles an hour on Main Street five years ago at half past three on a Tuesday morning? (If the prosecutor knows of this and the "friend" is willing to testify, is it relevant to the charge of fifty-three in a forty-mile-per-hour zone?)

In the United States, all state procedural laws must be fair, since the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment directs that no state shall deprive any citizen of "life, liberty, or property," without due process of law. (The \$200 fine plus court costs is designed to deprive you of property, that is, money, if you violate the speed limit.) Federal laws must also be fair, because the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution has the exact same due process language as the Fourteenth Amendment. This suggests that some laws are more powerful or important



than others, which is true. The next section looks at various types of positive law and their relative importance.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

In most legal systems, like that in the United States, there is a fairly firm distinction between criminal law (for actions that are offenses against the entire society) and civil law (usually for disputes between individuals or corporations). Basic ethical norms for promise-keeping and not harming others are reflected in the civil law of contracts and torts. In the United States, both the states and the federal government have roles to play, and sometimes these roles will overlap, as in environmental standards set by both states and the federal government.

### EXERCISES

1. Jenna gets a ticket for careless driving after the police come to investigate a car accident she had with you on Hanover Boulevard. Your car is badly damaged through no fault of your own. Is Jenna likely to face criminal charges, civil charges, or both?
2. Jenna's ticket says that she has thirty days in which to respond to the charges against her. The thirty days conforms to a state law that sets this time limit. Is the thirty-day limit procedural law or substantive law?

## 1.4 Sources of Law and Their Priority

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the different sources of law in the US legal system and the principal institutions that create those laws.
2. Explain in what way a statute is like a treaty, and vice versa.
3. Explain why the Constitution is “prior” and has priority over the legislative acts of a majority, whether in the US Congress or in a state legislature.
4. Describe the origins of the common-law system and what common law means.

### Sources of Law

In the United States today, there are numerous sources of law. The main ones are (1) constitutions—both state and federal, (2) statutes and agency regulations, and (3) judicial decisions. In addition, chief executives (the president and the various governors) can issue executive orders that have the effect of law.

In international legal systems, sources of law include treaties (agreements between states or countries) and what is known as customary international law (usually consisting of judicial decisions from national court systems where parties from two or more nations are in a dispute). As you might expect, these laws sometimes conflict: a state law may conflict with a federal law, or a federal law might be contrary to an international obligation. One nation's law may provide one substantive rule, while another nation's law may provide a different, somewhat contrary rule to apply. Not all laws, in other words, are created equal. To understand which laws have priority, it is essential to understand the relationships between the various kinds of law.

### **Constitutions**

Constitutions are the foundation for a state or nation's other laws, providing the country's legislative, executive, and judicial framework. Among the nations of the world, the United States has the oldest constitution still in use. It is difficult to amend, which is why there have only been seventeen amendments following the first ten in 1789; two-thirds of the House and Senate must pass amendments, and three-fourths of the states must approve them.

The nation's states also have constitutions. Along with providing for legislative, executive, and judicial functions, state constitutions prescribe various rights of citizens. These rights may be different from, and in addition to, rights granted by the US Constitution. Like statutes and judicial decisions, a constitution's specific provisions can provide people with a "cause of action" on which to base a lawsuit (see [Section 1.4.3 "Causes of Action, Precedent, and "](#) on "causes of action"). For example, California's constitution provides that the citizens of that state have a right of privacy. This has been used to assert claims against businesses that invade an employee's right of privacy. In the case of Virginia Rulon-Miller, her employer, International Business Machines (IBM), told her to stop dating a former colleague who went to work for a competitor. When she refused, IBM terminated her, and a jury fined the company for \$300,000 in damages. As the California court noted, "While an employee sacrifices some privacy rights when he enters the workplace, the employee's privacy expectations must be balanced against the employer's interests....[T]he point here is that privacy, like the other unalienable rights listed first in our Constitution...is unquestionably a fundamental interest of our society."<sup>[1]</sup>

### **Statutes and Treaties in Congress**

In Washington, DC, the federal legislature is known as Congress and has both a House of Representatives and a Senate. The House is composed of representatives elected every two years from various districts in each state. These districts are established by Congress according to population as determined every ten years by the census, a process required by the Constitution. Each state has at least one district; the most populous state (California) has fifty-two districts. In the Senate, there are two senators from each state, regardless of the state's population. Thus Delaware has two senators and California has two senators, even though California has far more people. Effectively, less than 20 percent of the nation's population can send fifty senators to Washington.

Many consider this to be antidemocratic. The House of Representatives, on the other hand, is directly proportioned by population, though no state can have less than one representative. Each Congressional legislative body has committees for various purposes. In these committees, proposed bills are discussed, hearings are sometimes held, and bills are either reported out (brought to the floor for a vote) or killed in committee. If a bill is reported out, it may be passed by majority vote. Because of the procedural differences between the House and the Senate, bills that have the same language when proposed in both houses are apt to be different after approval by each body. A conference committee will then be held to try to match the two versions. If the two versions differ widely enough, reconciliation of the two differing versions into one acceptable to both chambers (House and Senate) is more difficult.

If the House and Senate can agree on identical language, the reconciled bill will be sent to the president for signature or veto. The Constitution prescribes that the president will have veto power over any legislation. But the two bodies can override a presidential veto with a two-thirds vote in each chamber.

In the case of treaties, the Constitution specifies that only the Senate must ratify them. When the Senate ratifies a treaty, it becomes part of federal law, with the same weight and effect as a statute passed by the entire Congress. The statutes of Congress are collected in codified form in the US Code. The code is available online at <http://uscode.house.gov>.

### **Delegating Legislative Powers: Rules by Administrative Agencies**

Congress has found it necessary and useful to create government agencies to administer various laws (see [Chapter 5 "Administrative Law"](#)). The Constitution does not expressly provide for administrative agencies, but the US Supreme Court has upheld the delegation of power to create federal agencies.

Examples of administrative agencies would include the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

It is important to note that Congress does not have unlimited authority to delegate its lawmaking powers to an agency. It must delegate its authority with some guidelines for the agency and cannot altogether avoid its constitutional responsibilities (see [Chapter 5 "Administrative Law"](#)).

Agencies propose rules in the Federal Register, published each working day of the year. Rules that are formally adopted are published in the *Code of Federal Regulations*, or CFR, available online at <http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/cfr-table-search.html>.

### **State Statutes and Agencies: Other Codified Law**

Statutes are passed by legislatures and provide general rules for society. States have legislatures (sometimes called assemblies), which are usually made up of both a senate and a house of representatives. Like the federal government, state legislatures will agree on the provisions of a bill, which is then sent to the governor (acting like the president for that state) for signature. Like the president, governors often have a veto power. The process of creating and amending, or changing, laws is filled with political negotiation and compromise.

On a more local level, counties and municipal corporations or townships may be authorized under a state's constitution to create or adopt ordinances. Examples of ordinances include local building codes, zoning laws, and misdemeanors or infractions such as skateboarding or jaywalking. Most of the more unusual laws that are in the news from time to time are local ordinances. For example, in Logan County, Colorado, it is illegal to kiss a sleeping woman; in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Eureka, Nebraska, it is a crime to kiss if you have a mustache. But reportedly, some states still have odd laws here and there. Kentucky law proclaims that every person in the state must take a bath at least once a year, and failure to do so is illegal.

## **Judicial Decisions: The Common Law**

Common law consists of decisions by courts (judicial decisions) that do not involve interpretation of statutes, regulations, treaties, or the Constitution. Courts make such interpretations, but many cases are decided where there is no statutory or other codified law or regulation to be interpreted. For example, a state court deciding what kinds of witnesses are required for a valid will in the absence of a rule (from a statute) is making common law. United States law comes primarily from the tradition of English common law. By the time England's American colonies revolted in 1776, English common-law traditions were well established in the colonial courts. English common law was a system that gave written judicial decisions the force of law throughout the country. Thus if an English court delivered an opinion as to what constituted the common-law crime of burglary, other courts would stick to that decision, so that a common body of law developed throughout the country. Common law is essentially shorthand for the notion that a common body of law, based on past written decisions, is desirable and necessary.

In England and in the laws of the original thirteen states, common-law decisions defined crimes such as arson, burglary, homicide, and robbery. As time went on, US state legislatures either adopted or modified common-law definitions of most crimes by putting them in the form of codes or statutes. This legislative ability—to modify or change common law into judicial law—points to an important phenomenon: the priority of statutory law over common law. As we will see in the next section, constitutional law will have priority over statutory law.

## **Priority of Laws**

### **The Constitution as Preemptive Force in US Law**

The US Constitution takes precedence over all statutes and judicial decisions that are inconsistent. For example, if Michigan were to decide legislatively that students cannot speak ill of professors in state-sponsored universities, that law would be void, since it is inconsistent with the state's obligation under the First Amendment to protect free speech. Or if the Michigan courts were to allow a professor to bring a lawsuit against a student who had said something about him that was derogatory but not defamatory, the state's judicial system would not be acting according to the First Amendment. (As we will see in [Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort](#)

**Law**", free speech has its limits; defamation was a cause of action at the time the First Amendment was added to the Constitution, and it has been understood that the free speech rights in the First Amendment did not negate existing common law.)

### **Statutes and Cases**

Statutes generally have priority, or take precedence, over case law (judicial decisions). Under common-law judicial decisions, employers could hire young children for difficult work, offer any wage they wanted, and not pay overtime work at a higher rate. But various statutes changed that. For example, the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (1938) forbid the use of oppressive child labor and established a minimum pay wage and overtime pay rules.

### **Treaties as Statutes: The “Last in Time” Rule**

A treaty or convention is considered of equal standing to a statute. Thus when Congress ratified the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), any judicial decisions or previous statutes that were inconsistent—such as quotas or limitations on imports from Mexico that were opposite to NAFTA commitments—would no longer be valid. Similarly, US treaty obligations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and obligations made later through the World Trade Organization (WTO) would override previous federal or state statutes.

One example of treaty obligations overriding, or taking priority over, federal statutes was the tuna-dolphin dispute between the United States and Mexico. The Marine Mammal Protection Act amendments in 1988 spelled out certain protections for dolphins in the Eastern Tropical Pacific, and the United States began refusing to allow the importation of tuna that were caught using “dolphin-unfriendly” methods (such as purse seining). This was challenged at a GATT dispute panel in Switzerland, and the United States lost. The discussion continued at the WTO under its dispute resolution process. In short, US environmental statutes can be ruled contrary to US treaty obligations.

Under most treaties, the United States can withdraw, or take back, any voluntary limitation on its sovereignty; participation in treaties is entirely elective. That is, the United States may “unbind” itself whenever it chooses. But for practical purposes, some limitations on sovereignty may be good for the nation. The argument goes something like this: if free trade in general helps the United States, then it makes some sense to be part of a system that promotes free trade; and

despite some temporary setbacks, the WTO decision process will (it is hoped) provide far more benefits than losses in the long run. This argument invokes utilitarian theory (that the best policy does the greatest good overall for society) and David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage.

Ultimately, whether the United States remains a supporter of free trade and continues to participate as a leader in the WTO will depend upon citizens electing leaders who support the process. Had Ross Perot been elected in 1992, for example, NAFTA would have been politically (and legally) dead during his term of office.

### **Causes of Action, Precedent, and *Stare Decisis***

No matter how wrong someone's actions may seem to you, the only wrongs you can right in a court are those that can be tied to one or more causes of action. Positive law is full of cases, treaties, statutes, regulations, and constitutional provisions that can be made into a cause of action. If you have an agreement with Harold Hill that he will purchase seventy-six trombones from you and he fails to pay for them after you deliver, you will probably feel wronged, but a court will only act favorably on your complaint if you can show that his behavior gives you a cause of action based on some part of your state's contract law. This case would give you a cause of action under the law of most states; unless Harold Hill had some legal excuse recognized by the applicable state's contract law—such as his legal incompetence, his being less than eighteen years of age, his being drunk at the time the agreement was made, or his claim that the instruments were trumpets rather than trombones or that they were delivered too late to be of use to him—you could expect to recover some compensation for his breaching of your agreement with him.

An old saying in the law is that the law does not deal in trifles, or unimportant issues (in Latin, *de minimis non curat lex*). Not every wrong you may suffer in life will be a cause to bring a court action. If you are stood up for a Saturday night date and feel embarrassed or humiliated, you cannot recover anything in a court of law in the United States, as there is no cause of action (no basis in the positive law) that you can use in your complaint. If you are engaged to be married and your spouse-to-be bolts from the wedding ceremony, there are some states that do provide a legal basis on which to bring a lawsuit. "Breach of promise to marry" is recognized in

several states, but most states have abolished this cause of action, either by judicial decision or by legislation. Whether a runaway bride or groom gives rise to a valid cause of action in the courts depends on whether the state courts still recognize and enforce this now-disappearing cause of action.

Your cause of action is thus based on existing laws, including decided cases. How closely your case “fits” with a prior decided case raises the question of precedent.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the English common-law tradition placed great emphasis on precedent and what is called *stare decisis*. A court considering one case would feel obliged to decide that case in a way similar to previously decided cases. Written decisions of the most important cases had been spread throughout England (the common “realm”), and judges hoped to establish a somewhat predictable, consistent group of decisions.

The English legislature (Parliament) was not in the practice of establishing detailed statutes on crimes, torts, contracts, or property. Thus definitions and rules were left primarily to the courts. By their nature, courts could only decide one case at a time, but in doing so they would articulate holdings, or general rules, that would apply to later cases.

Suppose that one court had to decide whether an employer could fire an employee for no reason at all. Suppose that there were no statutes that applied to the facts: there was no contract between the employer and the employee, but the employee had worked for the employer for many years, and now a younger person was replacing him. The court, with no past guidelines, would have to decide whether the employee had stated a “cause of action” against the employer. If the court decided that the case was not legally actionable, it would dismiss the action. Future courts would then treat similar cases in a similar way. In the process, the court might make a holding that employers could fire employees for any reason or for no reason. This rule could be applied in the future should similar cases come up.

But suppose that an employer fired an employee for not committing perjury (lying on the witness stand in a court proceeding); the employer wanted the employee to cover up the company's criminal or unethical act. Suppose that, as in earlier cases, there were no applicable statutes and no contract of employment. Courts relying on a holding or precedent that “employers may fire employees for any reason or no reason” might rule against an employee



seeking compensation for being fired for telling the truth on the witness stand. Or it might make an exception to the general rule, such as, “Employers may generally discharge employees for any reason or for no reason without incurring legal liability; however, employers will incur legal liability for firing an employee who refuses to lie on behalf of the employer in a court proceeding.”

In each case (the general rule and its exception), the common-law tradition calls for the court to explain the reasons for its ruling. In the case of the general rule, “freedom of choice” might be the major reason. In the case of the perjury exception, the efficiency of the judicial system and the requirements of citizenship might be used as reasons. Because the court’s “reasons” will be persuasive to some and not to others, there is inevitably a degree of subjectivity to judicial opinions. That is, reasonable people will disagree as to the persuasiveness of the reasoning a court may offer for its decision.

Written judicial opinions are thus a good playing field for developing critical thinking skills by identifying the issue in a case and examining the reasons for the court’s previous decision(s), or holding. What *has* the court actually decided, and why? Remember that a court, especially the US Supreme Court, is not only deciding one particular case but also setting down guidelines (in its holdings) for federal and state courts that encounter similar issues. Note that court cases often raise a variety of issues or questions to be resolved, and judges (and attorneys) will differ as to what the real issue in a case is. A holding is the court’s complete answer to an issue that is critical to deciding the case and thus gives guidance to the meaning of the case as a precedent for future cases.

Beyond the decision of the court, it is in looking at the court’s *reasoning* that you are most likely to understand what facts have been most significant to the court and what theories (schools of legal thought) each trial or appellate judge believes in. Because judges do not always agree on first principles (i.e., they subscribe to different schools of legal thought), there are many divided opinions in appellate opinions and in each US Supreme Court term.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

There are different sources of law in the US legal system. The US Constitution is foundational; US statutory and common law cannot be inconsistent with its provisions. Congress creates

statutory law (with the signature of the president), and courts will interpret constitutional law and statutory law. Where there is neither constitutional law nor statutory law, the courts function in the realm of common law. The same is true of law within the fifty states, each of which also has a constitution, or foundational law.

Both the federal government and the states have created administrative agencies. An agency only has the power that the legislature gives it. Within the scope of that power, an agency will often create regulations (see [Chapter 5 "Administrative Law"](#)), which have the same force and effect as statutes. Treaties are never negotiated and concluded by states, as the federal government has exclusive authority over relations with other nation-states. A treaty, once ratified by the Senate, has the same force and effect as a statute passed by Congress and signed into law by the president.

Constitutions, statutes, regulations, treaties, and court decisions can provide a legal basis in the positive law. You may believe you have been wronged, but for you to have a right that is enforceable in court, you must have something in the positive law that you can point to that will support a cause of action against your chosen defendant.

## EXERCISES

1. Give one example of where common law was overridden by the passage of a federal statute.
2. How does common law change or evolve without any action on the part of a legislature?
3. Lindsey Paradise is not selected for her sorority of choice at the University of Kansas. She has spent all her time rushing that particular sorority, which chooses some of her friends but not her. She is disappointed and angry and wants to sue the sorority. What are her prospects of recovery in the legal system? Explain.

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[1] *Rulon-Miller v. International Business Machines Corp.*, 162 Cal. App.3d 241, 255 (1984).

## 1.5 Legal and Political Systems of the World

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Describe how the common-law system differs from the civil-law system.

Other legal and political systems are very different from the US system, which came from English common-law traditions and the framers of the US Constitution. Our legal and political traditions are different both in what kinds of laws we make and honor and in how disputes are resolved in court.

### **Comparing Common-Law Systems with Other Legal Systems**

The common-law tradition is unique to England, the United States, and former colonies of the British Empire. Although there are differences among common-law systems (e.g., most nations do not permit their judiciaries to declare legislative acts unconstitutional; some nations use the jury less frequently), all of them recognize the use of precedent in judicial cases, and none of them relies on the comprehensive, legislative codes that are prevalent in civil-law systems.

### **Civil-Law Systems**

The main alternative to the common-law legal system was developed in Europe and is based in Roman and Napoleonic law. A civil-law or code-law system is one where all the legal rules are in one or more comprehensive legislative enactments. During Napoleon's reign, a comprehensive book of laws—a code—was developed for all of France. The code covered criminal law, criminal procedure, noncriminal law and procedure, and commercial law. The rules of the code are still used today in France and in other continental European legal systems. The code is used to resolve particular cases, usually by judges without a jury. Moreover, the judges are not required to follow the decisions of other courts in similar cases. As George Cameron of the University of Michigan has noted, "The law is in the code, not in the cases." He goes on to note, "Where several cases all have interpreted a provision in a particular way, the French courts may feel bound to reach the same result in future cases, under the doctrine of *jurisprudence constante*. The major agency for growth and change, however, is the legislature, not the courts." Civil-law systems are used throughout Europe as well as in Central and South America. Some nations in Asia and Africa have also adopted codes based on European civil law. Germany, Holland, Spain, France, and Portugal all had colonies outside of Europe, and many of these colonies adopted the legal practices that were imposed on them by colonial rule, much like the original thirteen states of the United States, which adopted English common-law practices.

One source of possible confusion at this point is that we have already referred to US civil law in contrast to criminal law. But the European civil law covers both civil and criminal law.

There are also legal systems that differ significantly from the common-law and civil-law systems. The communist and socialist legal systems that remain (e.g., in Cuba and North Korea) operate on very different assumptions than those of either English common law or European civil law. Islamic and other religion-based systems of law bring different values and assumptions to social and commercial relations.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Legal systems vary widely in their aims and in the way they process civil and criminal cases. Common-law systems use juries, have one judge, and adhere to precedent. Civil-law systems decide cases without a jury, often use three judges, and often render shorter opinions without reference to previously decided cases.

#### EXERCISE

1. Use the Internet to identify some of the better-known nations with civil-law systems. Which Asian nations came to adopt all or part of civil-law traditions, and why?

## 1.6 A Sample Case

### *Preliminary Note to Students*

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a federal statute that applies to all employers whose workforce exceeds fifteen people. The text of Title VII says that

*(a) it shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer—  
(1) to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or natural origin.*

At common law—where judges decide cases without reference to statutory guidance—employers were generally free to hire and fire on any basis they might choose, and employees were generally free to work for an employer or quit an employer on any basis they might choose (unless the employer and the employee had a contract). This rule has been called “employment at will.” State and federal statutes that prohibit discrimination on any basis (such as the

prohibitions on discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in Title VII) are essentially legislative exceptions to the common-law employment-at-will rule.

In the 1970s, many female employees began to claim a certain kind of sex discrimination: sexual harassment. Some women were being asked to give sexual favors in exchange for continued employment or promotion (quid pro quo sexual harassment) or found themselves in a working environment that put their chances for continued employment or promotion at risk. This form of sexual discrimination came to be called “hostile working environment” sexual harassment. Notice that the statute itself says nothing about sexual harassment but speaks only in broad terms about discrimination “because of” sex (and four other factors). Having set the broad policy, Congress left it to employees, employers, and the courts to fashion more specific rules through the process of civil litigation.

This is a case from our federal court system, which has a trial or hearing in the federal district court, an appeal to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, and a final appeal to the US Supreme Court. Teresa Harris, having lost at both the district court and the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, here has petitioned for a writ of certiorari (asking the court to issue an order to bring the case to the Supreme Court), a petition that is granted less than one out of every fifty times. The Supreme Court, in other words, chooses its cases carefully. Here, the court wanted to resolve a difference of opinion among the various circuit courts of appeal as to whether or not a plaintiff in a hostile-working-environment claim could recover damages without showing “severe psychological injury.”

*Harris v. Forklift Systems*

*510 U.S. 17 (U.S. Supreme Court 1992)*

JUDGES: O’CONNOR, J., delivered the opinion for a unanimous Court. SCALIA, J., and GINSBURG, J., filed concurring opinions.

JUSTICE O’CONNOR delivered the opinion of the Court.

In this case we consider the definition of a discriminatorily “abusive work environment” (also known as a “hostile work environment”) under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 78 Stat. 253, as amended, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq. (1988 ed., Supp. III).

I

Teresa Harris worked as a manager at Forklift Systems, Inc., an equipment rental company, from April 1985 until October 1987. Charles Hardy was Forklift's president.

The Magistrate found that, throughout Harris' time at Forklift, Hardy often insulted her because of her gender and often made her the target of unwanted sexual innuendoes. Hardy told Harris on several occasions, in the presence of other employees, "You're a woman, what do you know" and "We need a man as the rental manager"; at least once, he told her she was "a dumbass woman." Again in front of others, he suggested that the two of them "go to the Holiday Inn to negotiate [Harris's] raise." Hardy occasionally asked Harris and other female employees to get coins from his front pants pocket. He threw objects on the ground in front of Harris and other women, and asked them to pick the objects up. He made sexual innuendoes about Harris' and other women's clothing.

In mid-August 1987, Harris complained to Hardy about his conduct. Hardy said he was surprised that Harris was offended, claimed he was only joking, and apologized. He also promised he would stop, and based on this assurance Harris stayed on the job. But in early September, Hardy began anew: While Harris was arranging a deal with one of Forklift's customers, he asked her, again in front of other employees, "What did you do, promise the guy...some [sex] Saturday night?" On October 1, Harris collected her paycheck and quit. Harris then sued Forklift, claiming that Hardy's conduct had created an abusive work environment for her because of her gender. The United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee, adopting the report and recommendation of the Magistrate, found this to be "a close case," but held that Hardy's conduct did not create an abusive environment. The court found that some of Hardy's comments "offended [Harris], and would offend the reasonable woman," but that they were not "so severe as to be expected to seriously affect [Harris's] psychological well-being. A reasonable woman manager under like circumstances would have been offended by Hardy, but his conduct would not have risen to the level of interfering with that person's work performance.

"Neither do I believe that [Harris] was subjectively so offended that she suffered injury....Although Hardy may at times have genuinely offended [Harris], I do not believe that he created a working environment so poisoned as to be intimidating or abusive to [Harris]."

In focusing on the employee's psychological well-being, the District Court was following Circuit precedent. See *Rabidue v. Osceola Refining Co.*, 805 F.2d 611, 620 (CA6 1986), cert. denied, 481 U.S. 1041, 95 L. Ed. 2d 823, 107 S. Ct. 1983 (1987). The United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit affirmed in a brief unpublished decision...reported at 976 F.2d 733 (1992).

We granted certiorari, 507 U.S. 959 (1993), to resolve a conflict among the Circuits on whether conduct, to be actionable as "abusive work environment" harassment (no quid pro quo harassment issue is present here), must "seriously affect [an employee's] psychological well-being" or lead the plaintiff to "suffer injury." Compare *Rabidue* (requiring serious effect on psychological well-being); *Vance v. Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Co.*, 863 F.2d 1503, 1510 (CA11 1989) (same); and *Downes v. FAA*, 775 F.2d 288, 292 (CA Fed. 1985) (same), with *Ellison v. Brady*, 924 F.2d 872, 877–878 (CA9 1991) (rejecting such a requirement).

## II

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes it "an unlawful employment practice for an employer...to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(a)(1). As we made clear in *Meritor Savings Bank, FSB v. Vinson*, 477 U.S. 57 (1986), this language "is not limited to 'economic' or 'tangible' discrimination. The phrase 'terms, conditions, or privileges of employment' evinces a congressional intent 'to strike at the entire spectrum of disparate treatment of men and women' in employment," which includes requiring people to work in a discriminatorily hostile or abusive environment. *Id.*, at 64, quoting *Los Angeles Dept. of Water and Power v. Manhart*, 435 U.S. 702, 707, n.13, 55 L. Ed. 2d 657, 98 S. Ct. 1370 (1978). When the workplace is permeated with "discriminatory intimidation, ridicule, and insult," 477 U.S. at 65, that is "sufficiently severe or pervasive to alter the conditions of the victim's employment and create an abusive working environment," Title VII is violated.

This standard, which we reaffirm today, takes a middle path between making actionable any conduct that is merely offensive and requiring the conduct to cause a tangible psychological injury. As we pointed out in *Meritor*, "mere utterance of an...epithet which engenders offensive feelings in an employee," does not sufficiently affect the conditions of employment to implicate

Title VII. Conduct that is not severe or pervasive enough to create an objectively hostile or abusive work environment—an environment that a reasonable person would find hostile or abusive—is beyond Title VII’s purview. Likewise, if the victim does not subjectively perceive the environment to be abusive, the conduct has not actually altered the conditions of the victim’s employment, and there is no Title VII violation.

But Title VII comes into play before the harassing conduct leads to a nervous breakdown. A discriminatorily abusive work environment, even one that does not seriously affect employees’ psychological well-being, can and often will detract from employees’ job performance, discourage employees from remaining on the job, or keep them from advancing in their careers. Moreover, even without regard to these tangible effects, the very fact that the discriminatory conduct was so severe or pervasive that it created a work environment abusive to employees because of their race, gender, religion, or national origin offends Title VII’s broad rule of workplace equality. The appalling conduct alleged in *Meritor*, and the reference in that case to environments “so heavily polluted with discrimination as to destroy completely the emotional and psychological stability of minority group workers,” *Id.*, at 66, quoting *Rogers v. EEOC*, 454 F.2d 234, 238 (CA5 1971), cert. denied, 406 U.S. 957, 32 L. Ed. 2d 343, 92 S. Ct. 2058 (1972), merely present some especially egregious examples of harassment. They do not mark the boundary of what is actionable.

We therefore believe the District Court erred in relying on whether the conduct “seriously affected plaintiff’s psychological well-being” or led her to “suffer injury.” Such an inquiry may needlessly focus the fact finder’s attention on concrete psychological harm, an element Title VII does not require. Certainly Title VII bars conduct that would seriously affect a reasonable person’s psychological well-being, but the statute is not limited to such conduct. So long as the environment would reasonably be perceived, and is perceived, as hostile or abusive, *Meritor*, *supra*, at 67, there is no need for it also to be psychologically injurious.

This is not, and by its nature cannot be, a mathematically precise test. We need not answer today all the potential questions it raises, nor specifically address the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s new regulations on this subject, see 58 Fed. Reg. 51266 (1993) (proposed 29 CFR §§ 1609.1, 1609.2); see also 29 CFR § 1604.11 (1993). But we can say that



whether an environment is “hostile” or “abusive” can be determined only by looking at all the circumstances. These may include the frequency of the discriminatory conduct; its severity; whether it is physically threatening or humiliating, or a mere offensive utterance; and whether it unreasonably interferes with an employee’s work performance. The effect on the employee’s psychological well-being is, of course, relevant to determining whether the plaintiff actually found the environment abusive. But while psychological harm, like any other relevant factor, may be taken into account, no single factor is required.

### III

Forklift, while conceding that a requirement that the conduct seriously affect psychological well-being is unfounded, argues that the District Court nonetheless correctly applied the Meritor standard. We disagree. Though the District Court did conclude that the work environment was not “intimidating or abusive to [Harris],” it did so only after finding that the conduct was not “so severe as to be expected to seriously affect plaintiff’s psychological well-being,” and that Harris was not “subjectively so offended that she suffered injury,” *ibid*. The District Court’s application of these incorrect standards may well have influenced its ultimate conclusion, especially given that the court found this to be a “close case.”

We therefore reverse the judgment of the Court of Appeals, and remand the case for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.

So ordered.

#### *Note to Students*

This was only the second time that the Supreme Court had decided a sexual harassment case. Many feminist legal studies scholars feared that the court would raise the bar and make hostile-working-environment claims under Title VII more difficult to win. That did not happen. When the question to be decided is combined with the court’s decision, we get the holding of the case. Here, the question that the court poses, plus its answer, yields a holding that “An employee need not prove severe psychological injury in order to win a Title VII sexual harassment claim.” This holding will be true until such time as the court revisits a similar question and answers it differently. This does happen, but happens rarely.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Is this a criminal case or a civil-law case? How can you tell?
2. Is the court concerned with making a procedural rule here, or is the court making a statement about the substantive law?
3. Is this a case where the court is interpreting the Constitution, a federal statute, a state statute, or the common law?
4. In *Harris v. Forklift*, what if the trial judge does not personally agree that women should have any rights to equal treatment in the workplace? Why shouldn't that judge dismiss the case even before trial? Or should the judge dismiss the case after giving the female plaintiff her day in court?
5. What was the employer's argument in this case? Do you agree or disagree with it? What if those who legislated Title VII gave no thought to the question of seriousness of injury at all?

## 1.7 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

There are differing conceptions of what law is and of what law should be. Laws and legal systems differ worldwide. The legal system in the United States is founded on the US Constitution, which is itself inspired by natural-law theory and the idea that people have rights that cannot be taken by government but only protected by government. The various functions of the law are done well or poorly depending on which nation-state you look at. Some do very well in terms of keeping order, while others do a better job of allowing civil and political freedoms. Social and political movements within each nation greatly affect the nature and quality of the legal system within that nation.

This chapter has familiarized you with a few of the basic schools of legal thought, such as natural law, positive law, legal realism, and critical legal studies. It has also given you a brief background in common law, including contracts, torts, and criminal law. The differences between civil and criminal cases, substance and procedure, and the various sources of law have also been reviewed. Each source has a different level of authority, starting with constitutions, which are primary and will negate any lower-court laws that are not consistent with its principles and

provisions. The basic differences between the common law and civil law (continental, or European) systems of law are also discussed.

### EXERCISES

1. What is the common law? Where do the courts get the authority to interpret it and to change it?
2. After World War II ended in 1945, there was an international tribunal at Nuremberg that prosecuted various officials in Germany's Third Reich who had committed "crimes against humanity." Many of them claim that they were simply "following orders" of Adolf Hitler and his chief lieutenants. What law, if any, have they violated?
3. What does *stare decisis* mean, and why is it so basic to common-law legal tradition?
4. In the following situations, which source of law takes priority, and why?
  - a. The state statute conflicts with the common law of that state.
  - b. A federal statute conflicts with the US Constitution.
  - c. A common-law decision in one state conflicts with the US Constitution.
  - d. A federal statute conflicts with a state constitution.

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. The source of law that is foundational in the US legal system is
  - a. the common law
  - b. statutory law
  - c. constitutional law
  - d. administrative law

"Law is the command of a sovereign" represents what school of legal thought?

  - a. civil law
  - b. constitutional law
  - c. natural law
  - d. ecofeminist law
  - e. positive law

Which of the following kinds of law are most often found in state law rather than federal law?

- a. torts and contracts
- b. bankruptcy
- c. maritime law
- d. international law

Where was natural law discovered?

- a. in nature
- b. in constitutions and statutes
- c. in the exercise of human reason
- d. in the *Wall Street Journal*

Wolfe is a state court judge in California. In the case of *Riddick v. Clouse*, which involves a contract dispute, Wolfe must follow precedent. She establishes a logical relationship between the Riddick case and a case decided by the California Supreme Court, *Zhu v. Patel Enterprises, Inc.* She compares the facts of Riddick to the facts in Zhu and to the extent the facts are similar, applies the same rule to reach her decision. This is

- a. deductive reasoning
- b. faulty reasoning
- c. linear reasoning
- d. reasoning by analogy

Moore is a state court judge in Colorado. In the case of *Cassidy v. Seawell*, also a contract dispute, there is no Colorado Supreme Court or court of appeals decision that sets forth a rule that could be applied. However, the California case of *Zhu v. Patel Enterprises, Inc.* is “very close” on the facts and sets forth a rule of law that could be applied to the Cassidy case. What process must Moore follow in considering whether to use the Zhu case as precedent?

- a. Moore is free to decide the case any way he wants, but he may not look at decisions and reasons in similar cases from other states.
- b. Moore must wait for the Colorado legislature and the governor to pass a law that addresses the issues raised in the Cassidy case.

- c. Moore must follow the California case if that is the best precedent.
- d. Moore may follow the California case if he believes that it offers the best reasoning for a similar case.

## SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. c
- 2. e
- 3. a
- 4. c
- 5. d
- 6. d

# Chapter 2

## Corporate Social Responsibility and Business Ethics

*A great society is a society in which [leaders] of business think greatly about their functions.*

*Alfred North Whitehead*

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Define ethics and explain the importance of good ethics for business people and business organizations.
2. Understand the principal philosophies of ethics, including utilitarianism, duty-based ethics, and virtue ethics.
3. Distinguish between the ethical merits of various choices by using an ethical decision model.
4. Explain the difference between shareholder and stakeholder models of ethical corporate governance.
5. Explain why it is difficult to establish and maintain an ethical corporate culture in a business organization.

Few subjects are more contentious or important as the role of business in society, particularly, whether corporations have social responsibilities that are distinct from maximizing shareholder value. While the phrase “business ethics” is not oxymoronic (i.e., a contradiction in terms), there is plenty of evidence that businesspeople and firms seek to look out primarily for themselves. However, business organizations ignore the ethical and social expectations of consumers, employees, the media, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), government officials, and socially responsible investors at their peril. Legal compliance alone no longer serves the long-term interests of many companies, who find that sustainable profitability requires thinking about people and the planet as well as profits.

This chapter has a fairly modest aim: to introduce potential businesspeople to the differences between legal compliance and ethical excellence by reviewing some of the philosophical perspectives that apply to business, businesspeople, and the role of business organizations in society.

## 2.1 What Is Ethics?

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how both individuals and institutions can be viewed as ethical or unethical.
2. Explain how law and ethics are different, and why a good reputation can be more important than legal compliance.

Most of those who write about ethics do not make a clear distinction between ethics and morality. The question of what is “right” or “morally correct” or “ethically correct” or “morally desirable” in any situation is variously phrased, but all of the words and phrases are after the same thing: what act is “better” in a moral or ethical sense than some other act? People sometimes speak of morality as something personal but view ethics as having wider social implications. Others see morality as the subject of a field of study, that field being ethics. Ethics would be morality as applied to any number of subjects, including journalistic ethics, business ethics, or the ethics of professionals such as doctors, attorneys, and accountants. We will venture a definition of *ethics*, but for our purposes, *ethics* and *morality* will be used as equivalent terms.

People often speak about the ethics or morality of individuals and also about the morality or ethics of corporations and nations. There are clearly differences in the kind of moral responsibility that we can fairly ascribe to corporations and nations; we tend to see individuals as having a soul, or at least a conscience, but there is no general agreement that nations or corporations have either. Still, our ordinary use of language does point to something significant: if we say that some nations are “evil” and others are “corrupt,” then we make moral judgments about the quality of actions undertaken by the governments or people of that nation. For example, if North Korea is characterized by the US president as part of an “axis of evil,” or if we conclude that WorldCom or Enron acted “unethically” in certain respects, then we are making judgments that their collective actions are morally deficient.

In talking about morality, we often use the word *good*; but that word can be confusing. If we say that Microsoft is a “good company,” we may be making a statement about the investment potential of Microsoft stock, or their preeminence in the market, or their ability to win lawsuits or appeals or to influence administrative agencies. Less likely, though possibly, we may be

making a statement about the civic virtue and corporate social responsibility of Microsoft. In the first set of judgments, we use the word *good* but mean something other than ethical or moral; only in the second instance are we using the word *good* in its ethical or moral sense.

A word such as *good* can embrace ethical or moral values but also nonethical values. If I like Daniel and try to convince you what a “good guy” he is, you may ask all sorts of questions: Is he good-looking? Well-off? Fun to be with? Humorous? Athletic? Smart? I could answer all of those questions with a yes, yet you would still not know any of his moral qualities. But if I said that he was honest, caring, forthright, and diligent, volunteered in local soup kitchens, or tithed to the church, many people would see Daniel as having certain ethical or moral qualities. If I said that he keeps the Golden Rule as well as anyone I know, you could conclude that he is an ethical person. But if I said that he is “always in control” or “always at the top of his game,” you would probably not make inferences or assumptions about his character or ethics.

There are three key points here:

1. Although morals and ethics are not precisely measurable, people generally have similar reactions about what actions or conduct can rightly be called ethical or moral.
2. As humans, we need and value ethical people and want to be around them.
3. Saying that someone or some organization is law-abiding does not mean the same as saying a person or company is ethical.

Here is a cautionary note: for individuals, it is far from easy to recognize an ethical problem, have a clear and usable decision-making process to deal it, and then have the moral courage to do what’s right. All of that is even more difficult within a business organization, where corporate employees vary in their motivations, loyalties, commitments, and character. There is no universally accepted way for developing an organization where employees feel valued, respected, and free to openly disagree; where the actions of top management are crystal clear; and where all the employees feel loyal and accountable to one another.

Before talking about how ethics relates to law, we can conclude that ethics is the study of morality—“right” and “wrong”—in the context of everyday life, organizational behaviors, and even how society operates and is governed.

## **How Do Law and Ethics Differ?**



There is a difference between legal compliance and moral excellence. Few would choose a professional service, health care or otherwise, because the provider had a record of perfect legal compliance, or always following the letter of the law. There are many professional ethics codes, primarily because people realize that law prescribes only a minimum of morality and does not provide purpose or goals that can mean excellent service to customers, clients, or patients. Business ethicists have talked for years about the intersection of law and ethics. Simply put, what is legal is not necessarily ethical. Conversely, what is ethical is not necessarily legal. There are lots of legal maneuvers that are not all that ethical; the well-used phrase “legal loophole” suggests as much.

Here are two propositions about business and ethics. Consider whether they strike you as true or whether you would need to know more in order to make a judgment.

- Individuals and organizations have reputations. (For an individual, moral reputation is most often tied to others’ perceptions of his or her character: is the individual honest, diligent, reliable, fair, and caring? The reputation of an organization is built on the goodwill that suppliers, customers, the community, and employees feel toward it. Although an organization is not a person in the usual sense, the goodwill that people feel about the organization is based on their perception of its better qualities by a variety of stakeholders: customers or clients, suppliers, investors, employees, government officials).
- The goodwill of an organization is to a great extent based on the actions it takes and on whether the actions are favorably viewed. (This goodwill is usually specifically counted in the sale of a business as an asset that the buyer pays for. While it is difficult to place a monetary value on goodwill, a firm’s good reputation will generally call for a higher evaluation in the final accounting before the sale. Legal troubles or a reputation for having legal troubles will only lessen the price for a business and will even lessen the value of the company’s stock as bad legal news comes to the public’s attention.)

Another reason to think about ethics in connection with law is that the laws themselves are meant to express some moral view. If there are legal prohibitions against cheating the Medicare program, it is because people (legislators or their agents) have collectively decided that cheating Medicare is wrong. If there are legal prohibitions against assisting someone to commit suicide, it

is because there has been a group decision that doing so is immoral. Thus the law provides some important cues as to what society regards as right or wrong.

Finally, important policy issues that face society are often resolved through law, but it is important to understand the moral perspectives that underlie public debate—as, for example, in the continuing controversies over stem-cell research, medical use of marijuana, and abortion. Some ethical perspectives focus on rights, some on social utility, some on virtue or character, and some on social justice. People consciously (or, more often, unconsciously) adopt one or more of these perspectives, and even if they completely agree on the facts with an opponent, they will not change their views. Fundamentally, the difference comes down to incompatible moral perspectives, a clash of basic values. These are hot-button issues because society is divided, not so much over facts, but over basic values. Understanding the varied moral perspectives and values in public policy debates is a clarifying benefit in following or participating in these important discussions.

### **Why Should an Individual or a Business Entity Be Ethical?**

The usual answer is that good ethics is good business. In the long run, businesses that pay attention to ethics as well as law do better; they are viewed more favorably by customers. But this is a difficult claim to measure scientifically, because “the long run” is an indistinct period of time and because there are as yet no generally accepted criteria by which ethical excellence can be measured. In addition, life is still lived in the short run, and there are many occasions when something short of perfect conduct is a lot more profitable.

Some years ago, Royal Dutch/Shell (one of the world’s largest companies) found that it was in deep trouble with the public for its apparent carelessness with the environment and human rights. Consumers were boycotting and investors were getting frightened, so the company took a long, hard look at its ethic of short-term profit maximization. Since then, changes have been made. The CEO told one group of business ethicists that the uproar had taken them by surprise; they thought they had done everything right, but it seemed there was a “ghost in the machine.” That ghost was consumers, NGOs, and the media, all of whom objected to the company’s seeming lack of moral sensitivity.

The market does respond to unethical behavior. In [Section 2.4 "Corporations and Corporate Governance"](#), you will read about the Sears Auto Centers case. The loss of goodwill toward Sears Auto Centers was real, even though the total amount of money lost cannot be clearly accounted for. Years later, there are people who will not go near a Sears Auto Center; the customers who lost trust in the company will never return, and many of their children may avoid Sears Auto Centers as well.

The Arthur Andersen story is even more dramatic. A major accounting firm, Andersen worked closely with Enron in hiding its various losses through creative accounting measures. Suspiciously, Andersen's Houston office also did some shredding around the clock, appearing to cover up what it was doing for Enron. A criminal case based on this shredding resulted in a conviction, later overturned by the Supreme Court. But it was too late. Even before the conviction, many clients had found other accounting firms that were not under suspicion, and the Supreme Court's reversal came too late to save the company. Even without the conviction, Andersen would have lost significant market share.

The irony of Andersen as a poster child for overly aggressive accounting practices is that the man who founded the firm built it on integrity and straightforward practices. "Think straight, talk straight" was the company's motto. Andersen established the company's reputation for integrity over a hundred years ago by refusing to play numbers games for a potentially lucrative client.

Maximizing profits while being legally compliant is not a very inspiring goal for a business. People in an organization need some quality or excellence to strive for. By focusing on pushing the edge of what is legal, by looking for loopholes in the law that would help create short-term financial gain, companies have often learned that in the long term they are not actually satisfying the market, the shareholders, the suppliers, or the community generally.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Legal compliance is not the same as acting ethically. Your reputation, individually or corporately, depends on how others regard your actions. Goodwill is hard to measure or quantify, but it is real nonetheless and can best be protected by acting ethically.

#### EXERCISES

1. Think of a person who did something morally wrong, at least to your way of thinking. What was it? Explain to a friend of yours—or a classmate—why you think it was wrong. Does your friend agree? Why or why not? What is the basic principle that forms the basis for your judgment that it was wrong?
2. Think of a person who did something morally right, at least to your way of thinking. (This is not a matter of finding something they did well, like efficiently changing a tire, but something good.) What was it? Explain to a friend of yours—or a classmate—why you think it was right. Does your friend agree? Why or why not? What is the basic principle that forms the basis for your judgment that it was right?
3. Think of an action by a business organization (sole proprietor, partnership, or corporation) that was legal but still strikes you as wrong. What was it? Why do you think it was wrong?
4. Think of an act by an individual or a corporation that is ethical but not legal. Compare your answer with those of your classmates: were you more likely to find an example from individual action or corporate action? Do you have any thoughts as to why?

## 2.2 Major Ethical Perspectives

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the various major theories about ethics in human decision making.
2. Begin considering how the major theories about ethics apply to difficult choices in life and business.

There are several well-respected ways of looking at ethical issues. Some of them have been around for centuries. It is important to know that many who think a lot about business and ethics have deeply held beliefs about which perspective is best. Others would recommend considering ethical problems from a variety of different perspectives. Here, we take a brief look at (1) utilitarianism, (2) deontology, (3) social justice and social contract theory, and (4) virtue theory. We are leaving out some important perspectives, such as general theories of justice and “rights” and feminist thought about ethics and patriarchy.

### Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a prominent perspective on ethics, one that is well aligned with economics and the free-market outlook that has come to dominate much current thinking about business,

management, and economics. Jeremy Bentham is often considered the founder of utilitarianism, though John Stuart Mill (who wrote *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*) and others promoted it as a guide to what is good. Utilitarianism emphasizes not rules but results. An action (or set of actions) is generally deemed good or right if it maximizes happiness or pleasure throughout society. Originally intended as a guide for legislators charged with seeking the greatest good for society, the utilitarian outlook may also be practiced individually and by corporations.

Bentham believed that the most promising way to obtain agreement on the best policies for a society would be to look at the various policies a legislature could pass and compare the good and bad consequences of each. The right course of action from an ethical point of view would be to choose the policy that would produce the greatest amount of utility, or usefulness. In brief, the utilitarian principle holds that an action is right if and only if the sum of utilities produced by that action is greater than the sum of utilities from any other possible act.

This statement describes “act utilitarianism”—which action among various options will deliver the greatest good to society? “Rule utilitarianism” is a slightly different version; it asks, what rule or principle, if followed regularly, will create the greatest good?

Notice that the emphasis is on finding the best possible results and that the assumption is that we can measure the utilities involved. (This turns out to be more difficult than you might think.)

Notice also that “the sum total of utilities” clearly implies that in doing utilitarian analysis, we cannot be satisfied if an act or set of acts provides the greatest utility to us as individuals or to a particular corporation; the test is, instead, whether it provides the greatest utility to society as a whole. Notice that the theory does not tell us what kinds of utilities may be better than others or how much better a good today is compared with a good a year from today.

Whatever its difficulties, utilitarian thinking is alive and well in US law and business. It is found in such diverse places as cost-benefit analysis in administrative and regulatory rules and calculations, environmental impact studies, the majority vote, product comparisons for consumer information, marketing studies, tax laws, and strategic planning. In management, people will often employ a form of utility reasoning by projecting costs and benefits for plan X versus plan Y. But the issue in most of these cost-benefit analyses is usually (1) put exclusively in

terms of money and (2) directed to the benefit of the person or organization doing the analysis and not to the benefit of society as a whole.

An individual or a company that consistently uses the test “What’s the greatest good for me or the company?” is not following the utilitarian test of the greatest good overall. Another common failing is to see only one or two options that seem reasonable. The following are some frequent mistakes that people make in applying what they think are utilitarian principles in justifying their chosen course of action:

1. Failing to come up with lots of options that seem reasonable and then choosing the one that has the greatest benefit for the greatest number. Often, a decision maker seizes on one or two alternatives without thinking carefully about other courses of action. If the alternative does more good than harm, the decision maker assumes it’s ethically okay.
2. Assuming that the greatest good for you or your company is in fact the greatest good for all—that is, looking at situations subjectively or with your own interests primarily in mind.
3. Underestimating the costs of a certain decision to you or your company. The now-classic Ford Pinto case demonstrates how Ford Motor Company executives drastically underestimated the legal costs of not correcting a feature on their Pinto models that they knew could cause death or injury. General Motors was often taken to task by juries that came to understand that the company would not recall or repair known and dangerous defects because it seemed more profitable not to. In 2010, Toyota learned the same lesson.
4. Underestimating the cost or harm of a certain decision to someone else or some other group of people.
5. Favoring short-term benefits, even though the long-term costs are greater.
6. Assuming that all values can be reduced to money. In comparing the risks to human health or safety against, say, the risks of job or profit losses, cost-benefit analyses will often try to compare apples to oranges and put arbitrary numerical values on human health and safety.

### **Rules and Duty: Deontology**

In contrast to the utilitarian perspective, the deontological view presented in the writings of Immanuel Kant purports that having a moral intent and following the right rules is a better path to ethical conduct than achieving the right results. A deontologist like Kant is likely to believe

that ethical action arises from doing one's duty and that duties are defined by rational thought. Duties, according to Kant, are not specific to particular kinds of human beings but are owed universally to all human beings. Kant therefore uses "universalizing" as a form of rational thought that assumes the inherent equality of all human beings. It considers all humans as equal, not in the physical, social, or economic sense, but equal before God, whether they are male, female, Pygmy, Eskimoan, Islamic, Christian, gay, straight, healthy, sick, young, or old. For Kantian thinkers, this basic principle of equality means that we should be able to universalize any particular law or action to determine whether it is ethical. For example, if you were to consider misrepresenting yourself on a resume for a particular job you really wanted and you were convinced that doing so would get you that job, you might be very tempted to do so. (What harm would it be? you might ask yourself. When I have the job, I can prove that I was perfect for it, and no one is hurt, while both the employer and I are clearly better off as a result!) Kantian ethicists would answer that your chosen course of action should be a universal one—a course of action that would be good for all persons at all times. There are two requirements for a rule of action to be universal: consistency and reversibility. Consider reversibility: if you make a decision as though you didn't know what role or position you would have after the decision, you would more likely make an impartial one—you would more likely choose a course of action that would be most fair to all concerned, not just you. Again, deontology requires that we put duty first, act rationally, and give moral weight to the inherent equality of all human beings. In considering whether to lie on your resume, reversibility requires you to actively imagine both that you were the employer in this situation and that you were another well-qualified applicant who lost the job because someone else padded his resume with false accomplishments. If the consequences of such an exercise of the imagination are not appealing to you, your action is probably not ethical.

The second requirement for an action to be universal is the search for consistency. This is more abstract. A deontologist would say that since you know you are telling a lie, you must be willing to say that lying, as a general, universal phenomenon, is acceptable. But if everyone lied, then there would be no point to lying, since no one would believe anyone. It is only because honesty

works well for society as a whole and is generally practiced that lying even becomes possible! That is, lying cannot be universalized, for it depends on the preexistence of honesty. Similar demonstrations can be made for actions such as polluting, breaking promises, and committing most crimes, including rape, murder, and theft. But these are the easy cases for Kantian thinkers. In the gray areas of life as it is lived, the consistency test is often difficult to apply. If breaking a promise would save a life, then Kantian thought becomes difficult to apply. If some amount of pollution can allow employment and the harm is minimal or distant, Kantian thinking is not all that helpful. Finally, we should note that the well-known Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” emphasizes the easier of the two universalizing requirements: practicing reversibility (“How would I like it if someone did this to me?”).

### **Social Justice Theory and Social Contract Theory**

Social justice theorists worry about “distributive justice”—that is, what is the fair way to distribute goods among a group of people? Marxist thought emphasizes that members of society should be given goods according to their needs. But this redistribution would require a governing power to decide who gets what and when. Capitalist thought takes a different approach, rejecting any giving that is not voluntary. Certain economists, such as the late Milton Friedman (see the sidebar in [Section 2.4 "Corporations and Corporate Governance"](#)) also reject the notion that a corporation has a duty to give to unmet needs in society, believing that the government should play that role. Even the most dedicated free-market capitalist will often admit the need for some government and some forms of welfare—Social Security, Medicare, assistance to flood-stricken areas, help for AIDS patients—along with some public goods (such as defense, education, highways, parks, and support of key industries affecting national security). People who do not see the need for public goods (including laws, court systems, and the government goods and services just cited) often question why there needs to be a government at all. One response might be, “Without government, there would be no corporations.” Thomas Hobbes believed that people in a “state of nature” would rationally choose to have some form of government. He called this the social contract, where people give up certain rights to government in exchange for security and common benefits. In your own lives and in this course, you will see



an ongoing balancing act between human desires for freedom and human desires for order; it is an ancient tension. Some commentators also see a kind of social contract between corporations and society; in exchange for perpetual duration and limited liability, the corporation has some corresponding duties toward society. Also, if a corporation is legally a “person,” as the Supreme Court reaffirmed in 2010, then some would argue that if this corporate person commits three felonies, it should be locked up for life and its corporate charter revoked!

Modern social contract theorists, such as Thomas Donaldson and Thomas Dunfee (*Ties that Bind*, 1999), observe that various communities, not just nations, make rules for the common good. Your college or school is a community, and there are communities within the school (fraternities, sororities, the folks behind the counter at the circulation desk, the people who work together at the university radio station, the sports teams, the faculty, the students generally, the gay and lesbian alliance) that have rules, norms, or standards that people can buy into or not. If not, they can exit from that community, just as we are free (though not without cost) to reject US citizenship and take up residence in another country.

Donaldson and Dunfee’s integrative social contracts theory stresses the importance of studying the rules of smaller communities along with the larger social contracts made in states (such as Colorado or California) and nation-states (such as the United States or Germany). Our Constitution can be seen as a fundamental social contract.

It is important to realize that a social contract can be changed by the participants in a community, just as the US Constitution can be amended. Social contract theory is thus dynamic—it allows for structural and organic changes. Ideally, the social contract struck by citizens and the government allows for certain fundamental rights such as those we enjoy in the United States, but it need not. People can give up freedom-oriented rights (such as the right of free speech or the right to be free of unreasonable searches and seizures) to secure order (freedom from fear, freedom from terrorism). For example, many citizens in Russia now miss the days when the Kremlin was all powerful; there was less crime and more equality and predictability to life in the Soviet Union, even if there was less freedom.

Thus the rights that people have—in positive law—come from whatever social contract exists in the society. This view differs from that of the deontologists and that of the natural-law thinkers

such as Gandhi, Jesus, or Martin Luther King Jr., who believed that rights come from God or, in less religious terms, from some transcendent moral order.

Another important movement in ethics and society is the communitarian outlook.

Communitarians emphasize that rights carry with them corresponding duties; that is, there cannot be a right without a duty. Interested students may wish to explore the work of Amitai Etzioni. Etzioni was a founder of the Communitarian Network, which is a group of individuals who have come together to bolster the moral, social, and political environment. It claims to be nonsectarian, nonpartisan, and international in scope.

The relationship between rights and duties—in both law and ethics—calls for some explanations:

1. If you have a right of free expression, the government has a duty to respect that right but can put reasonable limits on it. For example, you can legally say whatever you want about the US president, but you can't get away with threatening the president's life. Even if your criticisms are strong and insistent, you have the right (and our government has the duty to protect your right) to speak freely. In Singapore during the 1990s, even indirect criticisms—mere hints—of the political leadership were enough to land you in jail or at least silence you with a libel suit.
2. Rights and duties exist not only between people and their governments but also between individuals. Your right to be free from physical assault is protected by the law in most states, and when someone walks up to you and punches you in the nose, your rights—as set forth in the positive law of your state—have been violated. Thus other people have a duty to respect your rights and to not punch you in the nose.
3. Your right in legal terms is only as good as your society's willingness to provide legal remedies through the courts and political institutions of society.

A distinction between basic rights and nonbasic rights may also be important. Basic rights may include such fundamental elements as food, water, shelter, and physical safety. Another distinction is between positive rights (the right to bear arms, the right to vote, the right of privacy) and negative rights (the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures, the right to be free of cruel or unusual punishments). Yet another is between economic or social rights (adequate food, work, and environment) and political or civic rights (the right to vote, the right to equal protection of the laws, the right to due process).

## Aristotle and Virtue Theory

Virtue theory, or virtue ethics, has received increasing attention over the past twenty years, particularly in contrast to utilitarian and deontological approaches to ethics. Virtue theory emphasizes the value of virtuous qualities rather than formal rules or useful results. Aristotle is often recognized as the first philosopher to advocate the ethical value of certain qualities, or virtues, in a person's character. As LaRue Hosmer has noted, Aristotle saw the goal of human existence as the active, rational search for excellence, and excellence requires the personal virtues of honesty, truthfulness, courage, temperance, generosity, and high-mindedness. This pursuit is also termed "knowledge of the good" in Greek philosophy. <sup>[1]</sup>

Aristotle believed that all activity was aimed at some goal or perceived good and that there must be some ranking that we do among those goals or goods. Happiness may be our ultimate goal, but what does that mean, exactly? Aristotle rejected wealth, pleasure, and fame and embraced reason as the distinguishing feature of humans, as opposed to other species. And since a human is a reasoning animal, happiness must be associated with reason. Thus happiness is living according to the active (rather than passive) use of reason. The use of reason leads to excellence, and so happiness can be defined as the active, rational pursuit of personal excellence, or virtue. Aristotle named fourteen virtues: (1) courage, particularly in battle; (2) temperance, or moderation in eating and drinking; (3) liberality, or spending money well; (4) magnificence, or living well; (5) pride, or taking pleasure in accomplishments and stature; (6) high-mindedness, or concern with the noble rather than the petty; (7) unnamed virtue, which is halfway between ambition and total lack of effort; (8) gentleness, or concern for others; (9) truthfulness; (10) wit, or pleasure in group discussions; (11) friendliness, or pleasure in personal conduct; (12) modesty, or pleasure in personal conduct; (13) righteous indignation, or getting angry at the right things and in the right amounts; and (14) justice.

From a modern perspective, some of these virtues seem old-fashioned or even odd.

Magnificence, for example, is not something we commonly speak of. Three issues emerge: (1) How do we know what a virtue is these days? (2) How useful is a list of agreed-upon virtues anyway? (3) What do virtues have to do with companies, particularly large ones where various groups and individuals may have little or no contact with other parts of the organization?

As to the third question, whether corporations can “have” virtues or values is a matter of lively debate. A corporation is obviously not the same as an individual. But there seems to be growing agreement that organizations do differ in their practices and that these practices are value driven. If all a company cares about is the bottom line, other values will diminish or disappear. Quite a few books have been written in the past twenty years that emphasize the need for businesses to define their values in order to be competitive in today’s global economy. <sup>[2]</sup>

As to the first two questions regarding virtues, a look at Michael Josephson’s core values may prove helpful.

### **Josephson’s Core Values Analysis and Decision Process**

Michael Josephson, a noted American ethicist, believes that a current set of *core values* has been identified and that the values can be meaningfully applied to a variety of personal and corporate decisions.

To simplify, let’s say that there are ethical and nonethical qualities among people in the United States. When you ask people what kinds of qualities they admire in others or in themselves, they may say wealth, power, fitness, sense of humor, good looks, intelligence, musical ability, or some other quality. They may also value honesty, caring, fairness, courage, perseverance, diligence, trustworthiness, or integrity. The qualities on the second list have something in common—they are distinctively ethical characteristics. That is, they are commonly seen as moral or ethical qualities, unlike the qualities on the first list. You can be, like the Athenian Alcibiades, brilliant but unprincipled, or, like some political leaders today, powerful but dishonest, or wealthy but uncaring. You can, in short, have a number of admirable qualities (brilliance, power, wealth) that are not per se virtuous. Just because Harold is rich or good-looking or has a good sense of humor does not mean that he is ethical. But if Harold is honest and caring (whether he is rich or poor, humorous or humorless), people are likely to see him as ethical.

Among the virtues, are any especially important? Studies from the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Marina del Rey, California, have identified six core values in our society, values that almost everyone agrees are important to them. When asked what values people hold dear, what values they wish to be known by, and what values they wish others would exhibit in their actions, six

values consistently turn up: (1) trustworthiness, (2) respect, (3) responsibility, (4) fairness, (5) caring, and (6) citizenship.

Note that these values are distinctly ethical. While many of us may value wealth, good looks, and intelligence, having wealth, good looks, and intelligence does not automatically make us virtuous in our character and habits. But being more trustworthy (by being honest and by keeping promises) does make us more virtuous, as does staying true to the other five core values.

Notice also that these six core values share something in common with other ethical values that are less universally agreed upon. Many values taught in the family or in places of worship are not generally agreed on, practiced, or admired by all. Some families and individuals believe strongly in the virtue of saving money or in abstaining from alcohol or sex prior to marriage. Others clearly do not, or at least don't act on their beliefs. Moreover, it is possible to have and practice core ethical values even if you take on heavy debt, knock down several drinks a night, or have frequent premarital sex. Some would dispute this, saying that you can't really lead a virtuous life if you get into debt, drink heavily, or engage in premarital sex. But the point here is that since people do disagree in these areas, the ethical traits of thrift, temperance, and sexual abstinence do not have the unanimity of approval that the six core values do.

The importance of an individual's having these consistent qualities of character is well known. Often we remember the last bad thing a person did far more than any or all previous good acts. For example, Eliot Spitzer and Bill Clinton are more readily remembered by people for their last, worst acts than for any good they accomplished as public servants. As for a company, its good reputation also has an incalculable value that when lost takes a great deal of time and work to recover. Shell, Nike, and other companies have discovered that there is a market for morality, however difficult to measure, and that not paying attention to business ethics often comes at a serious price. In the past fifteen years, the career of ethics and compliance officer has emerged, partly as a result of criminal proceedings against companies but also because major companies have found that reputations cannot be recovered retroactively but must be pursued proactively. For individuals, Aristotle emphasized the practice of virtue to the point where virtue becomes a habit. Companies are gradually learning the same lesson.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

Throughout history, people have pondered what it means “to do what is right.” Some of the main answers have come from the differing perspectives of utilitarian thought; duty-based, or deontological, thought; social contract theory; and virtue ethics.

## EXERCISES

XYZ Motor Corporation begins to get customer complaints about two models of its automobiles. Customers have had near-death experiences from sudden acceleration; they would be driving along a highway at normal speed when suddenly the car would begin to accelerate, and efforts to stop the acceleration by braking fail to work. Drivers could turn off the ignition and come to a safe stop, but XYZ does not instruct buyers of its cars to do so, nor is this a common reaction among drivers who experience sudden acceleration.

Internal investigations of half a dozen accidents in US locations come to the conclusion that the accidents are not being caused by drivers who mistake the gas pedal for the brake pedal. In fact, there appears to be a possible flaw in both models, perhaps in a semiconductor chip, that makes sudden acceleration happen. Interference by floor mats and poorly designed gas pedals do not seem to be the problem.

It is voluntary to report these incidents to the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration (NHTSA), but the company decides that it will wait awhile and see if there are more complaints. Recalling the two models so that local dealers and their mechanics could examine them is also an option, but it would be extremely costly. Company executives are aware that quarterly and annual profit-and-loss statements, on which their bonuses depend, could be decisively worse with a recall. They decide that on a cost-benefit basis, it makes more sense to wait until there are more accidents and more data. After a hundred or more accidents and nearly fifteen fatalities, the company institutes a selective recall, still not notifying NHTSA, which has its own experts and the authority to order XYZ to do a full recall of all affected models.

Experts have advised XYZ that standard failure-analysis methodology requires that the company obtain absolutely every XYZ vehicle that has experienced sudden acceleration, using microscopic analysis of all critical components of the electronic system. The company

does not wish to take that advice, as it would be—as one top executive put it—“too time-consuming and expensive.”

1. Can XYZ’s approach to this problem be justified under utilitarian theory? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. What would Kant advise XYZ to do? Explain.
3. What would the “virtuous” approach be for XYZ in this situation?

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[1] LaRue Tone Hosmer, *Moral Leadership in Business* (Chicago: Irwin Professional Publishing, 1994), 72.

[2] James O’Toole and Don Mayer, eds., *Good Business: Exercising Effective and Ethical Leadership* (London: Routledge, 2010).

## 2.3 An Ethical Decision Model

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand one model for ethical decision making: a process to arrive at the most ethical option for an individual or a business organization, using a virtue ethics approach combined with some elements of stakeholder analysis and utilitarianism.

### Josephson’s Core Values Model

Once you recognize that there is a decision that involves ethical judgment, Michael Josephson would first have you ask as many questions as are necessary to get a full background on the relevant facts. Then, assuming you have all the needed information, the decision process is as follows:

1. Identify the stakeholders. That is, who are the potential gainers and losers in the various decisions that might be made here?
2. Identify several likely or reasonable decisions that could be made.
3. Consider which stakeholders gain or lose with each decision.
4. Determine which decision satisfies the greatest number of core values.
5. If there is no decision that satisfies the greatest number of core values, try to determine which decision delivers the greatest good to the various stakeholders.

It is often helpful to identify who (or what group) is the most important stakeholder, and why. In Milton Friedman's view, it will always be the shareholders. In the view of John Mackey, the CEO of Whole Foods Market, the long-term viability and profitability of the organization may require that customers come first, or, at times, some other stakeholder group (see "Conscious Capitalism" in [Section 2.4 "Corporations and Corporate Governance"](#)).

## The Core Values

Here are the core values and their subcomponents as developed by the Josephson Institute of Ethics.

***Trustworthiness:*** Be honest—tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; be sincere, forthright; don't deceive, mislead, or be tricky with the truth; don't cheat or steal, and don't betray a trust. Demonstrate integrity—stand up for what you believe, walk the walk as well as talking the talk; be what you seem to be; show commitment and courage. Be loyal—stand by your family, friends, co-workers, community, and nation; be discreet with information that comes into your hands; don't spread rumors or engage in harmful gossip; don't violate your principles just to win friendship or approval; don't ask a friend to do something that is wrong. Keep promises—keep your word, honor your commitments, and pay your debts; return what you borrow.

***Respect:*** Judge people on their merits, not their appearance; be courteous, polite, appreciative, and accepting of differences; respect others' right to make decisions about their own lives; don't abuse, demean, mistreat anyone; don't use, manipulate, exploit, or take advantage of others.

***Responsibility:*** Be accountable—think about the consequences on yourself and others likely to be affected before you act; be reliable; perform your duties; take responsibility for the consequences of your choices; set a good example and don't make excuses or take credit for other people's work. Pursue excellence: Do your best, don't quit easily, persevere, be diligent, make all you do worthy of pride. Exercise self-restraint—be disciplined, know the difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.



**Fairness:** *Treat all people fairly, be open-minded; listen; consider opposing viewpoints; be consistent; use only appropriate considerations; don't let personal feelings improperly interfere with decisions; don't take unfair advantage of mistakes; don't take more than your fair share.*

**Caring:** *Show you care about others through kindness, caring, sharing, compassion, and empathy; treat others the way you want to be treated; don't be selfish, mean, cruel, or insensitive to others' feelings.*

**Citizenship:** *Play by the rules, obey laws; do your share, respect authority, stay informed, vote, protect your neighbors, pay your taxes; be charitable, help your community; protect the environment, conserve resources.*

When individuals and organizations confront ethical problems, the core values decision model offered by Josephson generally works well (1) to clarify the gains and losses of the various stakeholders, which then raises ethical awareness on the part of the decision maker and (2) to provide a fairly reliable guide as to what the most ethical decision would be. In nine out of ten cases, step 5 in the decision process is not needed.

That said, it does not follow that students (or managers) would necessarily act in accord with the results of the core values decision process. There are many psychological pressures and organizational constraints that place limits on people both individually and in organizations. These pressures and constraints tend to compromise ideal or the most ethical solutions for individuals and for organizations. For a business, one essential problem is that ethics can cost the organization money or resources, at least in the short term. Doing the most ethical thing will often appear to be something that fails to maximize profits in the short term or that may seem pointless because if you or your organization acts ethically, others will not, and society will be no better off, anyway.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Having a step-by-step process to analyze difficult moral dilemmas is useful. One such process is offered here, based on the core values of trustworthiness, caring, respect, fairness, responsibility, and citizenship.

#### EXERCISE

1. Consider XYZ in the exercises for [Section 2.2.5 "Josephson's Core Values Analysis and Decision Process"](#) and use the core values decision-making model. What are XYZ's options when they first notice that two of their models are causing sudden acceleration incidents that put their customers at risk? Who are the stakeholders? What options most clearly meet the criteria for each of the core values?

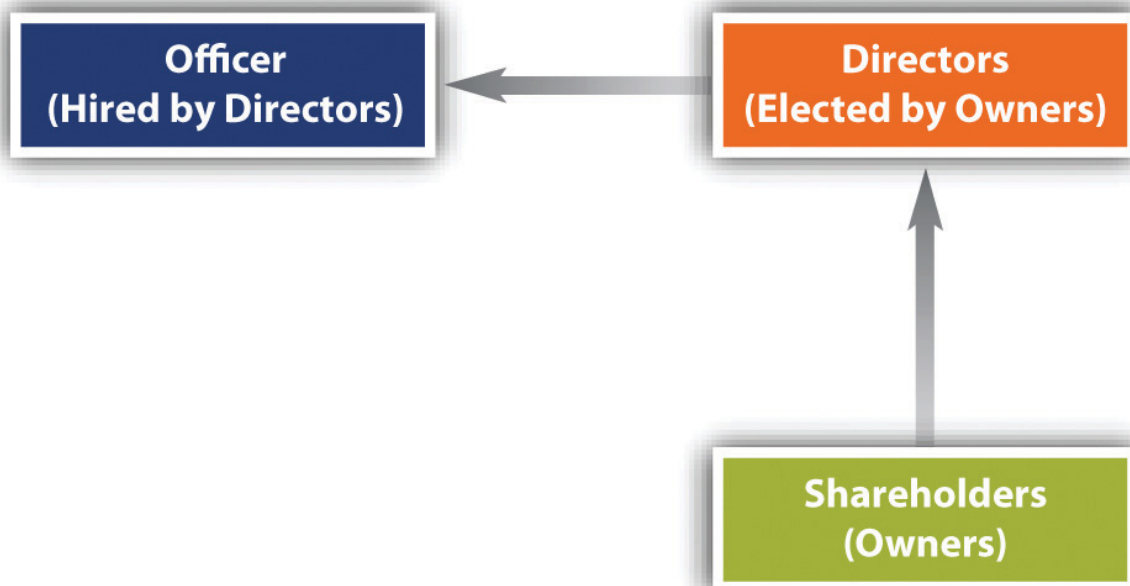
## 2.4 Corporations and Corporate Governance

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain the basic structure of the typical corporation and how the shareholders own the company and elect directors to run it.
2. Understand how the shareholder profit-maximization model is different from stakeholder theory.
3. Discern and describe the ethical challenges for corporate cultures.
4. Explain what conscious capitalism is and how it differs from stakeholder theory.

### Legal Organization of the Corporation

*Figure 2.1 Corporate Legal Structure*



**Figure 2.1 "Corporate Legal Structure"**, though somewhat oversimplified, shows the basic legal structure of a corporation under Delaware law and the laws of most other states in the United States. Shareholders elect directors, who then hire officers to manage the company. From this structure, some very basic realities follow. Because the directors of a corporation do not meet that often, it's possible for the officers hired (top management, or the "C-suite") to be selective of what the board knows about, and directors are not always ready and able to provide the oversight that the shareholders would like. Nor does the law require officers to be shareholders, so that officers' motivations may not align with the best interests of the company. This is the "agency problem" often discussed in corporate governance: how to get officers and other top management to align their own interests with those of the shareholders. For example, a CEO might trade insider information to the detriment of the company's shareholders. Even board members are susceptible to misalignment of interests; for example, board members might resist hostile takeover bids because they would likely lose their perks (short for *perquisites*) as directors, even though the tender offer would benefit stockholders. Among other attempted realignments, the use of stock options was an attempt to make managers more attentive to the value of company stock, but the law of unintended consequences was in full force; managers tweaked and managed earnings in the bubble of the 1990s bull market, and "managing by numbers" became an epidemic in corporations organized under US corporate law. The rights of shareholders can be bolstered by changes in state and federal law, and there have been some attempts to do that since the late 1990s. But as owners, shareholders have the ultimate power to replace nonperforming or underperforming directors, which usually results in changes at the C-suite level as well.

## Shareholders and Stakeholders

There are two main views about what the corporation's duties are. The first view—maximizing profits—is the prevailing view among business managers and in business schools. This view largely follows the idea of Milton Friedman that the duty of a manager is to maximize return on investment to the owners. In essence, managers' legally prescribed duties are those that make their employment possible. In terms of the legal organization of the corporation, the shareholders elect directors who hire managers, who have legally prescribed duties toward both

directors and shareholders. Those legally prescribed duties are a reflection of the fact that managers are managing other people's money and have a moral duty to act as a responsible agent for the owners. In law, this is called the manager's fiduciary duty. Directors have the same duties toward shareholders. Friedman emphasized the primacy of this duty in his writings about corporations and social responsibility.

### **Maximizing Profits: Milton Friedman**

Economist Milton Friedman is often quoted as having said that the only moral duty a corporation has is to make the most possible money, or to maximize profits, for its stockholders. Friedman's beliefs are noted at length (see sidebar on Friedman's article from the *New York Times*), but he asserted in a now-famous 1970 article that in a free society, "there is one and only one social responsibility of business: to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits as long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception and fraud." What follows is a major portion of what Friedman had to say in 1970.

### **"The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits"**

Milton Friedman, *New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970

*What does it mean to say that "business" has responsibilities? Only people can have responsibilities. A corporation is an artificial person and in this sense may have artificial responsibilities, but "business" as a whole cannot be said to have responsibilities, even in this vague sense....*

*Presumably, the individuals who are to be responsible are businessmen, which means individual proprietors or corporate executives....In a free enterprise, private-property system, a corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business. He has direct responsibility to his employers. That responsibility is to conduct the business in accordance with their desires, which generally will be to make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of the society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in ethical custom....*

*...[T]he manager is that agent of the individuals who own the corporation or establish the eleemosynary institution, and his primary responsibility is to them...*

*Of course, the corporate executive is also a person in his own right. As a person, he may have other responsibilities that he recognizes or assumes voluntarily—to his family, his conscience, his feeling of charity, his church, his clubs, his city, his country. He may feel impelled by these responsibilities to devote part of his income to causes he regards as worthy, to refuse to work for particular corporations, even to leave his job...But in these respects he is acting as a principal, not an agent; he is spending his own money or time or energy, not the money of his employers or the time or energy he has contracted to devote to their purposes. If these are “social responsibilities,” they are the social responsibilities of individuals, not of business.*

*What does it mean to say that the corporate executive has a “social responsibility” in his capacity as businessman? If this statement is not pure rhetoric, it must mean that he has to act in some way that is not in the interest of his employers. For example, that he is to refrain from increasing the price of the product in order to contribute to the social objective of preventing inflation, even though a price increase would be in the best interests of the corporation. Or that he is to make expenditures on reducing pollution beyond the amount that is in the best interests of the corporation or that is required by law in order to contribute to the social objective of improving the environment. Or that, at the expense of corporate profits, he is to hire “hardcore” unemployed instead of better qualified available workmen to contribute to the social objective of reducing poverty.*

*In each of these cases, the corporate executive would be spending someone else’s money for a general social interest. Insofar as his actions...reduce returns to stockholders, he is spending their money. Insofar as his actions raise the price to customers, he is spending the customers’ money. Insofar as his actions lower the wages of some employees, he is spending their money.*

*This process raises political questions on two levels: principle and consequences. On the level of political principle, the imposition of taxes and the expenditure of tax proceeds are governmental functions. We have established elaborate constitutional, parliamentary, and judicial provisions to control these functions, to assure that taxes*

*are imposed so far as possible in accordance with the preferences and desires of the public....*

Others have challenged the notion that corporate managers have no real duties except toward the owners (shareholders). By changing two letters in *shareholder*, stakeholder theorists widened the range of people and institutions that a corporation should pay moral consideration to. Thus they contend that a corporation, through its management, has a set of responsibilities toward nonshareholder interests.

### **Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholders of a corporation include its employees, suppliers, customers, and the community. Stakeholder is a deliberate play on the word *shareholder*, to emphasize that corporations have obligations that extend beyond the bottom-line aim of maximizing profits. A stakeholder is anyone who most would agree is significantly affected (positively or negatively) by the decision of another moral agent.

There is one vital fact about corporations: the corporation is a creation of the law. Without law (and government), corporations would not have existence. The key concept for corporations is the legal fact of limited liability. The benefit of limited liability for shareholders of a corporation meant that larger pools of capital could be aggregated for larger enterprises; shareholders could only lose their investments should the venture fail in any way, and there would be no personal liability and thus no potential loss of personal assets other than the value of the corporate stock. Before New Jersey and Delaware competed to make incorporation as easy as possible and beneficial to the incorporators and founders, those who wanted the benefits of incorporation had to go to legislatures—usually among the states—to show a public purpose that the company would serve.

In the late 1800s, New Jersey and Delaware changed their laws to make incorporating relatively easy. These two states allowed incorporation “for any legal purpose,” rather than requiring some public purpose. Thus it is government (and its laws) that makes limited liability happen through the corporate form. That is, only through the consent of the state and armed with the charter granted by the state can a corporation’s shareholders have limited liability. This is a right granted by the state, a right granted for good and practical reasons for encouraging capital and

innovation. But with this right comes a related duty, not clearly stated at law, but assumed when a charter is granted by the state: that the corporate form of doing business is legal because the government feels that it socially useful to do so.

Implicitly, then, there is a social contract between governments and corporations: as long as corporations are considered socially useful, they can exist. But do they have explicit social responsibilities? Milton Friedman’s position suggests that having gone along with legal duties, the corporation can ignore any other social obligations. But there are others (such as advocates of stakeholder theory) who would say that a corporation’s social responsibilities go beyond just staying within the law and go beyond the corporation’s shareholders to include a number of other important stakeholders, those whose lives can be affected by corporate decisions.

According to stakeholder theorists, corporations (and other business organizations) must pay attention not only to the bottom line but also to their overall effect on the community. Public perception of a company’s unfairness, uncaring, disrespect, or lack of trustworthiness often leads to long-term failure, whatever the short-term successes or profits may be. A socially responsible corporation is likely to consider the impact of its decisions on a wide range of stakeholders, not just shareholders. As [Table 2.1 "The Stakes of Various Stakeholders"](#) indicates, stakeholders have very different kinds of interests (“stakes”) in the actions of a corporation.

Table 2.1 The Stakes of Various Stakeholders

<i>Ownership</i>	The value of the organization has a direct impact on the wealth of these stakeholders.	Managers
		Directors who own stock
		Shareholders
<i>Economic Dependence</i>	Stakeholders can be economically dependent without having ownership. Each of these stakeholders relies on the corporation in some way for financial well-being.	Salaried managers
		Creditors
		Suppliers
		Employees
		Local communities

<i>Social Interests</i>	These stakeholders are not directly linked to the organization but have an interest in making sure the organization acts in a socially responsible manner.	Communities
		Government
		Media

## Corporate Culture and Codes of Ethics

A corporation is a “person” capable of suing, being sued, and having rights and duties in our legal system. (It is a legal or juridical person, not a natural person, according to our Supreme Court.) Moreover, many corporations have distinct cultures and beliefs that are lived and breathed by its members. Often, the culture of a corporation is the best defense against individuals within that firm who may be tempted to break the law or commit serious ethical misdeeds.

What follows is a series of observations about corporations, ethics, and corporate culture.

### Ethical Leadership Is Top-Down

People in an organization tend to watch closely what the top managers do and say. Regardless of managers’ talk about ethics, employees quickly learn what speech or actions are in fact rewarded. If the CEO is firm about acting ethically, others in the organization will take their cues from him or her. People at the top tend to set the target, the climate, the beliefs, and the expectations that fuel behavior.

### Accountability Is Often Weak

Clever managers can learn to shift blame to others, take credit for others’ work, and move on before “funny numbers” or other earnings management tricks come to light. <sup>[1]</sup>Again, we see that the manager is often an agent for himself or herself and will often act more in his or her self-interest than for the corporate interest.

### Killing the Messenger

Where organizations no longer function, inevitably some employees are unhappy. If they call attention to problems that are being covered up by coworkers or supervisors, they bring bad news. Managers like to hear good news and discourage bad news. Intentionally or not, those who told on others, or blew the whistle, have rocked the boat and become unpopular with those whose defalcations they report on and with the managers who don’t really want to hear the bad news. In many organizations, “killing the messenger” solves the problem. Consider James



Alexander at Enron Corporation, who was deliberately shut out after bringing problems to CEO Ken Lay's attention. <sup>[2]</sup>When Sherron Watkins sent Ken Lay a letter warning him about Enron's accounting practices, CFO Andrew Fastow tried to fire her. <sup>[3]</sup>

### **Ethics Codes**

Without strong leadership and a willingness to listen to bad news as well as good news, managers do not have the feedback necessary to keep the organization healthy. Ethics codes have been put in place—partly in response to federal sentencing guidelines and partly to encourage feedback loops to top management. The best ethics codes are aspirational, or having an ideal to be pursued, not legalistic or compliance driven. The Johnson & Johnson ethics code predated the Tylenol scare and the company's oft-celebrated corporate response. <sup>[4]</sup> The corporate response was consistent with that code, which was lived and modeled by the top of the organization.

It's often noted that a code of ethics is only as important as top management is willing to make it. If the code is just a document that goes into a drawer or onto a shelf, it will not effectively encourage good conduct within the corporation. The same is true of any kind of training that the company undertakes, whether it be in racial sensitivity or sexual harassment. If the message is not continuously reinforced, or (worse yet) if the message is undermined by management's actions, the real message to employees is that violations of the ethics code will not be taken seriously, or that efforts to stop racial discrimination or sexual harassment are merely token efforts, and that the important things are profits and performance. The ethics code at Enron seems to have been one of those "3-P" codes that wind up sitting on shelves—"Print, Post, and Pray." Worse, the Enron board twice suspended the code in 1999 to allow outside partnerships to be led by a top Enron executive who stood to gain financially from them. <sup>[5]</sup>

### **Ethics Hotlines and Federal Sentencing Guidelines**

The federal sentencing guidelines were enacted in 1991. The original idea behind these guidelines was for Congress to correct the lenient treatment often given to white-collar, or corporate, criminals. The guidelines require judges to consider "aggravating and mitigating" factors in determining sentences and fines. (While corporations cannot go to jail, its officers and managers certainly can, and the corporation itself can be fined. Many companies will claim that

it is one bad apple that has caused the problem; the guidelines invite these companies to show that they are in fact tending their orchard well. They can show this by providing evidence that they have (1) a viable, active code of ethics; (2) a way for employees to report violations of law or the ethics code; and (3) an ethics ombudsman, or someone who oversees the code.

In short, if a company can show that it has an ongoing process to root out wrongdoing at all levels of the company, the judge is allowed to consider this as a major mitigating factor in the fines the company will pay. Most Fortune 500 companies have ethics hotlines and processes in place to find legal and ethical problems within the company.

### **Managing by the Numbers**

If you manage by the numbers, there is a temptation to lie about those numbers, based on the need to get stock price ever higher. At Enron, “15 percent a year or better earnings growth” was the mantra. Jeffrey Pfeffer, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University, observes how the belief that “stock price is all that matters” has been hardwired into the corporate psyche. It dictates not only how people judge the worth of their company but also how they feel about themselves and the work that they are doing. And, over time, it has clouded judgments about what is acceptable corporate behavior. <sup>[6]</sup>

### **Managing by Numbers: The Sears Auto Center Story**

*If winning is the most important thing in your life, then you must be prepared to do anything to win.*

—Michael Josephson

Most people want to be winners or associate with winners. As humans, our desire to associate with those who have status provides plenty of incentive to glorify winners and ignore losers. But if an individual, a team, or a company does whatever it takes to win, then all other values are thrown out in the goal to win at all costs. The desire of some people within Sears & Roebuck Company’s auto repair division to win by gaining higher profits resulted in the situation portrayed here.

*Sears Roebuck & Company has been a fixture in American retailing throughout the twentieth century. At one time, people in rural America could order virtually anything (including a house) from Sears. Not without some accuracy, the company*

*billed itself as “the place where Americans shop.” But in 1992, Sears was charged by California authorities with gross and deliberate fraud in many of its auto centers. The authorities were alerted by a 50 percent increase in consumer complaints over a three-year period. New Jersey’s division of consumer affairs also investigated Sears Auto Centers and found that all six visited by investigators had recommended unnecessary repairs. California’s department of consumer affairs found that Sears had systematically overcharged by an average of \$223 for repairs and routinely billed for work that was not done. Sears Auto Centers were the largest providers of auto repair services in the state.*

*The scam was a variant on the old bait-and-switch routine. Customers received coupons in the mail inviting them to take advantage of hefty discounts on brake jobs. When customers came in to redeem their coupons, sales staffers would convince them to authorize additional repairs. As a management tool, Sears had also established quotas for each of their sales representatives to meet.*

*Ultimately, California got Sears to settle a large number of lawsuits against it by threatening to revoke Sears’ auto repair license. Sears agreed to distribute \$50 coupons to nearly a million customers nationwide who had obtained certain services between August 1, 1990, and January 31, 1992. Sears also agreed to pay \$3.5 million to cover the costs of various government investigations and to contribute \$1.5 million annually to conduct auto mechanic training programs. It also agreed to abandon its repair service quotas. The entire settlement cost Sears \$30 million. Sears Auto Center sales also dropped about 15 to 20 percent after news of the scandal broke.*

Note that in boosting sales by performing unnecessary services, Sears suffered very bad publicity. Losses were incalculable. The short-term gains were easy to measure; long-term consequences seldom are. The case illustrates a number of important lessons:

- People generally choose short-term gains over potential long-term losses.
- People often justify the harm to others as being minimal or “necessary” to achieve the desired sales quota or financial goal.

- In working as a group, we often form an “us versus them” mentality. In the Sears case, it is likely that Sears “insiders” looked at customers as “outsiders,” effectively treating them (in Kantian terms) as means rather than ends in themselves. In short, outsiders were used for the benefit of insiders.
- The long-term losses to Sears are difficult to quantify, while the short-term gains were easy to measure and (at least for a brief while) quite satisfying financially.
- Sears’ ongoing rip-offs were possible only because individual consumers lacked the relevant information about the service being offered. This lack of information is a market failure, since many consumers were demanding more of Sears Auto Center services than they would have (and at a higher price) if relevant information had been available to them earlier. Sears, like other sellers of goods and services, took advantage of a market system, which, in its ideal form, would not permit such information distortions.
- People in the organization probably thought that the actions they took were necessary. Noting this last point, we can assume that these key people were motivated by maximizing profits and had lost sight of other goals for the organization.

The emphasis on doing whatever is necessary to win is entirely understandable, but it is not ethical. The temptation will always exist—for individuals, companies, and nations—to dominate or to win and to write the history of their actions in a way that justifies or overlooks the harm that has been done. In a way, this fits with the notion that “might makes right,” or that power is the ultimate measure of right and wrong.

### **Conscious Capitalism**

One effort to integrate the two viewpoints of stakeholder theory and shareholder primacy is the conscious capitalism movement. Companies that practice conscious capitalism embrace the idea that profit and prosperity can and must go hand in hand with social justice and environmental stewardship. They operate with a holistic or systems view. This means that they understand that all stakeholders are connected and interdependent. They reject false trade-offs between stakeholder interests and strive for creative ways to achieve win-win-win outcomes for all. <sup>[7]</sup>

The “conscious business” has a purpose that goes beyond maximizing profits. It is designed to maximize profits but is focused more on its higher purpose and does not fixate solely on the

bottom line. To do so, it focuses on delivering value to all its stakeholders, harmonizing as best it can the interests of consumers, partners, investors, the community, and the environment. This requires that company managers take a “servant leadership” role, serving as stewards to the company’s deeper purpose and to the company’s stakeholders.

Conscious business leaders serve as such stewards, focusing on fulfilling the company’s purpose, delivering value to its stakeholders, and facilitating a harmony of interests, rather than on personal gain and self-aggrandizement. Why is this refocusing needed? Within the standard profit-maximizing model, corporations have long had to deal with the “agency problem.” Actions by top-level managers—acting on behalf of the company—should align with the shareholders, but in a culture all about winning and money, managers sometimes act in ways that are self-aggrandizing and that do not serve the interests of shareholders. Laws exist to limit such self-aggrandizing, but the remedies are often too little and too late and often catch only the most egregious overreaching. Having a culture of servant leadership is a much better way to see that a company’s top management works to ensure a harmony of interests.

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[1] See Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[2] John Schwartz, “An Enron Unit Chief Warned, and Was Rebuffed,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2002.

[3] Warren Bennis, “A Corporate Fear of Too Much Truth,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2002.

[4] University of Oklahoma Department of Defense Joint Course in Communication, *Case Study: The Johnson & Johnson Tylenol Crisis*, accessed April 5, 2011.

[5] FindLaw, *Report of Investigation by the Special Investigative Committee of the Board of Directors of Enron Corp.*, February 1, 2002, accessed April 5, 2011, <http://news.findlaw.com/wsj/docs/enron/sicreport>.

[6] Steven Pearlstein, “Debating the Enron Effect,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2002.

[7] Milton Friedman, John Mackey, and T. J. Rodgers, “Rethinking the Social Responsibility of Business,” Reason.com, October 2005, <http://reason.com/archives/2005/10/01/rethinking-the-social-responsi>.

## 2.5 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Doing good business requires attention to ethics as well as law. Understanding the long-standing perspectives on ethics—utilitarianism, deontology, social contract, and virtue ethics—is helpful in sorting out the ethical issues that face us as individuals and businesses. Each business needs to create or maintain a culture of ethical excellence, where there is ongoing dialogue not only about the best technical practices but also about the company’s ethical challenges and practices. A firm that has purpose and passion beyond profitability is best poised to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders and can best position itself for long-term, sustainable success for shareholders and other stakeholders as well.

### EXERCISES

1. Consider again Milton Friedman’s article.
  - a. What does Friedman mean by “ethical custom”?
  - b. If the laws of the society are limiting the company’s profitability, would the company be within its rights to disobey the law?
  - c. What if the law is “on the books,” but the company could count on a lack of enforcement from state officials who were overworked and underpaid? Should the company limit its profits? Suppose that it could save money by discharging a pollutant into a nearby river, adversely affecting fish and, potentially, drinking water supplies for downstream municipalities. In polluting against laws that aren’t enforced, is it still acting “within the rules of the game”? What if almost all other companies in the industry were saving money by doing similar acts?

Consider again the *Harris v. Forklift* case at the end of [Chapter 1 "Introduction to Law and Legal Systems"](#). The Supreme Court ruled that Ms. Harris was entitled to be heard again by the federal district court, which means that there would be a trial on her claim that Mr. Hardy, owner of Forklift Systems, had created a “hostile working environment” for Ms. Harris. Apart from the legal aspects, did he really do anything unethical? How can you tell?

- a. Which of his actions, if any, were contrary to utilitarian thinking?
- b. If Kant were his second-in-command and advising him on ethical matters, would he have approved of Mr. Hardy's behavior? Why or why not?

Consider the behaviors alleged by Ms. Harris and assume for a moment that they are all true. In terms of core values, which of these behaviors are not consistent with the core values Josephson points to? Be specific.

Assume that Forklift Systems is a large public corporation and that the CEO engages in these kinds of behaviors. Assume also that the board of directors knows about it. What action should the board take, and why?

Assume that the year is 1963, prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Title VII provisions regarding equal employment opportunity that prohibit discrimination based on sex. So, Mr. Hardy's actions are not illegal, fraudulent, or deceitful. Assume also that he heads a large public company and that there is a large amount of turnover and unhappiness among the women who work for the company. No one can sue him for being sexist or lecherous, but are his actions consistent with maximizing shareholder returns? Should the board be concerned?

Notice that this question is really a stand-in for any situation faced by a company today regarding its CEO where the actions are not illegal but are ethically questionable. What would conscious capitalism tell a CEO or a board to do where some group of its employees are regularly harassed or disadvantaged by top management?

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Milton Friedman would have been most likely to agree to which of the following statements?
  - a. The purpose of the corporation is to find a path to sustainable corporate profits by paying careful attention to key stakeholders.
  - b. The business of business is business.

- c. The CEO and the board should have a single-minded focus on delivering maximum value to shareholders of the business.
- d. All is fair in love, war, and business.

Milton Friedman meant (using the material quoted in this chapter) that companies should

- a. Find a path to sustainable profits by looking at the interconnected needs and desires of all the stakeholders.
- b. Always remember that the business of business is business.
- c. Remind the CEO that he or she has one duty: to maximize shareholder wealth by any means possible.
- d. Maximize shareholder wealth by engaging in open competition without fraud or deceit.

What are some key drawbacks to utilitarian thinking at the corporate level?

- a. The corporation may do a cost-benefit analysis that puts the greatest good of the firm above all other considerations.
- b. It is difficult to predict future consequences; decision makers in for-profit organizations will tend to overestimate the upside of certain decisions and underestimate the downside.
- c. Short-term interests will be favored over long-term consequences.
- d. all of the above
- e. a and b only

Which ethical perspective would allow that under certain circumstances, it might be ethical to lie to a liar?

- a. deontology
- b. virtue ethics
- c. utilitarianism
- d. all of the above

Under conscious capitalism,

- a. Virtue ethics is ignored.



- b. Shareholders, whether they be traders or long-term investors, are always the first and last consideration for the CEO and the board.
- c. Maximizing profits comes from a focus on higher purposes and harmonizing the interests of various stakeholders.
- d. Kantian duties take precedence over cost-benefit analyses.

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. c
- 2. d
- 3. d
- 4. c
- 5. c

# Chapter 3

## Courts and the Legal Process

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Describe the two different court systems in the United States, and explain why some cases can be filed in either court system.
2. Explain the importance of subject matter jurisdiction and personal jurisdiction and know the difference between the two.
3. Describe the various stages of a civil action: from pleadings, to discovery, to trial, and to appeals.
4. Describe two alternatives to litigation: mediation and arbitration.

In the United States, law and government are interdependent. The Constitution establishes the basic framework of government and imposes certain limitations on the powers of government. In turn, the various branches of government are intimately involved in making, enforcing, and interpreting the law. Today, much of the law comes from Congress and the state legislatures. But it is in the courts that legislation is interpreted and prior case law is interpreted and applied. As we go through this chapter, consider the case of Harry and Kay Robinson. In which court should the Robinsons file their action? Can the Oklahoma court hear the case and make a judgment that will be enforceable against all of the defendants? Which law will the court use to come to a decision? Will it use New York law, Oklahoma law, federal law, or German law?

### ***Robinson v. Audi***

Harry and Kay Robinson purchased a new Audi automobile from Seaway Volkswagen, Inc. (Seaway), in Massena, New York, in 1976. The following year the Robinson family, who resided in New York, left that state for a new home in Arizona. As they passed through Oklahoma, another car struck their Audi in the rear, causing a fire that severely burned Kay Robinson and her two children. Later on, the Robinsons brought a products-liability action in the District Court for Creek County, Oklahoma, claiming that their injuries resulted from the defective design and placement of the Audi's gas tank and fuel system. They sued numerous defendants, including the automobile's manufacturer, Audi NSU Auto Union Aktiengesellschaft (Audi); its

importer, Volkswagen of America, Inc. (Volkswagen); its regional distributor, World-Wide Volkswagen Corp. (World-Wide); and its retail dealer, Seaway.

Should the Robinsons bring their action in state court or in federal court? Over which of the defendants will the court have personal jurisdiction?

## 3.1 The Relationship between State and Federal Court Systems in the United States

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the different but complementary roles of state and federal court systems.
2. Explain why it makes sense for some courts to hear and decide only certain kinds of cases.
3. Describe the difference between a trial court and an appellate court.

Although it is sometimes said that there are two separate court systems, the reality is more complex. There are, in fact, fifty-two court systems: those of the fifty states, the local court system in the District of Columbia, and the federal court system. At the same time, these are not entirely separate; they all have several points of contact.

State and local courts must honor both federal law and the laws of the other states. First, state courts must honor federal law where state laws are in conflict with federal laws (under the supremacy clause of the Constitution; see [Chapter 4 "Constitutional Law and US Commerce"](#)). Second, claims arising under federal statutes can often be tried in the state courts, where the Constitution or Congress has not explicitly required that only federal courts can hear that kind of claim. Third, under the full faith and credit clause, each state court is obligated to respect the final judgments of courts in other states. Thus a contract dispute resolved by an Arkansas court cannot be relitigated in North Dakota when the plaintiff wants to collect on the Arkansas judgment in North Dakota. Fourth, state courts often must consider the laws of other states in deciding cases involving issues where two states have an interest, such as when drivers from two different states collide in a third state. Under these circumstances, state judges will consult their own state's case decisions involving conflicts of laws and sometimes decide that they must apply another state's laws to decide the case (see [Table 3.1 "Sample Conflict-of-Law Principles"](#)).

As state courts are concerned with federal law, so federal courts are often concerned with state law and with what happens in state courts. Federal courts will consider state-law-based claims when a case involves claims using both state and federal law. Claims based on federal laws will permit the federal court to take jurisdiction over the whole case, including any state issues raised. In those cases, the federal court is said to exercise “pendent jurisdiction” over the state claims. Also, the Supreme Court will occasionally take appeals from a state supreme court where state law raises an important issue of federal law to be decided. For example, a convict on death row may claim that the state’s chosen method of execution using the injection of drugs is unusually painful and involves “cruel and unusual punishment,” raising an Eighth Amendment issue.

There is also a broad category of cases heard in federal courts that concern only state legal issues—namely, cases that arise between citizens of different states. The federal courts are permitted to hear these cases under their so-called diversity of citizenship jurisdiction (or diversity jurisdiction). A citizen of New Jersey may sue a citizen of New York over a contract dispute in federal court, but if both were citizens of New Jersey, the plaintiff would be limited to the state courts. The Constitution established diversity jurisdiction because it was feared that local courts would be hostile toward people from other states and that they would need separate courts. In 2009, nearly a third of all lawsuits filed in federal court were based on diversity of citizenship. In these cases, the federal courts were applying state law, rather than taking federal question jurisdiction, where federal law provided the basis for the lawsuit or where the United States was a party (as plaintiff or defendant).

Why are there so many diversity cases in federal courts? Defense lawyers believe that there is sometimes a “home-court advantage” for an in-state plaintiff who brings a lawsuit against a nonresident in his local state court. The defense attorney is entitled to ask for removal to a federal court where there is diversity. This fits with the original reason for diversity jurisdiction in the Constitution—the concern that judges in one state court would favor the in-state plaintiff rather than a nonresident defendant. Another reason there are so many diversity cases is that plaintiffs’ attorneys know that removal is common and that it will move the case along faster by filing in federal court to begin with. Some plaintiffs’ attorneys also find advantages in pursuing a

lawsuit in federal court. Federal court procedures are often more efficient than state court procedures, so that federal dockets are often less crowded. This means a case will get to trial faster, and many lawyers enjoy the higher status that comes in practicing before the federal bench. In some federal districts, judgments for plaintiffs may be higher, on average, than in the local state court. In short, not only law but also legal strategy factor into the popularity of diversity cases in federal courts.

## **State Court Systems**

The vast majority of civil lawsuits in the United States are filed in state courts. Two aspects of civil lawsuits are common to all state courts: trials and appeals. A court exercising a trial function has original jurisdiction—that is, jurisdiction to determine the facts of the case and apply the law to them. A court that hears appeals from the trial court is said to have appellate jurisdiction—it must accept the facts as determined by the trial court and limit its review to the lower court’s theory of the applicable law.

### **Limited Jurisdiction Courts**

In most large urban states and many smaller states, there are four and sometimes five levels of courts. The lowest level is that of the limited jurisdiction courts. These are usually county or municipal courts with original jurisdiction to hear minor criminal cases (petty assaults, traffic offenses, and breach of peace, among others) and civil cases involving monetary amounts up to a fixed ceiling (no more than \$10,000 in most states and far less in many states). Most disputes that wind up in court are handled in the 18,000-plus limited jurisdiction courts, which are estimated to hear more than 80 percent of all cases.

One familiar limited jurisdiction court is the small claims court, with jurisdiction to hear civil cases involving claims for amounts ranging between \$1,000 and \$5,000 in about half the states and for considerably less in the other states (\$500 to \$1,000). The advantage of the small claims court is that its procedures are informal, it is often located in a neighborhood outside the business district, it is usually open after business hours, and it is speedy. Lawyers are not necessary to present the case and in some states are not allowed to appear in court.

### **General Jurisdiction Courts**

All other civil and criminal cases are heard in the general trial courts, or courts of general jurisdiction. These go by a variety of names: superior, circuit, district, or common pleas court (New York calls its general trial court the supreme court). These are the courts in which people seek redress for incidents such as automobile accidents and injuries, or breaches of contract. These state courts also prosecute those accused of murder, rape, robbery, and other serious crimes. The fact finder in these general jurisdiction courts is not a judge, as in the lower courts, but a jury of citizens.

Although courts of general jurisdiction can hear all types of cases, in most states more than half involve family matters (divorce, child custody disputes, and the like). A third were commercial cases, and slightly over 10 percent were devoted to car accident cases and other torts (as discussed in [Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort Law"](#)).

Most states have specialized courts that hear only a certain type of case, such as landlord-tenant disputes or probate of wills. Decisions by judges in specialized courts are usually final, although any party dissatisfied with the outcome may be able to get a new trial in a court of general jurisdiction. Because there has been one trial already, this is known as a trial de novo. It is not an appeal, since the case essentially starts over.

### **Appellate Courts**

The losing party in a general jurisdiction court can almost always appeal to either one or two higher courts. These intermediate appellate courts—usually called courts of appeal—have been established in forty states. They do not retry the evidence, but rather determine whether the trial was conducted in a procedurally correct manner and whether the appropriate law was applied. For example, the appellant (the losing party who appeals) might complain that the judge wrongly instructed the jury on the meaning of the law, or improperly allowed testimony of a particular witness, or misconstrued the law in question. The appellee (who won in the lower court) will ask that the appellant be denied—usually this means that the appellee wants the lower-court judgment affirmed. The appellate court has quite a few choices: it can affirm, modify, reverse, or reverse and remand the lower court (return the case to the lower court for retrial).

The last type of appeal within the state courts system is to the highest court, the state supreme court, which is composed of a single panel of between five and nine judges and is usually located in the state capital. (The intermediate appellate courts are usually composed of panels of three judges and are situated in various locations around the state.) In a few states, the highest court goes by a different name: in New York, it is known as the court of appeals. In certain cases, appellants to the highest court in a state have the right to have their appeals heard, but more often the supreme court selects the cases it wishes to hear. For most litigants, the ruling of the state supreme court is final. In a relatively small class of cases—those in which federal constitutional claims are made—appeal to the US Supreme Court to issue a writ of certiorari remains a possibility.

## **The Federal Court System**

### **District Courts**

The federal judicial system is uniform throughout the United States and consists of three levels. At the first level are the federal district courts, which are the trial courts in the federal system. Every state has one or more federal districts; the less populous states have one, and the more populous states (California, Texas, and New York) have four. The federal court with the heaviest commercial docket is the US District Court for the Southern District of New York (Manhattan). There are forty-four district judges and fifteen magistrates in this district. The district judges throughout the United States commonly preside over all federal trials, both criminal and civil.

### **Courts of Appeal**

Cases from the district courts can then be appealed to the circuit courts of appeal, of which there are thirteen ([Figure 3.1 "The Federal Judicial Circuits"](#)). Each circuit oversees the work of the district courts in several states. For example, the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit hears appeals from district courts in New York, Connecticut, and Vermont. The US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit hears appeals from district courts in California, Oregon, Nevada, Montana, Washington, Idaho, Arizona, Alaska, Hawaii, and Guam. The US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit hears appeals from the district court in Washington, DC, as well as from numerous federal administrative agencies (see [Chapter 5 "Administrative Law"](#)). The US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, also located in Washington, hears appeals in patent and

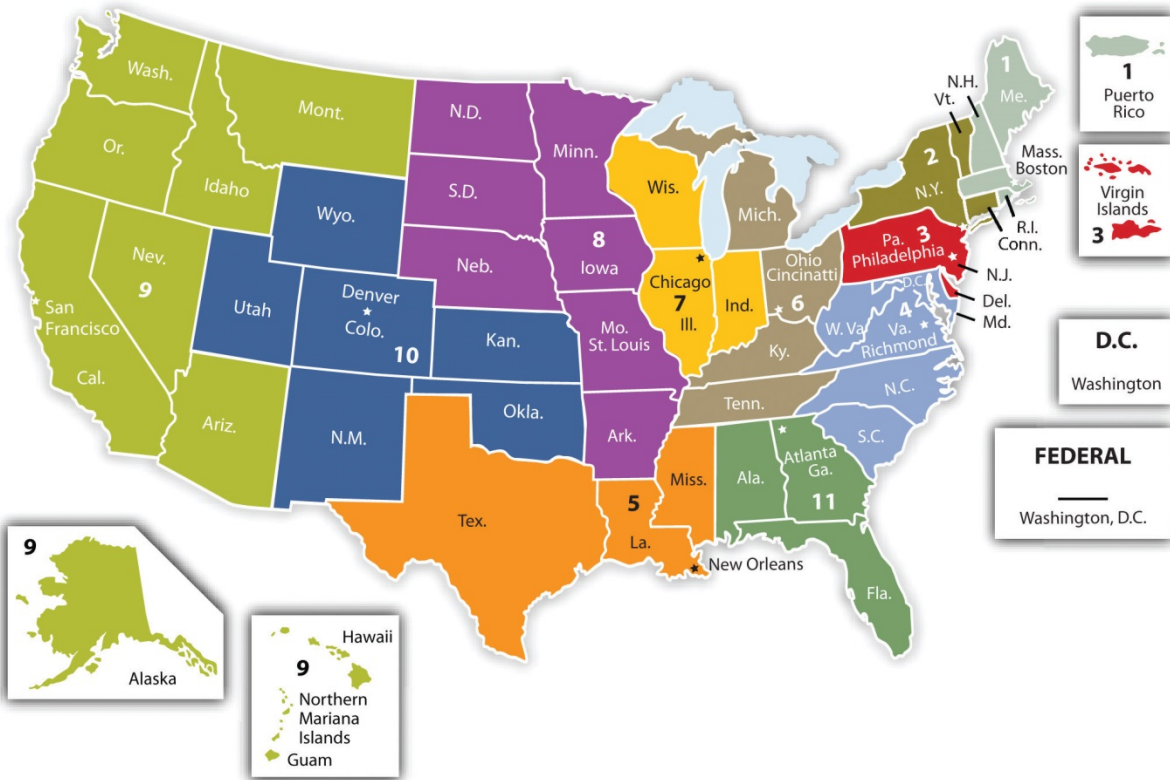
customs cases. Appeals are usually heard by three-judge panels, but sometimes there will be a rehearing at the court of appeals level, in which case all judges sit to hear the case “en banc.” There are also several specialized courts in the federal judicial system. These include the US Tax Court, the Court of Customs and Patent Appeals, and the Court of Claims.

### **United States Supreme Court**

Overseeing all federal courts is the US Supreme Court, in Washington, DC. It consists of nine justices—the chief justice and eight associate justices. (This number is not constitutionally required; Congress can establish any number. It has been set at nine since after the Civil War.) The Supreme Court has selective control over most of its docket. By law, the cases it hears represent only a tiny fraction of the cases that are submitted. In 2008, the Supreme Court had numerous petitions (over 7,000, not including thousands of petitions from prisoners) but heard arguments in only 87 cases. The Supreme Court does not sit in panels. All the justices hear and consider each case together, unless a justice has a conflict of interest and must withdraw from hearing the case.

### *Figure 3.1 The Federal Judicial Circuits*





Federal judges—including Supreme Court justices—are nominated by the president and must be confirmed by the Senate. Unlike state judges, who are usually elected and preside for a fixed term of years, federal judges sit for life unless they voluntarily retire or are impeached.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Trial courts and appellate courts have different functions. State trial courts sometimes hear cases with federal law issues, and federal courts sometimes hear cases with state law issues. Within both state and federal court systems, it is useful to know the different kinds of courts and what cases they can decide.

### EXERCISES

1. Why all of this complexity? Why don't state courts hear only claims based on state law, and federal courts only federal-law-based claims?
2. Why would a plaintiff in Iowa with a case against a New Jersey defendant prefer to have the case heard in Iowa?

3. James, a New Jersey resident, is sued by Jonah, an Iowa resident. After a trial in which James appears and vigorously defends himself, the Iowa state court awards Jonah \$136,750 dollars in damages for his tort claim. In trying to collect from James in New Jersey, Jonah must have the New Jersey court certify the Iowa judgment. Why, ordinarily, must the New Jersey court do so?

## 3.2 The Problem of Jurisdiction

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain the concept of subject matter jurisdiction and distinguish it from personal jurisdiction.
2. Understand how and where the US Constitution provides a set of instructions as to what federal courts are empowered by law to do.
3. Know which kinds of cases must be heard in federal courts only.
4. Explain diversity of citizenship jurisdiction and be able to decide whether a case is eligible for diversity jurisdiction in the federal courts.

Jurisdiction is an essential concept in understanding courts and the legal system. Jurisdiction is a combination of two Latin words: *juris* (law) and *diction* (to speak). Which court has the power “to speak the law” is the basic question of jurisdiction.

There are two questions about jurisdiction in each case that must be answered before a judge will hear a case: the question of subject matter jurisdiction and the question of personal jurisdiction. We will consider the question of subject matter jurisdiction first, because judges do; if they determine, on the basis of the initial documents in the case (the “pleadings”), that they have no power to hear and decide that kind of case, they will dismiss it.

### The Federal-State Balance: Federalism

State courts have their origins in colonial era courts. After the American Revolution, state courts functioned (with some differences) much like they did in colonial times. The big difference after 1789 was that state courts coexisted with federal courts. Federalism was the system devised by the nation’s founders in which power is shared between states and the federal government. This sharing requires a division of labor between the states and the federal government. It is Article

III of the US Constitution that spells out the respective spheres of authority (jurisdiction) between state and federal courts.

Take a close look at Article III of the Constitution. (You can find a printable copy of the Constitution at <http://www.findlaw.com>.) Article III makes clear that federal courts are courts of limited power or jurisdiction. Notice that the only kinds of cases federal courts are authorized to deal with have strong federal connections. For example, federal courts have jurisdiction when a federal law is being used by the plaintiff or prosecutor (a “federal question” case) or the case arises “in admiralty” (meaning that the problem arose not on land but on sea, beyond the territorial jurisdiction of any state, or in navigable waters within the United States). Implied in this list is the clear notion that states would continue to have their own laws, interpreted by their own courts, and that federal courts were needed only where the issues raised by the parties had a clear federal connection. The exception to this is diversity jurisdiction, discussed later.

The Constitution was constructed with the idea that state courts would continue to deal with basic kinds of claims such as tort, contract, or property claims. Since states sanction marriages and divorce, state courts would deal with “domestic” (family) issues. Since states deal with birth and death records, it stands to reason that paternity suits, probate disputes, and the like usually wind up in state courts. You wouldn’t go to the federal building or courthouse to get a marriage license, ask for a divorce, or probate a will: these matters have traditionally been dealt with by the states (and the thirteen original colonies before them). Matters that historically get raised and settled in state court under state law include not only domestic and probate matters but also law relating to corporations, partnerships, agency, contracts, property, torts, and commercial dealings generally. You cannot get married or divorced in federal court, because federal courts have no jurisdiction over matters that are historically (and are still) exclusively within the domain of state law.

In terms of subject matter jurisdiction, then, state courts will typically deal with the kinds of disputes just cited. Thus if you are Michigan resident and have an auto accident in Toledo with an Ohio resident and you each blame each other for the accident, the state courts would ordinarily resolve the matter if the dispute cannot otherwise be settled. Why state courts? Because when you blame one another and allege that it’s the other person’s fault, you have the

beginnings of a tort case, with negligence as a primary element of the claim, and state courts have routinely dealt with this kind of claim, from British colonial times through Independence and to the present. (See also [Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort Law"](#) of this text.) People have had a need to resolve this kind of dispute long before our federal courts were created, and you can tell from Article III that the founders did not specify that tort or negligence claims should be handled by the federal courts. Again, federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, limited to the kinds of cases specified in Article III. If the case before the federal court does not fall within one of those categories, the federal court cannot constitutionally hear the case because it does not have subject matter jurisdiction.

Always remember: a court must have subject matter jurisdiction to hear and decide a case. Without it, a court cannot address the merits of the controversy or even take the next jurisdictional step of figuring out which of the defendants can be sued in that court. The question of which defendants are appropriately before the court is a question of personal jurisdiction.

Because there are two court systems, it is important for a plaintiff to file in the right court to begin with. The right court is the one that has subject matter jurisdiction over the case—that is, the power to hear and decide the kind of case that is filed. Not only is it a waste of time to file in the wrong court system and be dismissed, but if the dismissal comes after the filing period imposed by the applicable statute of limitations, it will be too late to refile in the correct court system. Such cases will be routinely dismissed, regardless of how deserving the plaintiff might be in his quest for justice. (The plaintiff's only remedy at that point would be to sue his lawyer for negligence for failing to mind the clock and get to the right court in time!)

### **Exclusive Jurisdiction in Federal Courts**

With two court systems, a plaintiff (or the plaintiff's attorney, most likely) must decide whether to file a case in the state court system or the federal court system. Federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over certain kinds of cases. The reason for this comes directly from the Constitution. Article III of the US Constitution provides the following:

*The judicial Power shall extend to all Cases, in Law and Equity, arising under this Constitution, the Laws of the United States, and Treaties made, or which shall be*

*made, under their Authority; to all Cases affecting Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls; to all Cases of admiralty and maritime Jurisdiction; to Controversies to which the United States shall be a Party; to Controversies between two or more States; between a State and Citizens of another State; between Citizens of different States; between Citizens of the same State claiming Lands under Grants of different States, and between a State, or the Citizens thereof, and foreign States, Citizens or Subjects.*

By excluding diversity cases, we can assemble a list of the kinds of cases that can only be heard in federal courts. The list looks like this:

1. *Suits between states.* Cases in which two or more states are a party.
2. *Cases involving ambassadors and other high-ranking public figures.* Cases arising between foreign ambassadors and other high-ranking public officials.
3. *Federal crimes.* Crimes defined by or mentioned in the US Constitution or those defined or punished by federal statute. Such crimes include treason against the United States, piracy, counterfeiting, crimes against the law of nations, and crimes relating to the federal government's authority to regulate interstate commerce. However, most crimes are state matters.
4. *Bankruptcy.* The statutory procedure, usually triggered by insolvency, by which a person is relieved of most debts and undergoes a judicially supervised reorganization or liquidation for the benefit of the person's creditors.
5. *Patent, copyright, and trademark cases*
  - a. *Patent.* The exclusive right to make, use, or sell an invention for a specified period (usually seventeen years), granted by the federal government to the inventor if the device or process is novel, useful, and nonobvious.
  - b. *Copyright.* The body of law relating to a property right in an original work of authorship (such as a literary, musical, artistic, photographic, or film work) fixed in any tangible medium of expression, giving the holder the exclusive right to reproduce, adapt, distribute, perform, and display the work.
  - c. *Trademark.* A word, phrase, logo, or other graphic symbol used by a manufacturer or seller to distinguish its product or products from those of others.

*Admiralty.* The system of laws that has grown out of the practice of admiralty courts: courts that exercise jurisdiction over all maritime contracts, torts, injuries, and offenses.

*Antitrust.* Federal laws designed to protect trade and commerce from restraining monopolies, price fixing, and price discrimination.

*Securities and banking regulation.* The body of law protecting the public by regulating the registration, offering, and trading of securities and the regulation of banking practices.

*Other cases specified by federal statute.* Any other cases specified by a federal statute where Congress declares that federal courts will have exclusive jurisdiction.

### **Concurrent Jurisdiction**

When a plaintiff takes a case to state court, it will be because state courts typically hear that kind of case (i.e., there is subject matter jurisdiction). If the plaintiff's main cause of action comes from a certain state's constitution, statutes, or court decisions, the state courts have subject matter jurisdiction over the case. If the plaintiff's main cause of action is based on federal law (e.g., Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), the federal courts have subject matter jurisdiction over the case. But federal courts will also have subject matter jurisdiction over certain cases that have only a state-based cause of action; those cases are ones in which the plaintiff(s) and the defendant(s) are from different states and the amount in controversy is more than \$75,000. State courts can have subject matter jurisdiction over certain cases that have only a federal-based cause of action. The Supreme Court has now made clear that state courts have concurrent jurisdiction of any federal cause of action unless Congress has given exclusive jurisdiction to federal courts.

In short, a case with a federal question can be often be heard in either state or federal court, and a case that has parties with a diversity of citizenship can be heard in state courts or in federal courts where the tests of complete diversity and amount in controversy are met. (See [Note 3.18 "Summary of Rules on Subject Matter Jurisdiction"](#).)

Whether a case will be heard in a state court or moved to a federal court will depend on the parties. If a plaintiff files a case in state trial court where concurrent jurisdiction applies, a defendant may (or may not) ask that the case be removed to federal district court.

### **Summary of Rules on Subject Matter Jurisdiction**

1. A court must always have subject matter jurisdiction, and personal jurisdiction over at least one defendant, to hear and decide a case.
2. A state court will have subject matter jurisdiction over any case that is not required to be brought in a federal court.

Some cases can *only* be brought in federal court, such as bankruptcy cases, cases involving federal crimes, patent cases, and Internal Revenue Service tax court claims. The list of cases for exclusive federal jurisdiction is fairly short. That means that almost any state court will have subject matter jurisdiction over almost any kind of case. If it's a case based on state law, a state court will always have subject matter jurisdiction.

3. A federal court will have subject matter jurisdiction over any case that is either based on a federal law (statute, case, or US Constitution)

OR

A federal court will have subject matter jurisdiction over any case based on state law where the parties are (1) from different states and (2) the amount in controversy is at least \$75,000.

(1) The different states requirement means that no plaintiff can have permanent residence in a state where any defendant has permanent residence—there must be complete diversity of citizenship as between all plaintiffs and defendants.

(2) The amount in controversy requirement means that a good-faith estimate of the amount the plaintiff may recover is at least \$75,000.

NOTE: For purposes of permanent residence, a corporation is considered a resident where it is incorporated AND where it has a principal place of business.

4. In diversity cases, the following rules apply.
  - (1) Federal civil procedure rules apply to how the case is conducted before and during trial and any appeals, but
  - (2) State law will be used as the basis for a determination of legal rights and responsibilities.
    - (a) This “choice of law” process is interesting but complicated. Basically, each state has its own set of judicial decisions that resolve conflict of laws. For example, just because A sues B in a Texas court, the Texas court will not necessarily apply Texas law. Anna and Bobby collide and suffer serious physical injuries while driving their cars in Roswell, New Mexico. Both live in

Austin, and Bobby files a lawsuit in Austin. The court there could hear it (having subject matter jurisdiction and personal jurisdiction over Bobby) but would apply New Mexico law, which governs motor vehicle laws and accidents in New Mexico. Why would the Texas judge do that?

(b) The Texas judge knows that which state's law is chosen to apply to the case can make a decisive difference in the case, as different states have different substantive law standards. For example, in a breach of contract case, one state's version of the Uniform Commercial Code may be different from another's, and which one the court decides to apply is often exceedingly good for one side and dismal for the other. In *Anna v. Bobby*, if Texas has one kind of comparative negligence statute and New Mexico has a different kind of comparative negligence statute, who wins or loses, or how much is awarded, could well depend on which law applies. Because both were under the jurisdiction of New Mexico's laws at the time, it makes sense to apply New Mexico law.

(3) Why do some nonresident defendants prefer to be in federal court?

(a) In the state court, the judge is elected, and the jury may be familiar with or sympathetic to the "local" plaintiff.

(b) The federal court provides a more neutral forum, with an appointed, life-tenured judge and a wider pool of potential jurors (drawn from a wider geographical area).

(4) If a defendant does not want to be in state court and there is diversity, what is to be done?

(a) Make a motion for removal to the federal court.

(b) The federal court will not want to add to its caseload, or docket, but must take the case unless there is *not* complete diversity of citizenship or the amount in controversy is *less than* \$75,000.

To better understand subject matter jurisdiction in action, let's take an example. Wile E. Coyote wants a federal judge to hear his products-liability action against Acme, Inc., even though the action is based on state law. Mr. Coyote's attorney wants to "make a federal case" out of it, thinking that the jurors in the federal district court's jury pool will understand the case better and be more likely to deliver a "high value" verdict for Mr. Coyote. Mr. Coyote resides in Arizona, and Acme is incorporated in the state of Delaware and has its principal place of business in Chicago, Illinois. The federal court in Arizona can hear and decide Mr. Coyote's case



(i.e., it has subject matter jurisdiction over the case) because of diversity of citizenship. If Mr. Coyote was injured by one of Acme's defective products while chasing a roadrunner in Arizona, the federal district court judge would hear his action—using federal procedural law—and decide the case based on the substantive law of Arizona on product liability.

But now change the facts only slightly: Acme is incorporated in Delaware but has its principal place of business in Phoenix, Arizona. Unless Mr. Coyote has a federal law he is using as a basis for his claims against Acme, his attempt to get a federal court to hear and decide the case will fail. It will fail because there is not complete diversity of citizenship between the plaintiff and the defendant.

### ***Robinson v. Audi***

Now consider Mr. and Mrs. Robinson and their products-liability claim against Seaway Volkswagen and the other three defendants. There is no federal products-liability law that could be used as a cause of action. They are most likely suing the defendants using products-liability law based on common-law negligence or common-law strict liability law, as found in state court cases. They were not yet Arizona residents at the time of the accident, and their accident does not establish them as Oklahoma residents, either. They bought the vehicle in New York from a New York-based retailer. None of the other defendants is from Oklahoma.

They file in an Oklahoma state court, but how will they (their attorney or the court) know if the state court has subject matter jurisdiction? Unless the case is *required* to be in a federal court (i.e., unless the federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over this kind of case), *any* state court system will have subject matter jurisdiction, including Oklahoma's state court system. But if their claim is for a significant amount of money, they cannot file in small claims court, probate court, or any court in Oklahoma that does not have statutory jurisdiction over their claim. They will need to file in a court of general jurisdiction. In short, even filing in the right court system (state versus federal), the plaintiff must be careful to find the court that has subject matter jurisdiction.

If they wish to go to federal court, can they? There is no federal question presented here (the claim is based on state common law), and the United States is not a party, so the only basis for federal court jurisdiction would be diversity jurisdiction. If enough time has elapsed since the

accident and they have established themselves as Arizona residents, they could sue in federal court in Oklahoma (or elsewhere), but only if none of the defendants—the retailer, the regional Volkswagen company, Volkswagen of North America, or Audi (in Germany) are incorporated in or have a principal place of business in Arizona. The federal judge would decide the case using federal civil procedure but would have to make the appropriate choice of state law. In this case, the choice of conflicting laws would most likely be Oklahoma, where the accident happened, or New York, where the defective product was sold.

Table 3.1 Sample Conflict-of-Law Principles

Substantive Law Issue	Law to be Applied
Liability for injury caused by tortious conduct	State in which the injury was inflicted
Real property	State where the property is located
Personal Property: inheritance	Domicile of deceased (not location of property)
Contract: validity	State in which contract was made
Contract: breach	State in which contract was to be performed*
<b>*Or, in many states, the state with the most significant contacts with the contractual activities</b>	
<b>Note: Choice-of-law clauses in a contract will ordinarily be honored by judges in state and federal courts.</b>	

### Legal Procedure, Including Due Process and Personal Jurisdiction

In this section, we consider how lawsuits are begun and how the court knows that it has both subject matter jurisdiction and personal jurisdiction over at least one of the named defendants.

The courts are not the only institutions that can resolve disputes. In [Section 3.8 "Alternative Means of Resolving Disputes"](#), we will discuss other dispute-resolution forums, such as arbitration and mediation. For now, let us consider how courts make decisions in civil disputes. Judicial decision making in the context of litigation (civil lawsuits) is a distinctive form of dispute resolution.

First, to get the attention of a court, the plaintiff must make a claim based on existing laws. Second, courts do not reach out for cases. Cases are brought to them, usually when an attorney files a case with the right court in the right way, following the various laws that govern all civil



procedures in a state or in the federal system. (Most US states' procedural laws are similar to the federal procedural code.)

Once at the court, the case will proceed through various motions (motions to dismiss for lack of jurisdiction, for example, or insufficient service of process), the proofs (submission of evidence), and the arguments (debate about the meaning of the evidence and the law) of contesting parties. This is at the heart of the adversary system, in which those who oppose each other may attack the other's case through proofs and cross-examination. Every person in the United States who wishes to take a case to court is entitled to hire a lawyer. The lawyer works for his client, not the court, and serves him as an advocate, or supporter. The client's goal is to persuade the court of the accuracy and justness of his position. The lawyer's duty is to shape the evidence and the argument—the line of reasoning about the evidence—to advance his client's cause and persuade the court of its rightness. The lawyer for the opposing party will be doing the same thing, of course, for her client. The judge (or, if one is sitting, the jury) must sort out the facts and reach a decision from this cross-fire of evidence and argument.

The method of adjudication—the act of making an order or judgment—has several important features. First, it focuses the conflicting issues. Other, secondary concerns are minimized or excluded altogether. Relevance is a key concept in any trial. The judge is required to decide the questions presented at the trial, not to talk about related matters. Second, adjudication requires that the judge's decision be reasoned, and that is why judges write opinions explaining their decisions (an opinion may be omitted when the verdict comes from a jury). Third, the judge's decision must not only be reasoned but also be responsive to the case presented: the judge is not free to say that the case is unimportant and that he therefore will ignore it. Unlike other branches of government that are free to ignore problems pressing upon them, judges *must* decide cases. (For example, a legislature need not enact a law, no matter how many people petition it to do so.) Fourth, the court must respond in a certain way. The judge must pay attention to the parties' arguments and his decision must result from their proofs and arguments. Evidence that is not presented and legal arguments that are not made cannot be the basis for what the judge decides. Also, judges are bound by standards of weighing evidence: the burden of proof in a civil case is generally a "preponderance of the evidence."

In all cases, the plaintiff—the party making a claim and initiating the lawsuit (in a criminal case the plaintiff is the prosecution)—has the burden of proving his case. If he fails to prove it, the defendant—the party being sued or prosecuted—will win.

Criminal prosecutions carry the most rigorous burden of proof: the government must prove its case against the defendant *beyond a reasonable doubt*. That is, even if it seems very likely that the defendant committed the crime, as long as there remains some reasonable doubt—perhaps he was not clearly identified as the culprit, perhaps he has an alibi that could be legitimate—the jury must vote to acquit rather than convict.

By contrast, the burden of proof in ordinary civil cases—those dealing with contracts, personal injuries, and most of the cases in this book—is a *preponderance of the evidence*, which means that the plaintiff's evidence must outweigh whatever evidence the defendant can muster that casts doubts on the plaintiff's claim. This is not merely a matter of counting the number of witnesses or of the length of time that they talk: the judge in a trial without a jury (a bench trial), or the jury where one is impaneled, must apply the preponderance of evidence test by determining which side has the greater weight of credible, relevant evidence.

Adjudication and the adversary system imply certain other characteristics of courts. Judges must be impartial; those with a personal interest in a matter must refuse to hear it. The ruling of a court, after all appeals are exhausted, is final. This principle is known as *res judicata* (Latin for “the thing is decided”), and it means that the same parties may not take up the same dispute in another court at another time. Finally, a court must proceed according to a public set of formal procedural rules; a judge cannot make up the rules as he goes along. To these rules we now turn.

## **How a Case Proceeds**

### **Complaint and Summons**

Beginning a lawsuit is simple and is spelled out in the rules of procedure by which each court system operates. In the federal system, the plaintiff begins a lawsuit by filing a complaint—a document clearly explaining the grounds for suit—with the clerk of the court. The court's agent (usually a sheriff, for state trial courts, or a US deputy marshal, in federal district courts) will then serve the defendant with the complaint and a summons. The summons is a court document

stating the name of the plaintiff and his attorney and directing the defendant to respond to the complaint within a fixed time period.

The timing of the filing can be important. Almost every possible legal complaint is governed by a federal or state statute of limitations, which requires a lawsuit to be filed within a certain period of time. For example, in many states a lawsuit for injuries resulting from an automobile accident must be filed within two years of the accident or the plaintiff forfeits his right to proceed. As noted earlier, making a correct initial filing in a court that has subject matter jurisdiction is critical to avoiding statute of limitations problems.

### **Jurisdiction and Venue**

The place of filing is equally important, and there are two issues regarding location. The first is subject matter jurisdiction, as already noted. A claim for breach of contract, in which the amount at stake is \$1 million, cannot be brought in a local county court with jurisdiction to hear cases involving sums of up to only \$1,000. Likewise, a claim for copyright violation cannot be brought in a state superior court, since federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over copyright cases.

The second consideration is venue—the proper geographic location of the court. For example, every county in a state might have a superior court, but the plaintiff is not free to pick any county. Again, a statute will spell out to which court the plaintiff must go (e.g., the county in which the plaintiff resides or the county in which the defendant resides or maintains an office).

### **Service of Process and Personal Jurisdiction**

The defendant must be “served”—that is, must receive notice that he has been sued. Service can be done by physically presenting the defendant with a copy of the summons and complaint. But sometimes the defendant is difficult to find (or deliberately avoids the marshal or other process server). The rules spell out a variety of ways by which individuals and corporations can be served. These include using US Postal Service certified mail or serving someone already designated to receive service of process. A corporation or partnership, for example, is often required by state law to designate a “registered agent” for purposes of getting public notices or receiving a summons and complaint.

One of the most troublesome problems is service on an out-of-state defendant. The personal jurisdiction of a state court over persons is clear for those defendants found within the state. If the plaintiff claims that an out-of-state defendant injured him in some way, must the plaintiff go to the defendant's home state to serve him? Unless the defendant had some significant contact with the plaintiff's state, the plaintiff may indeed have to. For instance, suppose a traveler from Maine stopped at a roadside diner in Montana and ordered a slice of homemade pie that was tainted and caused him to be sick. The traveler may not simply return home and mail the diner a notice that he is suing it in a Maine court. But if out-of-state defendants have some contact with the plaintiff's state of residence, there might be grounds to bring them within the jurisdiction of the plaintiff's state courts. In *Burger King v. Rudzewicz*, [Section 3.9 "Cases"](#), the federal court in Florida had to consider whether it was constitutionally permissible to exercise personal jurisdiction over a Michigan franchisee.

Again, recall that even if a court has subject matter jurisdiction, it must also have personal jurisdiction over each defendant against whom an enforceable judgment can be made. Often this is not a problem; you might be suing a person who lives in your state or regularly does business in your state. Or a nonresident may answer your complaint without objecting to the court's "in personam" (personal) jurisdiction. But many defendants who do not reside in the state where the lawsuit is filed would rather not be put to the inconvenience of contesting a lawsuit in a distant forum. Fairness—and the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment—dictates that nonresidents should not be required to defend lawsuits far from their home base, especially where there is little or no contact or connection between the nonresident and the state where a lawsuit is brought.

### Summary of Rules on Personal Jurisdiction

1. Once a court determines that it has subject matter jurisdiction, it must find at least one defendant over which it is "fair" (i.e., in accord with due process) to exercise personal jurisdiction.
2. If a plaintiff sues five defendants and the court has personal jurisdiction over just one, the case can be heard, but the court cannot make a judgment against the other four.

1. But if the plaintiff loses against defendant 1, he can go elsewhere (to another state or states) and sue defendants 2, 3, 4, or 5.
2. The court's decision in the first lawsuit (against defendant 1) does not determine the liability of the nonparticipating defendants.

This involves the principle of *res judicata*, which means that you can't bring the same action against the same person (or entity) twice. It's like the civil side of double jeopardy. *Res* means "thing," and *judicata* means "adjudicated." Thus the "thing" has been "adjudicated" and should not be judged again. But, as to nonparticipating parties, it is not over. If you have a *different* case against the same defendant—one that arises out of a completely different situation—that case is not barred by *res judicata*.

3. Service of process is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for getting personal jurisdiction over a particular defendant (see rule 4).
  1. In order to get a judgment in a civil action, the plaintiff must serve a copy of the complaint and a summons on the defendant.
  2. There are many ways to do this.
    - The process server personally serves a complaint on the defendant.
    - The process server leaves a copy of the summons and complaint at the residence of the defendant, in the hands of a competent person.
    - The process server sends the summons and complaint by certified mail, return receipt requested.
    - The process server, if all other means are not possible, notifies the defendant by publication in a newspaper having a minimum number of readers (as may be specified by law).
  4. In addition to successfully serving the defendant with process, a plaintiff must convince the court that exercising personal jurisdiction over the defendant is consistent with due process and any statutes in that state that prescribe the jurisdictional reach of that state (the so-called long-arm statutes). The Supreme Court has long recognized various bases for judging whether such process is fair.
1. Consent. The defendant agrees to the court's jurisdiction by coming to court, answering the complaint, and having the matter litigated there.

2. Domicile. The defendant is a permanent resident of that state.
3. Event. The defendant did something in that state, related to the lawsuit, that makes it fair for the state to say, “Come back and defend!”
4. Service of process within the state will effectively provide personal jurisdiction over the nonresident.

Again, let’s consider Mrs. Robinson and her children in the Audi accident. She could file a lawsuit anywhere in the country. She could file a lawsuit in Arizona after she establishes residency there. But while the Arizona court would have subject matter jurisdiction over any products-liability claim (or any claim that was not required to be heard in a federal court), the Arizona court would face an issue of “*in personam* jurisdiction,” or personal jurisdiction: under the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, each state must extend due process to citizens of all of the other states. Because fairness is essential to due process, the court must consider whether it is fair to require an out-of-state defendant to appear and defend against a lawsuit that could result in a judgment against that defendant.

Almost every state in the United States has a statute regarding personal jurisdiction, instructing judges when it is permissible to assert personal jurisdiction over an out-of-state resident. These are called long-arm statutes. But no state can reach out beyond the limits of what is constitutionally permissible under the Fourteenth Amendment, which binds the states with its proviso to guarantee the due process rights of the citizens of every state in the union. The “minimum contacts” test in *Burger King v. Rudzewicz* (Section 3.9 "Cases") tries to make the fairness mandate of the due process clause more specific. So do other tests articulated in the case (such as “does not offend traditional notions of fair play and substantial justice”). These tests are posed by the Supreme Court and heeded by all lower courts in order to honor the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment’s due process guarantees. These tests are *in addition to* any state long-arm statute’s instructions to courts regarding the assertion of personal jurisdiction over nonresidents.

### **Choice of Law and Choice of Forum Clauses**

In a series of cases, the Supreme Court has made clear that it will honor contractual choices of parties in a lawsuit. Suppose the parties to a contract wind up in court arguing over the



application of the contract's terms. If the parties are from two different states, the judge may have difficulty determining which law to apply (see [Table 3.1 "Sample Conflict-of-Law Principles"](#)). But if the contract says that a particular state's law will be applied if there is a dispute, then ordinarily the judge will apply that state's law as a rule of decision in the case. For example, Kumar Patel (a Missouri resident) opens a brokerage account with Goldman, Sachs and Co., and the contractual agreement calls for "any disputes arising under this agreement" to be determined "according to the laws of the state of New York." When Kumar claims in a Missouri court that his broker is "churning" his account, and, on the other hand, Goldman, Sachs claims that Kumar has failed to meet his margin call and owes \$38,568.25 (plus interest and attorney's fees), the judge in Missouri will apply New York law based on the contract between Kumar and Goldman, Sachs.

Ordinarily, a choice-of-law clause will be accompanied by a choice-of-forum clause. In a choice-of-forum clause, the parties in the contract specify which court they will go to in the event of a dispute arising under the terms of contract. For example, Harold (a resident of Virginia) rents a car from Alamo at the Denver International Airport. He does not look at the fine print on the contract. He also waives all collision and other insurance that Alamo offers at the time of his rental. While driving back from Telluride Bluegrass Festival, he has an accident in Idaho Springs, Colorado. His rented Nissan Altima is badly damaged. On returning to Virginia, he would like to settle up with Alamo, but his insurance company and Alamo cannot come to terms. He realizes, however, that he has agreed to hear the dispute with Alamo in a specific court in San Antonio, Texas. In the absence of fraud or bad faith, any court in the United States is likely to uphold the choice-of-form clause and require Harold (or his insurance company) to litigate in San Antonio, Texas.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

There are two court systems in the United States. It is important to know which system—the state court system or the federal court system—has the power to hear and decide a particular case. Once that is established, the Constitution compels an inquiry to make sure that no court extends its reach unfairly to out-of-state residents. The question of personal jurisdiction is a question of fairness and due process to nonresidents.

#### EXERCISES

1. The Constitution specifies that federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction over admiralty claims. Mr. and Mrs. Shute have a claim against Carnival Cruise lines for the negligence of the cruise line. Mrs. Shute sustained injuries as a result of the company's negligence. Mr. and Mrs. Shute live in the state of Washington. Can they bring their claim in state court? Must they bring their claim in federal court?
2. Congress passed Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In Title VII, employers are required not to discriminate against employees on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin. In passing Title VII, Congress did not require plaintiffs to file only in federal courts. That is, Congress made no statement in Title VII that federal courts had "exclusive jurisdiction" over Title VII claims. Mrs. Harris wishes to sue Forklift Systems, Inc. of Nashville, Tennessee, for sexual harassment under Title VII. She has gone through the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission process and has a right-to-sue letter, which is required before a Title VII action can be brought to court. Can she file a complaint that will be heard by a state court?
3. Mrs. Harris fails to go to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to get her right-to-sue letter against Forklift Systems, Inc. She therefore does not have a viable Title VII cause of action against Forklift. She does, however, have her rights under Tennessee's equal employment statute and various court decisions from Tennessee courts regarding sexual harassment. Forklift is incorporated in Tennessee and has its principal place of business in Nashville. Mrs. Harris is also a citizen of Tennessee. Explain why, if she brings her employment discrimination and sexual harassment lawsuit in a federal court, her lawsuit will be dismissed for lack of subject matter jurisdiction.
4. Suppose Mr. and Mrs. Robinson find in the original paperwork with Seaway Volkswagen that there is a contractual agreement with a provision that says "all disputes arising between buyer and Seaway Volkswagen will be litigated, if at all, in the county courts of Westchester County, New York." Will the Oklahoma court take personal jurisdiction over Seaway Volkswagen, or will it require the Robinsons to litigate their claim in New York?

## 3.3 Motions and Discovery

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how a lawsuit can be dismissed prior to any trial.
2. Understand the basic principles and practices of discovery before a trial.

The early phases of a civil action are characterized by many different kinds of motions and a complex process of mutual fact-finding between the parties that is known as discovery. A lawsuit will start with the pleadings (complaint and answer in every case, and in some cases a counterclaim by the defendant against the plaintiff and the plaintiff's reply to the defendant's counterclaim). After the pleadings, the parties may make various motions, which are requests to the judge. Motions in the early stages of a lawsuit usually aim to dismiss the lawsuit, to have it moved to another venue, or to compel the other party to act in certain ways during the discovery process.

### **Initial Pleadings, and Motions to Dismiss**

The first papers filed in a lawsuit are called the pleadings. These include the plaintiff's complaint and then (usually after thirty or more days) the answer or response from the defendant. The answer may be coupled with a counterclaim against the plaintiff. (In effect, the defendant becomes the plaintiff for the claims she has against the original plaintiff.) The plaintiff may reply to any counterclaim by the defendant.

State and federal rules of civil procedure require that the complaint must state the nature of the plaintiff's claim, the jurisdiction of the court, and the nature of the relief that is being asked for (usually an award of money, but sometimes an injunction, or a declaration of legal rights). In an answer, the defendant will often deny all the allegations of the complaint or will admit to certain of its allegations and deny others.

A complaint and subsequent pleadings are usually quite general and give little detail. Cases can be decided on the pleadings alone in the following situations: (1) If the defendant fails to answer the complaint, the court can enter a default judgment, awarding the plaintiff what he seeks. (2) The defendant can move to dismiss the complaint on the grounds that the plaintiff failed to "state a claim on which relief can be granted," or on the basis that there is no subject matter jurisdiction for the court chosen by the plaintiff, or on the basis that there is no personal jurisdiction over the defendant. The defendant is saying, in effect, that even if all the plaintiff's allegations are true, they do not amount to a legal claim that can be heard by the court. For

example, a claim that the defendant induced a woman to stop dating the plaintiff (a so-called alienation of affections cause of action) is no longer actionable in US state courts, and any court will dismiss the complaint without any further proceedings. (This type of dismissal is occasionally still called a demurrer.)

A third kind of dismissal can take place on a motion for summary judgment. If there is no triable question of fact or law, there is no reason to have a trial. For example, the plaintiff sues on a promissory note and, at deposition (an oral examination under oath), the defendant admits having made no payment on the note and offers no excuse that would be recognizable as a reason not to pay. There is no reason to have a trial, and the court should grant summary judgment.

## **Discovery**

If there is a factual dispute, the case will usually involve some degree of discovery, where each party tries to get as much information out of the other party as the rules allow. Until the 1940s, when discovery became part of civil procedure rules, a lawsuit was frequently a game in which each party hid as much information as possible and tried to surprise the other party in court. Beginning with a change in the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure adopted by the Supreme Court in 1938 and subsequently followed by many of the states, the parties are entitled to learn the facts of the case before trial. The basic idea is to help the parties determine what the evidence might be, who the potential witnesses are, and what specific issues are relevant. Discovery can proceed by several methods. A party may serve an interrogatory on his adversary—a written request for answers to specific questions. Or a party may depose the other party or a witness. A deposition is a live question-and-answer session at which the witness answers questions put to him by one of the parties' lawyers. His answers are recorded verbatim and may be used at trial. Each party is also entitled to inspect books, documents, records, and other physical items in the possession of the other. This is a broad right, as it is not limited to just evidence that is admissible at trial. Discovery of physical evidence means that a plaintiff may inspect a company's accounts, customer lists, assets, profit-and-loss statements, balance sheets, engineering and quality-control reports, sales reports, and virtually any other document.

The lawyers, not the court, run the discovery process. For example, one party simply makes a written demand, stating the time at which the deposition will take place or the type of documents it wishes to inspect and make copies of. A party unreasonably resisting discovery methods (whether depositions, written interrogatories, or requests for documents) can be challenged, however, and judges are often brought into the process to push reluctant parties to make more disclosure or to protect a party from irrelevant or unreasonable discovery requests. For example, the party receiving the discovery request can apply to the court for a protective order if it can show that the demand is for privileged material (e.g., a party's lawyers' records are not open for inspection) or that the demand was made to harass the opponent. In complex cases between companies, the discovery of documents can run into tens of millions of pages and can take years. Depositions can consume days or even weeks of an executive's time.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Many cases never get to trial. They are disposed of by motions to dismiss or are settled after extensive discovery makes clear to the parties the strengths and weaknesses of the parties to the dispute.

#### EXERCISES

1. Mrs. Robinson (in the Volkswagen Audi case) never establishes residency in Arizona, returns to New York, and files her case in federal district court in New York, alleging diversity jurisdiction. Assume that the defendants do not want to have the case heard in federal court. What motion will they make?
2. Under contributory negligence, the negligence of any plaintiff that causes or contributes to the injuries a plaintiff complains of will be grounds for dismissal. Suppose that in discovery, Mr. Ferlito in *Ferlito v. Johnson & Johnson* (Section 3.9 "Cases") admits that he brought the cigarette lighter dangerously close to his costume, saying, "Yes, you could definitely say I was being careless; I had a few drinks under my belt." Also, Mrs. Ferlito admits that she never reads product instructions from manufacturers. If the case is brought in a state where contributory negligence is the law, on what basis can Johnson & Johnson have the case dismissed before trial?

## 3.4 The Pretrial and Trial Phase

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how judges can push parties into pretrial settlement.
2. Explain the meaning and use of directed verdicts.
3. Distinguish a directed verdict from a judgment n.o.v. (“notwithstanding the verdict”).

After considerable discovery, one of the parties may believe that there is no triable issue of law or fact for the court to consider and may file a motion with the court for summary judgment. Unless it is very clear, the judge will deny a summary judgment motion, because that ends the case at the trial level; it is a “final order” in the case that tells the plaintiff “no” and leaves no room to bring another lawsuit against the defendant for that particular set of facts (*res judicata*). If the plaintiff successfully appeals a summary judgment motion, the case will come back to the trial court.

Prior to the trial, the judge may also convene the parties in an effort to investigate the possibilities of settlement. Usually, the judge will explore the strengths and weaknesses of each party’s case with the attorneys. The parties may decide that it is more prudent or efficient to settle than to risk going to trial.

### **Pretrial Conference**

At various times during the discovery process, depending on the nature and complexity of the case, the court may hold a pretrial conference to clarify the issues and establish a timetable. The court may also hold a settlement conference to see if the parties can work out their differences and avoid trial altogether. Once discovery is complete, the case moves on to trial if it has not been settled. Most cases are settled before this stage; perhaps 85 percent of all civil cases end before trial, and more than 90 percent of criminal prosecutions end with a guilty plea.

### **Trial**

At trial, the first order of business is to select a jury. (In a civil case of any consequence, either party can request one, based on the Sixth Amendment to the US Constitution.) The judge and sometimes the lawyers are permitted to question the jurors to be sure that they are unbiased. This questioning is known as the *voir dire* (pronounced *vwahr-DEER*). This is an important process, and a great deal of thought goes into selecting the jury, especially in high-profile cases. A jury panel can be as few as six persons, or as many as twelve, with alternates selected and

sitting in court in case one of the jurors is unable to continue. In a long trial, having alternates is essential; even in shorter trials, most courts will have at least two alternate jurors.

In both criminal and civil trials, each side has opportunities to challenge potential jurors for cause. For example, in the Robinsons' case against Audi, the attorneys representing Audi will want to know if any prospective jurors have ever owned an Audi, what their experience has been, and if they had a similar problem (or worse) with their Audi that was not resolved to their satisfaction. If so, the defense attorney could well believe that such a juror has a potential for a bias against her client. In that case, she could use a challenge for cause, explaining to the judge the basis for her challenge. The judge, at her discretion, could either accept the for-cause reason or reject it.

Even if an attorney cannot articulate a for-cause reason acceptable to the judge, he may use one of several peremptory challenges that most states (and the federal system) allow. A trial attorney with many years of experience may have a sixth sense about a potential juror and, in consultation with the client, may decide to use a peremptory challenge to avoid having that juror on the panel.

After the jury is sworn and seated, the plaintiff's lawyer makes an opening statement, laying out the nature of the plaintiff's claim, the facts of the case as the plaintiff sees them, and the evidence that the lawyer will present. The defendant's lawyer may also make an opening statement or may reserve his right to do so at the end of the plaintiff's case.

The plaintiff's lawyer then calls witnesses and presents the physical evidence that is relevant to her proof. The direct testimony at trial is usually far from a smooth narration. The rules of evidence (that govern the kinds of testimony and documents that may be introduced at trial) and the question-and-answer format tend to make the presentation of evidence choppy and difficult to follow.

Anyone who has watched an actual televised trial or a television melodrama featuring a trial scene will appreciate the nature of the trial itself: witnesses are asked questions about a number of issues that may or may not be related, the opposing lawyer will frequently object to the question or the form in which it is asked, and the jury may be sent from the room while the lawyers argue at the bench before the judge.

After direct testimony of each witness is over, the opposing lawyer may conduct cross-examination. This is a crucial constitutional right; in criminal cases it is preserved in the Constitution's Sixth Amendment (the right to confront one's accusers in open court). The formal rules of direct testimony are then relaxed, and the cross-examiner may probe the witness more informally, asking questions that may not seem immediately relevant. This is when the opposing attorney may become harsh, casting doubt on a witness's credibility, trying to trip her up and show that the answers she gave are false or not to be trusted. This use of cross-examination, along with the requirement that the witness must respond to questions that are at all relevant to the questions raised by the case, distinguishes common-law courts from those of authoritarian regimes around the world.

Following cross-examination, the plaintiff's lawyer may then question the witness again: this is called redirect examination and is used to demonstrate that the witness's original answers were accurate and to show that any implications otherwise, suggested by the cross-examiner, were unwarranted. The cross-examiner may then engage the witness in re-cross-examination, and so on. The process usually stops after cross-examination or redirect.

During the trial, the judge's chief responsibility is to see that the trial is fair to both sides. One big piece of that responsibility is to rule on the admissibility of evidence. A judge may rule that a particular question is out of order—that is, not relevant or appropriate—or that a given document is irrelevant. Where the attorney is convinced that a particular witness, a particular question, or a particular document (or part thereof) is critical to her case, she may preserve an objection to the court's ruling by saying "exception," in which case the court stenographer will note the exception; on appeal, the attorney may cite any number of exceptions as adding up to the lack of a fair trial for her client and may request a court of appeals to order a retrial.

For the most part, courts of appeal will not reverse and remand for a new trial unless the trial court judge's errors are "prejudicial," or "an abuse of discretion." In short, neither party is entitled to a perfect trial, but only to a fair trial, one in which the trial judge has made only "harmless errors" and not prejudicial ones.

At the end of the plaintiff's case, the defendant presents his case, following the same procedure just outlined. The plaintiff is then entitled to present rebuttal witnesses, if necessary, to deny or



argue with the evidence the defendant has introduced. The defendant in turn may present “surrebuttal” witnesses.

When all testimony has been introduced, either party may ask the judge for a directed verdict—a verdict decided by the judge without advice from the jury. This motion may be granted if the plaintiff has failed to introduce evidence that is legally sufficient to meet her burden of proof or if the defendant has failed to do the same on issues on which she has the burden of proof. (For example, the plaintiff alleges that the defendant owes him money and introduces a signed promissory note. The defendant cannot show that the note is invalid. The defendant must lose the case unless he can show that the debt has been paid or otherwise discharged.)

The defendant can move for a directed verdict at the close of the plaintiff’s case, but the judge will usually wait to hear the entire case until deciding whether to do so. Directed verdicts are not usually granted, since it is the jury’s job to determine the facts in dispute.

If the judge refuses to grant a directed verdict, each lawyer will then present a closing argument to the jury (or, if there is no jury, to the judge alone). The closing argument is used to tie up the loose ends, as the attorney tries to bring together various seemingly unrelated facts into a story that will make sense to the jury.

After closing arguments, the judge will instruct the jury. The purpose of jury instruction is to explain to the jurors the meaning of the law as it relates to the issues they are considering and to tell the jurors what facts they must determine if they are to give a verdict for one party or the other. Each lawyer will have prepared a set of written instructions that she hopes the judge will give to the jury. These will be tailored to advance her client’s case. Many a verdict has been overturned on appeal because a trial judge has wrongly instructed the jury. The judge will carefully determine which instructions to give and often will use a set of pattern instructions provided by the state bar association or the supreme court of the state. These pattern jury instructions are often safer because they are patterned after language that appellate courts have used previously, and appellate courts are less likely to find reversible error in the instructions. After all instructions are given, the jury will retire to a private room and discuss the case and the answers requested by the judge for as long as it takes to reach a unanimous verdict. Some minor cases do not require a unanimous verdict. If the jury cannot reach a decision, this is called a

hung jury, and the case will have to be retried. When a jury does reach a verdict, it delivers it in court with both parties and their lawyers present. The jury is then discharged, and control over the case returns to the judge. (If there is no jury, the judge will usually announce in a written opinion his findings of fact and how the law applies to those facts. Juries just announce their verdicts and do not state their reasons for reaching them.)

## Posttrial Motions

The losing party is allowed to ask the judge for a new trial or for a judgment notwithstanding the verdict (often called a judgment n.o.v., from the Latin *non obstante veredicto*). A judge who decides that a directed verdict is appropriate will usually wait to see what the jury's verdict is. If it is favorable to the party the judge thinks should win, she can rely on that verdict. If the verdict is for the other party, he can grant the motion for judgment n.o.v. This is a safer way to proceed because if the judge is reversed on appeal, a new trial is not necessary. The jury's verdict always can be restored, whereas without a jury verdict (as happens when a directed verdict is granted before the case goes to the jury), the entire case must be presented to a new jury. *Ferlito v. Johnson & Johnson* (Section 3.9 "Cases") illustrates the judgment n.o.v. process in a case where the judge allowed the case to go to a jury that was overly sympathetic to the plaintiffs. Rule 50(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure provides the authorization for federal judges making a judgment contrary to the judgment of the jury. Most states have a similar rule.

Rule 50(b) says,

*Whenever a motion for a directed verdict made at the close of all the evidence is denied or for any reason is not granted, the court is deemed to have submitted the action to the jury subject to a later determination of the legal questions raised by the motion. Not later than 10 days after entry of judgment, a party who has moved for a directed verdict may move to have the verdict and any judgment entered thereon set aside and to have judgment entered in accordance with the party's motion for a directed verdict....[A] new trial may be prayed for in the alternative. If a verdict was returned the court may allow the judgment to stand or may reopen the judgment and either order a new trial or direct the entry of judgment as if the requested verdict had been directed.*

## KEY TAKEAWAY

The purpose of a trial judge is to ensure justice to all parties to the lawsuit. The judge presides, instructs the jury, and may limit who testifies and what they testify about what. In all of this, the judge will usually commit some errors; occasionally these will be the kinds of errors that seriously compromise a fair trial for both parties. Errors that do seriously compromise a fair trial for both parties are prejudicial, as opposed to harmless. The appeals court must decide whether any errors of the trial court judge are prejudicial or not. If a judge directs a verdict, that ends the case for the party who hasn't asked for one; if a judge grants judgment n.o.v., that will take away a jury verdict that one side has worked very hard to get. Thus a judge must be careful not to unduly favor one side or the other, regardless of his or her sympathies.

## EXERCISES

1. What if there was not a doctrine of res judicata? What would the legal system be like?
2. Why do you think cross-examination is a “right,” as opposed to a “good thing”? What kind of judicial system would not allow cross-examination of witnesses as a matter of right?

## 3.5 Judgment, Appeal, and Execution

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the posttrial process—how appellate courts process appeals.
2. Explain how a court's judgment is translated into relief for the winning party.

### Judgment or Order

At the end of a trial, the judge will enter an order that makes findings of fact (often with the help of a jury) and conclusions of law. The judge will also make a judgment as to what relief or remedy should be given. Often it is an award of money damages to one of the parties. The losing party may ask for a new trial at this point or within a short period of time following. Once the trial judge denies any such request, the judgment—in the form of the court's order—is final.

### Appeal

If the loser's motion for a new trial or a judgment n.o.v. is denied, the losing party may appeal but must ordinarily post a bond sufficient to ensure that there are funds to pay the amount awarded to the winning party. In an appeal, the appellant aims to show that there was some

prejudicial error committed by the trial judge. There will be errors, of course, but the errors must be significant (i.e., not harmless). The basic idea is for an appellate court to ensure that a reasonably fair trial was provided to both sides. Enforcement of the court's judgment—an award of money, an injunction—is usually stayed (postponed) until the appellate court has ruled. As noted earlier, the party making the appeal is called the appellant, and the party defending the judgment is the appellee (or in some courts, the petitioner and the respondent).

During the trial, the losing party may have objected to certain procedural decisions by the judge. In compiling a record on appeal, the appellant needs to show the appellate court some examples of mistakes made by the judge—for example, having erroneously admitted evidence, having failed to admit proper evidence that should have been admitted, or having wrongly instructed the jury. The appellate court must determine if those mistakes were serious enough to amount to prejudicial error.

Appellate and trial procedures are different. The appellate court does not hear witnesses or accept evidence. It reviews the *record* of the case—the transcript of the witnesses' testimony and the documents received into evidence at trial—to try to find a legal error on a specific request of one or both of the parties. The parties' lawyers prepare briefs (written statements containing the facts in the case), the procedural steps taken, and the argument or discussion of the meaning of the law and how it applies to the facts. After reading the briefs on appeal, the appellate court may dispose of the appeal without argument, issuing a written opinion that may be very short or many pages. Often, though, the appellate court will hear oral argument. (This can be months, or even more than a year after the briefs are filed.) Each lawyer is given a short period of time, usually no more than thirty minutes, to present his client's case. The lawyer rarely gets a chance for an extended statement because he is usually interrupted by questions from the judges. Through this exchange between judges and lawyers, specific legal positions can be tested and their limits explored.

Depending on what it decides, the appellate court will *affirm* the lower court's judgment, *modify* it, *reverse* it, or *remand* it to the lower court for retrial or other action directed by the higher court. The appellate court itself does not take specific action in the case; it sits only to rule on contested issues of law. The lower court must issue the final judgment in the

case. As we have already seen, there is the possibility of appealing from an intermediate appellate court to the state supreme court in twenty-nine states and to the US Supreme Court from a ruling from a federal circuit court of appeal. In cases raising constitutional issues, there is also the possibility of appeal to the Supreme Court from the state courts.

Like trial judges, appellate judges must follow previous decisions, or precedent. But not every previous case is a precedent for every court. Lower courts must respect appellate court decisions, and courts in one state are not bound by decisions of courts in other states. State courts are not bound by decisions of federal courts, except on points of federal law that come from federal courts within the state or from a federal circuit in which the state court sits. A state supreme court is not bound by case law in any other state. But a supreme court in one state with a type of case it has not previously dealt with may find persuasive reasoning in decisions of other state supreme courts.

Federal district courts are bound by the decisions of the court of appeals in their circuit, but decisions by one circuit court are not precedents for courts in other circuits. Federal courts are also bound by decisions of the state supreme courts within their geographic territory in diversity jurisdiction cases. All courts are bound by decisions of the US Supreme Court, except the Supreme Court itself, which seldom reverses itself but on occasion has overturned its own precedents.

Not everything a court says in an opinion is a precedent. Strictly speaking, only the exact holding is binding on the lower courts. A holding is the theory of the law that applies to the particular circumstances presented in a case. The courts may sometimes declare what they believe to be the law with regard to points that are not central to the case being decided. These declarations are called dicta (the singular, *dictum*), and the lower courts do not have to give them the same weight as holdings.

## **Judgment and Order**

When a party has no more possible appeals, it usually pays up voluntarily. If not voluntarily, then the losing party's assets can be seized or its wages or other income garnished to satisfy the judgment. If the final judgment is an injunction, failure to follow its dictates can lead to a contempt citation, with a fine or jail time imposed.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

The process of conducting a civil trial has many aspects, starting with pleadings and continuing with motions, discovery, more motions, pretrial conferences, and finally the trial itself. At all stages, the rules of civil procedure attempt to give both sides plenty of notice, opportunity to be heard, discovery of relevant information, cross-examination, and the preservation of procedural objections for purposes of appeal. All of these rules and procedures are intended to provide each side with a fair trial.

## EXERCISES

1. Mrs. Robinson has a key witness on auto safety that the judge believes is not qualified as an expert. The judge examines the witness while the jury is in the jury room and disqualifies him from testifying. The jury does not get to hear this witness. Her attorney objects. She loses her case. What argument would you expect Mrs. Robinson's attorney to make in an appeal?
2. Why don't appellate courts need a witness box for witnesses to give testimony under oath?

3. A trial judge in Nevada is wondering whether to enforce a surrogate motherhood contract. Penelope Barr, of Reno, Nevada, has contracted with Reuben and Tina Goldberg to bear the in vitro fertilized egg of Mrs. Goldberg. After carrying the child for nine months, Penelope gives birth, but she is reluctant to give up the child, even though she was paid \$20,000 at the start of the contract and will earn an additional \$20,000 on handing over the baby to the Goldbergs. (Barr was an especially good candidate for surrogate motherhood: she had borne two perfect children and at age 28 drinks no wine, does not smoke or use drugs of any kind, practices yoga, and maintains a largely vegetarian diet with just enough meat to meet the needs of the fetus within.)

The Goldbergs have asked the judge for an order compelling Penelope to give up the baby, who was five days old when the lawsuit was filed. The baby is now a month old as the judge looks in vain for guidance from any Nevada statute, federal statute, or any prior case in Nevada that addressed the issue of surrogate motherhood. He does find several well-reasoned cases, one from New Jersey, one from Michigan, and one from Oregon. Are any of these "precedent" that he must

follow? May he adopt the reasoning of any of these courts, if he should find that reasoning persuasive?

## 3.6 When Can Someone Bring a Lawsuit?

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain the requirements for standing to bring a lawsuit in US courts.
2. Describe the process by which a group or class of plaintiffs can be certified to file a class action case.

Almost anyone can bring a lawsuit, assuming they have the filing fee and the help of an attorney. But the court may not hear it, for a number of reasons. There may be no case or controversy, there may be no law to support the plaintiff's claim, it may be in the wrong court, too much time might have lapsed (a statute of limitations problem), or the plaintiff may not have standing.

### Case or Controversy: Standing to Sue

Article III of the US Constitution provides limits to federal judicial power. For some cases, the Supreme Court has decided that it has no power to adjudicate because there is no “case or controversy.” For example, perhaps the case has settled or the “real parties in interest” are not before the court. In such a case, a court might dismiss the case on the grounds that the plaintiff does not have “standing” to sue.

For example, suppose you see a sixteen-wheel moving van drive across your neighbor's flower bed, destroying her beloved roses. You have enjoyed seeing her roses every summer, for years. She is forlorn and tells you that she is not going to raise roses there anymore. She also tells you that she has decided not to sue, because she has made the decision to never deal with lawyers if at all possible. Incensed, you decide to sue on her behalf. But you will not have standing to sue because your person or property was not directly injured by the moving van. Standing means that only the person whose interests are directly affected has the legal right to sue.

The standing doctrine is easy to understand in straightforward cases such as this but is often a fairly complicated matter. For example, can fifteen or more state attorneys general bring a lawsuit for a declaratory judgment that the health care legislation passed in 2010 is unconstitutional? What particular injury have they (or the states) suffered? Are they the best set of plaintiffs to raise this issue? Time—and the Supreme Court—will tell.

## Class Actions

Most lawsuits concern a dispute between two people or between a person and a company or other organization. But it can happen that someone injures more than one person at the same time. A driver who runs a red light may hit another car carrying one person or many people. If several people are injured in the same accident, they each have the right to sue the driver for the damage that he caused them. Could they sue as a group? Usually not, because the damages would probably not be the same for each person, and different facts would have to be proved at the trial. Plus, the driver of the car that was struck might have been partially to blame, so the defendant's liability toward him might be different from his liability toward the passengers. If, however, the potential plaintiffs were all injured in the same way and their injuries were identical, a single lawsuit might be a far more efficient way of determining liability and deciding financial responsibility than many individual lawsuits.

How could such a suit be brought? All the injured parties could hire the same lawyer, and she could present a common case. But with a group numbering more than a handful of people, it could become overwhelmingly complicated. So how could, say, a million stockholders who believed they were cheated by a corporation ever get together to sue?

Because of these types of situations, there is a legal procedure that permits one person or a small group of people to serve as representatives for all others. This is the class action. The class action is provided for in the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure (Rule 23) and in the separate codes of civil procedure in the states. These rules differ among themselves and are often complex, but in general anyone can file a class action in an appropriate case, subject to approval of the court. Once the class is "certified," or judged to be a legally adequate group with common injuries, the lawyers for the named plaintiffs become, in effect, lawyers for the entire class.

Usually a person who doesn't want to be in the class can decide to leave. If she does, she will not be included in an eventual judgment or settlement. But a potential plaintiff who is included in the class cannot, after a final judgment is awarded, seek to relitigate the issue if she is dissatisfied with the outcome, even though she did not participate at all in the legal proceeding.

### KEY TAKEAWAY



Anyone can file a lawsuit, with or without the help of an attorney, but only those lawsuits where a plaintiff has standing will be heard by the courts. Standing has become a complicated question and is used by the courts to ensure that civil cases heard are being pursued by those with tangible and particular injuries. Class actions are a way of aggregating claims that are substantially similar and arise out of the same facts and circumstances.

### EXERCISE

1. Fuchs Funeral Home is carrying the body of Charles Emmenthaler to its resting place at Forest Lawn Cemetery. Charles's wife, Chloe, and their two children, Chucky and Clarice, are following the hearse when the coffin falls on the street, opens, and the body of Charles Emmenthaler falls out. The wife and children are shocked and aggrieved and later sue in civil court for damages. Assume that this is a viable cause of action based on "negligent infliction of emotional distress" in the state of California and that Charles's brother, sister-in-law, and multiple cousins also were in the funeral procession and saw what happened. The brother of Charles, Kingston Emmenthaler, also sees his brother's body on the street, but his wife, their three children, and some of Charles's other cousins do not.

Charles was actually emotionally closest to Kingston's oldest son, Nestor, who was studying abroad at the time of the funeral and could not make it back in time. He is as emotionally distraught at his uncle's passing as anyone else in the family and is especially grieved over the description of the incident and the grainy video shot by one of the cousins on his cell phone. Who has standing to sue Fuchs Funeral Home, and who does not?

## 3.7 Relations with Lawyers

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the various ways that lawyers charge for services.
2. Describe the contingent fee system in the United States.
3. Know the difference between the American rule and the British rule with regard to who pays attorneys' fees.

### Legal Fees

Lawyers charge for their services in one of three different ways: flat rate, hourly rate, and contingent fee. A flat rate is used usually when the work is relatively routine and the lawyer knows in advance approximately how long it will take her to do the job. Drawing a will or doing a real estate closing are examples of legal work that is often paid a flat rate. The rate itself may be based on a percentage of the worth of the matter—say, 1 percent of a home’s selling price. Lawyers generally charge by the hour for courtroom time and for ongoing representation in commercial matters. Virtually every sizable law firm bills its clients by hourly rates, which in large cities can range from \$300 for an associate’s time to \$500 and more for a senior partner’s time.

A contingent fee is one that is paid only if the lawyer wins—that is, it is contingent, or depends upon, the success of the case. This type of fee arrangement is used most often in personal injury cases (e.g., automobile accidents, products liability, and professional malpractice). Although used quite often, the contingent fee is controversial. Trial lawyers justify it by pointing to the high cost of preparing for such lawsuits. A typical automobile accident case can cost at least ten thousand dollars to prepare, and a complicated products-liability case can cost tens of thousands of dollars. Few people have that kind of money or would be willing to spend it on the chance that they might win a lawsuit. Corporate and professional defendants complain that the contingent fee gives lawyers a license to go big game hunting, or to file suits against those with deep pockets in the hopes of forcing them to settle.

Trial lawyers respond that the contingent fee arrangement forces them to screen cases and weed out cases that are weak, because it is not worth their time to spend the hundreds of hours necessary on such cases if their chances of winning are slim or nonexistent.

## **Costs**

In England and in many other countries, the losing party must pay the legal expenses of the winning party, including attorneys’ fees. That is not the general rule in this country. Here, each party must pay most of its own costs, including (and especially) the fees of lawyers. (Certain relatively minor costs, such as filing fees for various documents required in court, are chargeable to the losing side, if the judge decides it.) This type of fee structure is known as the American rule (in contrast to the British rule).

There are two types of exceptions to the American rule. By statute, Congress and the state legislatures have provided that the winning party in particular classes of cases may recover its full legal costs from the loser—for example, the federal antitrust laws so provide and so does the federal Equal Access to Justice Act. The other exception applies to litigants who either initiate lawsuits in bad faith, with no expectation of winning, or who defend them in bad faith, in order to cause the plaintiff great expense. Under these circumstances, a court has the discretion to award attorneys' fees to the winner. But this rule is not infinitely flexible, and courts do not have complete freedom to award attorneys' fees in any amount, but only "reasonable" attorney's fees.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Litigation is expensive. Getting a lawyer can be costly, unless you get a lawyer on a contingent fee. Not all legal systems allow contingent fees. In many legal systems, the loser pays attorneys' fees for both parties.

#### EXERCISES

1. Mrs. Robinson's attorney estimates that they will recover a million dollars from Volkswagen in the Audi lawsuit. She has Mrs. Robinson sign a contract that gives her firm one-third of any recovery after the firm's expenses are deducted. The judge does in fact award a million dollars, and the defendant pays. The firm's expenses are \$100,000. How much does Mrs. Robinson get?
2. Harry Potter brings a lawsuit against Draco Malfoy in Chestershire, England, for slander, a form of defamation. Potter alleges that Malfoy insists on calling him a mudblood. Ron Weasley testifies, as does Neville Chamberlain. But Harry loses, because the court has no conception of wizardry and cannot make sense of the case at all. In dismissing the case, however, who (under English law) will bear the costs of the attorneys who have brought the case for Potter and defended the matter for Malfoy?

## 3.8 Alternative Means of Resolving Disputes

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how arbitration and mediation are frequently used alternatives to litigation.
2. Describe the differences between arbitration and mediation.
3. Explain why arbitration is final and binding.

Disputes do not have to be settled in court. No law requires parties who have a legal dispute to seek judicial resolution if they can resolve their disagreement privately or through some other public forum. In fact, the threat of a lawsuit can frequently motivate parties toward private negotiation. Filing a lawsuit may convince one party that the other party is serious. Or the parties may decide that they will come to terms privately rather than wait the three or four years it can frequently take for a case to move up on the court calendar.

## **Arbitration**

Beginning around 1980, a movement toward alternative dispute resolution began to gain force throughout the United States. Bar associations, other private groups, and the courts themselves wanted to find quicker and cheaper ways for litigants and potential litigants to settle certain types of quarrels than through the courts. As a result, neighborhood justice centers or dispute resolution centers have sprung up in communities. These are where people can come for help in settling disputes, of both civil and criminal nature, that should not consume the time and money of the parties or courts in lengthy proceedings.

These alternative forums use a variety of methods, including arbitration, mediation, and conciliation, to bring about agreement or at least closure of the dispute. These methods are not all alike, and their differences are worth noting.

Arbitration is a type of adjudication. The parties use a private decision maker, the arbitrator, and the rules of procedure are considerably more relaxed than those that apply in the courtroom. Arbitrators might be retired judges, lawyers, or anyone with the kind of specialized knowledge and training that would be useful in making a final, binding decision on the dispute. In a contractual relationship, the parties can decide even before a dispute arises to use arbitration when the time comes. Or parties can decide after a dispute arises to use arbitration instead of litigation. In a predispute arbitration agreement (often part of a larger contract), the parties can spell out the rules of procedure to be used and the method for choosing the arbitrator. For example, they may name the specific person or delegate the responsibility of choosing to some neutral person, or they may each designate a person and the two designees may jointly pick a third arbitrator.

Many arbitrations take place under the auspices of the American Arbitration Association, a private organization headquartered in New York, with regional offices in many other cities. The association uses published sets of rules for various types of arbitration (e.g., labor arbitration or commercial arbitration); parties who provide in contracts for arbitration through the association are agreeing to be bound by the association's rules. Similarly, the National Association of Securities Dealers provides arbitration services for disputes between clients and brokerage firms. International commercial arbitration often takes place through the auspices of the International Chamber of Commerce. A multilateral agreement known as the Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Arbitral Awards provides that agreements to arbitrate—and arbitral awards—will be enforced across national boundaries.

Arbitration has two advantages over litigation. First, it is usually much quicker, because the arbitrator does not have a backlog of cases and because the procedures are simpler. Second, in complex cases, the quality of the decision may be higher, because the parties can select an arbitrator with specialized knowledge.

Under both federal and state law, arbitration is favored, and a decision rendered by an arbitrator is binding by law and may be enforced by the courts. The arbitrator's decision is final and binding, with very few exceptions (such as fraud or manifest disregard of the law by the arbitrator or panel of arbitrators). Saying that arbitration is favored means that if you have agreed to arbitration, you can't go to court if the other party wants you to arbitrate. Under the Federal Arbitration Act, the other party can go to court and get a stay against your litigation and also get an order compelling you to go to arbitration.

## **Mediation**

Unlike adjudication, mediation gives the neutral party no power to impose a decision. The mediator is a go-between who attempts to help the parties negotiate a solution. The mediator will communicate the parties' positions to each other, will facilitate the finding of common ground, and will suggest outcomes. But the parties have complete control: they may ignore the recommendations of the mediator entirely, settle in their own way, find another mediator, agree to binding arbitration, go to court, or forget the whole thing!

### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Litigation is not the only way to resolve disputes. Informal negotiation between the disputants usually comes first, but both mediation and arbitration are available. Arbitration, though, is final and binding. Once you agree to arbitrate, you will have a final, binding arbitral award that is enforceable through the courts, and courts will almost never allow you to litigate after you have agreed to arbitrate.

## EXERCISES

1. When Mrs. Robinson buys her Audi from Seaway, there is a paragraph in the bill of sale, which both the dealer and Mrs. Robinson sign, that says, “In the event of any complaint by customer/buyer against Seaway regarding the vehicle purchased herein, such complaint shall not be litigated, but may only be arbitrated under the rules of the American Arbitration Association and in accordance with New York law.” Mrs. Robinson did not see the provision, doesn’t like it, and wants to bring a lawsuit in Oklahoma against Seaway. What result?
2. Hendrik Koster (Netherlands) contracts with Automark, Inc. (a US company based in Illinois) to supply Automark with a large quantity of valve cap gauges. He does, and Automark fails to pay. Koster thinks he is owed \$66,000. There is no agreement to arbitrate or mediate. Can Koster make Automark mediate or arbitrate?
3. Suppose that there is an agreement between Koster and Automark to arbitrate. It says, “The parties agree to arbitrate any dispute arising under this agreement in accordance with the laws of the Netherlands and under the auspices of the International Chamber of Commerce’s arbitration facility.” The International Chamber of Commerce has arbitration rules and will appoint an arbitrator or arbitral panel in the event the parties cannot agree on an arbitrator. The arbitration takes place in Geneva. Koster gets an arbitral award for \$66,000 plus interest. Automark does not participate in any way. Will a court in Illinois enforce the arbitral award?

## 3.9 Cases

### ***Burger King v. Rudzewicz***

*Burger King Corp. v. Rudzewicz*

471 U.S. 462 (U.S. Supreme Court 1985)

### Summary

Burger King Corp. is a Florida corporation with principal offices in Miami. It principally conducts restaurant business through franchisees. The franchisees are licensed to use Burger King's trademarks and service marks in standardized restaurant facilities. Rudzewicz is a Michigan resident who, with a partner (MacShara) operated a Burger King franchise in Drayton Plains, Michigan. Negotiations for setting up the franchise occurred in 1978 largely between Rudzewicz, his partner, and a regional office of Burger King in Birmingham, Michigan, although some deals and concessions were made by Burger King in Florida. A preliminary agreement was signed in February of 1979. Rudzewicz and MacShara assumed operation of an existing facility in Drayton Plains and MacShara attended prescribed management courses in Miami during the four months following Feb. 1979.

Rudzewicz and MacShara bought \$165,000 worth of restaurant equipment from Burger King's Davmor Industries division in Miami. But before the final agreements were signed, the parties began to disagree over site-development fees, building design, computation of monthly rent, and whether Rudzewicz and MacShara could assign their liabilities to a corporation they had formed. Negotiations took place between Rudzewicz, MacShara, and the Birmingham regional office; but Rudzewicz and MacShara learned that the regional office had limited decision-making power and turned directly to Miami headquarters for their concerns. The final agreement was signed by June 1979 and provided that the franchise relationship was governed by Florida law, and called for payment of all required fees and forwarding of all relevant notices to Miami headquarters.

The Drayton Plains restaurant did fairly well at first, but a recession in late 1979 caused the franchisees to fall far behind in their monthly payments to Miami. Notice of default was sent from Miami to Rudzewicz, who nevertheless continued to operate the restaurant as a Burger King franchise. Burger King sued in federal district court for the southern district of Florida. Rudzewicz contested the court's personal jurisdiction over him, since he had never been to Florida.

The federal court looked to Florida's long arm statute and held that it did have personal jurisdiction over the non-resident franchisees, and awarded Burger King a quarter of a million dollars in contract damages and enjoined the franchisees from further operation of the Drayton

Plains facility. Franchisees appealed to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals and won a reversal based on lack of personal jurisdiction. Burger King petitioned the Supreme Ct. for a *writ of certiorari*.

Justice Brennan delivered the opinion of the court.

The Due Process Clause protects an individual's liberty interest in not being subject to the binding judgments of a forum with which he has established no meaningful "contacts, ties, or relations." *International Shoe Co. v. Washington*. By requiring that individuals have "fair warning that a particular activity may subject [them] to the jurisdiction of a foreign sovereign," the Due Process Clause "gives a degree of predictability to the legal system that allows potential defendants to structure their primary conduct with some minimum assurance as to where that conduct will and will not render them liable to suit."...

Where a forum seeks to assert specific jurisdiction over an out-of-state defendant who has not consented to suit there, this "fair warning" requirement is satisfied if the defendant has "purposefully directed" his activities at residents of the forum, and the litigation results from alleged injuries that "arise out of or relate to" those activities, Thus "[t]he forum State does not exceed its powers under the Due Process Clause if it asserts personal jurisdiction over a corporation that delivers its products into the stream of commerce with the expectation that they will be purchased by consumers in the forum State" and those products subsequently injure forum consumers. Similarly, a publisher who distributes magazines in a distant State may fairly be held accountable in that forum for damages resulting there from an allegedly defamatory story....

...[T]he constitutional touchstone remains whether the defendant purposefully established "minimum contacts" in the forum State....In defining when it is that a potential defendant should "reasonably anticipate" out-of-state litigation, the Court frequently has drawn from the reasoning of *Hanson v. Denckla*, 357 U.S. 235, 253 (1958):

*The unilateral activity of those who claim some relationship with a nonresident defendant cannot satisfy the requirement of contact with the forum State. The application of that rule will vary with the quality and nature of the defendant's activity, but it is essential in each case that there be some act by which the defendant*



*purposefully avails itself of the privilege of conducting activities within the forum State, thus invoking the benefits and protections of its laws.*

This “purposeful availment” requirement ensures that a defendant will not be haled into a jurisdiction solely as a result of “random,” “fortuitous,” or “attenuated” contacts, or of the “unilateral activity of another party or a third person,” [Citations] Jurisdiction is proper, however, where the contacts proximately result from actions by the defendant himself that create a “substantial connection” with the forum State. [Citations] Thus where the defendant “deliberately” has engaged in significant activities within a State, or has created “continuing obligations” between himself and residents of the forum, he manifestly has availed himself of the privilege of conducting business there, and because his activities are shielded by “the benefits and protections” of the forum’s laws it is presumptively not unreasonable to require him to submit to the burdens of litigation in that forum as well.

Jurisdiction in these circumstances may not be avoided merely because the defendant did not physically enter the forum State. Although territorial presence frequently will enhance a potential defendant’s affiliation with a State and reinforce the reasonable foreseeability of suit there, it is an inescapable fact of modern commercial life that a substantial amount of business is transacted solely by mail and wire communications across state lines, thus obviating the need for physical presence within a State in which business is conducted. So long as a commercial actor’s efforts are “purposefully directed” toward residents of another State, we have consistently rejected the notion that an absence of physical contacts can defeat personal jurisdiction there.

Once it has been decided that a defendant purposefully established minimum contacts within the forum State, these contacts may be considered in light of other factors to determine whether the assertion of personal jurisdiction would comport with “fair play and substantial justice.” [International Shoe Co. v. Washington](#), 326 U.S., at 320. Thus courts in “appropriate case[s]” may evaluate “the burden on the defendant,” “the forum State’s interest in adjudicating the dispute,” “the plaintiff’s interest in obtaining convenient and effective relief,” “the interstate judicial system’s interest in obtaining the most efficient resolution of controversies,” and the “shared interest of the several States in furthering fundamental substantive social policies.”

These considerations sometimes serve to establish the reasonableness of jurisdiction upon a lesser showing of minimum contacts than would otherwise be required. [Citations] Applying these principles to the case at hand, we believe there is substantial record evidence supporting the District Court's conclusion that the assertion of personal jurisdiction over Rudzewicz in Florida for the alleged breach of his franchise agreement did not offend due process....

In this case, no physical ties to Florida can be attributed to Rudzewicz other than MacShara's brief training course in Miami. Rudzewicz did not maintain offices in Florida and, for all that appears from the record, has never even visited there. Yet this franchise dispute grew directly out of "a contract which had a substantial connection with that State." Eschewing the option of operating an independent local enterprise, Rudzewicz deliberately "reach[ed] out beyond" Michigan and negotiated with a Florida corporation for the purchase of a long-term franchise and the manifold benefits that would derive from affiliation with a nationwide organization. Upon approval, he entered into a carefully structured 20-year relationship that envisioned continuing and wide-reaching contacts with Burger King in Florida. In light of Rudzewicz' voluntary acceptance of the long-term and exacting regulation of his business from Burger King's Miami headquarters, the "quality and nature" of his relationship to the company in Florida can in no sense be viewed as "random," "fortuitous," or "attenuated." Rudzewicz' refusal to make the contractually required payments in Miami, and his continued use of Burger King's trademarks and confidential business information after his termination, caused foreseeable injuries to the corporation in Florida. For these reasons it was, at the very least, presumptively reasonable for Rudzewicz to be called to account there for such injuries.

...Because Rudzewicz established a substantial and continuing relationship with Burger King's Miami headquarters, received fair notice from the contract documents and the course of dealing that he might be subject to suit in Florida, and has failed to demonstrate how jurisdiction in that forum would otherwise be fundamentally unfair, we conclude that the District Court's exercise of jurisdiction pursuant to Fla. Stat. 48.193(1)(g) (Supp. 1984) did not offend due process. The judgment of the Court of Appeals is accordingly reversed, and the case is remanded for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.

It is so ordered.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did Burger King sue in Florida rather than in Michigan?
2. If Florida has a long-arm statute that tells Florida courts that it may exercise personal jurisdiction over someone like Rudzewicz, why is the court talking about the due process clause?
3. Why is this case in federal court rather than in a Florida state court?
4. If this case had been filed in state court in Florida, would Rudzewicz be required to come to Florida? Explain.

### ***Ferlito v. Johnson & Johnson***

*Ferlito v. Johnson & Johnson Products, Inc.*

*771 F. Supp. 196 (U.S. District Ct., Eastern District of Michigan 1991)*

Gadola, J.

Plaintiffs Susan and Frank Ferlito, husband and wife, attended a Halloween party in 1984 dressed as Mary (Mrs. Ferlito) and her little lamb (Mr. Ferlito). Mrs. Ferlito had constructed a lamb costume for her husband by gluing cotton batting manufactured by defendant Johnson & Johnson Products (“JJP”) to a suit of long underwear. She had also used defendant’s product to fashion a headpiece, complete with ears. The costume covered Mr. Ferlito from his head to his ankles, except for his face and hands, which were blackened with Halloween paint. At the party Mr. Ferlito attempted to light his cigarette by using a butane lighter. The flame passed close to his left arm, and the cotton batting on his left sleeve ignited. Plaintiffs sued defendant for injuries they suffered from burns which covered approximately one-third of Mr. Ferlito’s body. Following a jury verdict entered for plaintiffs November 2, 1989, the Honorable Ralph M. Freeman entered a judgment for plaintiff Frank Ferlito in the amount of \$555,000 and for plaintiff Susan Ferlito in the amount of \$ 70,000. Judgment was entered November 7, 1989. Subsequently, on November 16, 1989, defendant JJP filed a timely motion for judgment notwithstanding the verdict pursuant to Fed.R.Civ.P. 50(b) or, in the alternative, for new trial. Plaintiffs filed their response to defendant’s motion December 18, 1989; and defendant filed a reply January 4, 1990. Before reaching a decision on this motion, Judge Freeman died. The case was reassigned to this court April 12, 1990.

## MOTION FOR JUDGMENT NOTWITHSTANDING THE VERDICT

Defendant JJP filed two motions for a directed verdict, the first on October 27, 1989, at the close of plaintiffs' proofs, and the second on October 30, 1989, at the close of defendant's proofs. Judge Freeman denied both motions without prejudice. Judgment for plaintiffs was entered November 7, 1989; and defendant's instant motion, filed November 16, 1989, was filed in a timely manner.

The standard for determining whether to grant a j.n.o.v. is identical to the standard for evaluating a motion for directed verdict:

In determining whether the evidence is sufficient, the trial court may neither weigh the evidence, pass on the credibility of witnesses nor substitute its judgment for that of the jury. Rather, the evidence must be viewed in the light most favorable to the party against whom the motion is made, drawing from that evidence all reasonable inferences in his favor. If after reviewing the evidence...the trial court is of the opinion that reasonable minds could not come to the result reached by the jury, then the motion for j.n.o.v. should be granted.

To recover in a "failure to warn" product liability action, a plaintiff must prove each of the following four elements of negligence: (1) that the defendant owed a duty to the plaintiff, (2) that the defendant violated that duty, (3) that the defendant's breach of that duty was a proximate cause of the damages suffered by the plaintiff, and (4) that the plaintiff suffered damages.

To establish a *prima facie* case that a manufacturer's breach of its duty to warn was a proximate cause of an injury sustained, a plaintiff must present evidence that the product would have been used differently had the proffered warnings been given. <sup>[1]</sup>[Citations omitted] In the absence of evidence that a warning would have prevented the harm complained of by altering the plaintiff's conduct, the failure to warn cannot be deemed a proximate cause of the plaintiff's injury as a matter of law. [In accordance with procedure in a diversity of citizenship case, such as this one, the court cites Michigan case law as the basis for its legal interpretation.]

...

A manufacturer has a duty "to warn the purchasers or users of its product about dangers associated with intended use." Conversely, a manufacturer has no duty to warn of a danger arising from an unforeseeable misuse of its product. [Citation] Thus, whether a manufacturer

has a duty to warn depends on whether the use of the product and the injury sustained by it are foreseeable. *Gootee v. Colt Industries Inc.*, 712 F.2d 1057, 1065 (6th Cir. 1983); *Owens v. Allis-Chalmers Corp.*, 414 Mich. 413, 425, 326 N.W.2d 372 (1982). Whether a plaintiff's use of a product is foreseeable is a legal question to be resolved by the court. Trotter, *supra*. Whether the resulting injury is foreseeable is a question of fact for the jury. <sup>[2]</sup> *Thomas v. International Harvester Co.*, 57 Mich. App. 79, 225 N.W.2d 175 (1974).

In the instant action no reasonable jury could find that JJP's failure to warn of the flammability of cotton batting was a proximate cause of plaintiffs' injuries because plaintiffs failed to offer any evidence to establish that a flammability warning on JJP's cotton batting would have dissuaded them from using the product in the manner that they did.

Plaintiffs repeatedly stated in their response brief that plaintiff Susan Ferlito testified that "she would never again use cotton batting to make a costume...However, a review of the trial transcript reveals that plaintiff Susan Ferlito never testified that she would never again use cotton batting to make a costume. More importantly, the transcript contains no statement by plaintiff Susan Ferlito that a flammability warning on defendant JJP's product would have dissuaded her from using the cotton batting to construct the costume in the first place. At oral argument counsel for plaintiffs conceded that there was no testimony during the trial that either plaintiff Susan Ferlito or her husband, plaintiff Frank J. Ferlito, would have acted any different if there had been a flammability warning on the product's package. The absence of such testimony is fatal to plaintiffs' case; for without it, plaintiffs have failed to prove proximate cause, one of the essential elements of their negligence claim.

In addition, both plaintiffs testified that they knew that cotton batting burns when it is exposed to flame. Susan Ferlito testified that she knew at the time she purchased the cotton batting that it would burn if exposed to an open flame. Frank Ferlito testified that he knew at the time he appeared at the Halloween party that cotton batting would burn if exposed to an open flame. His additional testimony that he would not have intentionally put a flame to the cotton batting shows that he recognized the risk of injury of which he claims JJP should have warned. Because both plaintiffs were already aware of the danger, a warning by JJP would have been superfluous.

Therefore, a reasonable jury could not have found that JJP's failure to provide a warning was a proximate cause of plaintiffs' injuries.

The evidence in this case clearly demonstrated that neither the use to which plaintiffs put JJP's product nor the injuries arising from that use were foreseeable. Susan Ferlito testified that the idea for the costume was hers alone. As described on the product's package, its intended uses are for cleansing, applying medications, and infant care. Plaintiffs' showing that the product may be used on occasion in classrooms for decorative purposes failed to demonstrate the foreseeability of an adult male encapsulating himself from head to toe in cotton batting and then lighting up a cigarette.

ORDER

NOW, THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that defendant JJP's motion for judgment notwithstanding the verdict is GRANTED.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the judgment entered November 2, 1989, is SET ASIDE.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the clerk will enter a judgment in favor of the defendant JJP.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. The opinion focuses on proximate cause. As we will see in [Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort Law"](#), a negligence case cannot be won unless the plaintiff shows that the defendant has breached a duty and that the defendant's breach has actually and proximately caused the damage complained of. What, exactly, is the alleged breach of duty by the defendant here?
2. Explain why Judge Gadola reasoning that JJP had no duty to warn in this case. After this case, would they then have a duty to warn, knowing that someone might use their product in this way?

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[1] By "prima facie case," the court means a case in which the plaintiff has presented all the basic elements of the cause of action alleged in the complaint. If one or more elements of proof are missing, then the plaintiff has fallen short of establishing a prima facie case, and the case should be dismissed (usually on the basis of a directed verdict).

[2] Note the division of labor here: questions of law are for the judge, while questions of “fact” are for the jury. Here, “foreseeability” is a fact question, while the judge retains authority over questions of law. The division between questions of fact and questions of law is not an easy one, however.

## Chapter 4

# Constitutional Law and US Commerce

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Explain the historical importance and basic structure of the US Constitution.
2. Know what judicial review is and what it represents in terms of the separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.
3. Locate the source of congressional power to regulate the economy under the Constitution, and explain what limitations there are to the reach of congressional power over interstate commerce.
4. Describe the different phases of congressional power over commerce, as adjudged by the US Supreme Court over time.
5. Explain what power the states retain over commerce, and how the Supreme Court may sometimes limit that power.
6. Describe how the Supreme Court, under the supremacy clause of the Constitution, balances state and federal laws that may be wholly or partly in conflict.
7. Explain how the Bill of Rights relates to business activities in the United States.

The US Constitution is the foundation for all of US law. Business and commerce are directly affected by the words, meanings, and interpretations of the Constitution. Because it speaks in general terms, its provisions raise all kinds of issues for scholars, lawyers, judges, politicians, and commentators. For example, arguments still rage over the nature and meaning of “federalism,” the concept that there is shared governance between the states and the federal government. The US Supreme Court is the ultimate arbiter of those disputes, and as such it has a unique role in the legal system. It has assumed the power of judicial review, unique among federal systems globally, through which it can strike down federal or state statutes that it believes violate the Constitution and can even void the president’s executive orders if they are

contrary to the Constitution’s language. No knowledgeable citizen or businessperson can afford to be ignorant of its basic provisions.

## 4.1 Basic Aspects of the US Constitution

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the American values that are reflected in the US Constitution.
2. Know what federalism means, along with separation of powers.
3. Explain the process of amending the Constitution and why judicial review is particularly significant.

### The Constitution as Reflecting American Values

In the US, the one document to which all public officials and military personnel pledge their unswerving allegiance is the Constitution. If you serve, you are asked to “support and defend” the Constitution “against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” The oath usually includes a statement that you swear that this oath is taken freely, honestly, and without “any purpose of evasion.” This loyalty oath may be related to a time—fifty years ago—when “un-American” activities were under investigation in Congress and the press; the fear of communism (as antithetical to American values and principles) was paramount. As you look at the Constitution and how it affects the legal environment of business, please consider what basic values it may impart to us and what makes it uniquely American and worth defending “against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

In Article I, the Constitution places the legislature first and prescribes the ways in which representatives are elected to public office. Article I balances influence in the federal legislature between large states and small states by creating a Senate in which the smaller states (by population) as well as the larger states have two votes. In Article II, the Constitution sets forth the powers and responsibilities of the branch—the presidency—and makes it clear that the president should be the commander in chief of the armed forces. Article II also gives states rather than individuals (through the Electoral College) a clear role in the election process. Article III creates the federal judiciary, and the Bill of Rights, adopted in 1791, makes clear that



individual rights must be preserved against activities of the federal government. In general, the idea of rights is particularly strong.

The Constitution itself speaks of rights in fairly general terms, and the judicial interpretation of various rights has been in flux. The “right” of a person to own another person was notably affirmed by the Supreme Court in the *Dred Scott* decision in 1857.<sup>[1]</sup> The “right” of a child to freely contract for long, tedious hours of work was upheld by the court in *Hammer v.*

*Dagenhart* in 1918. Both decisions were later repudiated, just as the decision that a woman has a “right” to an abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy could later be repudiated if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned by the Supreme Court.<sup>[2]</sup>

## **General Structure of the Constitution**

Look at the Constitution. Notice that there are seven articles, starting with Article I (legislative powers), Article II (executive branch), and Article III (judiciary). Notice that there is no separate article for administrative agencies. The Constitution also declares that it is “the supreme Law of the Land” (Article VI). Following Article VII are the ten amendments adopted in 1791 that are referred to as the Bill of Rights. Notice also that in 1868, a new amendment, the Fourteenth, was adopted, requiring states to provide “due process” and “equal protection of the laws” to citizens of the United States.

## **Federalism**

The partnership created in the Constitution between the states and the federal government is called federalism. The Constitution is a document created by the states in which certain powers are delegated to the national government, and other powers are reserved to the states. This is made explicit in the Tenth Amendment.

## **Separation of Powers and Judicial Review**

Because the Founding Fathers wanted to ensure that no single branch of the government, especially the executive branch, would be ascendant over the others, they created various checks and balances to ensure that each of the three principal branches had ways to limit or modify the power of the others. This is known as the separation of powers. Thus the president retains veto power, but the House of Representatives is entrusted with the power to initiate spending bills.

Power sharing was evident in the basic design of Congress, the federal legislative branch. The basic power imbalance was between the large states (with greater population) and the smaller ones (such as Delaware). The smaller ones feared a loss of sovereignty if they could be outvoted by the larger ones, so the federal legislature was constructed to guarantee two Senate seats for every state, no matter how small. The Senate was also given great responsibility in ratifying treaties and judicial nominations. The net effect of this today is that senators from a very small number of states can block treaties and other important legislation. The power of small states is also magnified by the Senate's cloture rule, which currently requires sixty out of one hundred senators to vote to bring a bill to the floor for an up-or-down vote.

Because the Constitution often speaks in general terms (with broad phrases such as "due process" and "equal protection"), reasonable people have disagreed as to how those terms apply in specific cases. The United States is unique among industrialized democracies in having a Supreme Court that reserves for itself that exclusive power to interpret what the Constitution means. The famous case of *Marbury v. Madison* began that tradition in 1803, when the Supreme Court had marginal importance in the new republic. The decision in *Bush v. Gore*, decided in December of 2000, illustrates the power of the court to shape our destiny as a nation. In that case, the court overturned a ruling by the Florida Supreme Court regarding the way to proceed on a recount of the Florida vote for the presidency. The court's ruling was purportedly based on the "equal protection of the laws" provision in the Fourteenth Amendment.

From *Marbury* to the present day, the Supreme Court has articulated the view that the US Constitution sets the framework for all other US laws, whether statutory or judicially created. Thus any statute (or portion thereof) or legal ruling (judicial or administrative) in conflict with the Constitution is not enforceable. And as the *Bush v. Gore* decision indicates, the states are not entirely free to do what they might choose; their own sovereignty is limited by their union with the other states in a federal sovereign.

If the Supreme Court makes a "bad decision" as to what the Constitution means, it is not easily overturned. Either the court must change its mind (which it seldom does) or two-thirds of Congress and three-fourths of the states must make an amendment (Article V).

Because the Supreme Court has this power of judicial review, there have been many arguments about how it should be exercised and what kind of “philosophy” a Supreme Court justice should have. President Richard Nixon often said that a Supreme Court justice should “strictly construe” the Constitution and not add to its language. Finding law in the Constitution was “judicial activism” rather than “judicial restraint.” The general philosophy behind the call for “strict constructionist” justices is that legislatures make laws in accord with the wishes of the majority, and so unelected judges should not make law according to their own views and values. Nixon had in mind the 1960s Warren court, which “found” rights in the Constitution that were not specifically mentioned—the right of privacy, for example. In later years, critics of the Rehnquist court would charge that it “found” rights that were not specifically mentioned, such as the right of states to be free from federal antidiscrimination laws. See, for example, *Kimel v. Florida Board of Regents*, or the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* case (Section 4.6.5), which held that corporations are “persons” with “free speech rights” that include spending unlimited amounts of money in campaign donations and political advocacy. <sup>[3]</sup>

Because *Roe v. Wade* has been so controversial, this chapter includes a seminal case on “the right of privacy,” *Griswold v. Connecticut*, Section 4.6.1. Was the court was correct in recognizing a “right of privacy” in *Griswold*? This may not seem like a “business case,” but consider: the manufacture and distribution of birth control devices is a highly profitable (and legal) business in every US state. Moreover, *Griswold* illustrates another important and much-debated concept in US constitutional law: substantive due process (see Section 4.5.3 “Fifth Amendment”). The problem of judicial review and its proper scope is brought into sharp focus in the abortion controversy. Abortion became a lucrative service business after *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973. That has gradually changed, with state laws that have limited rather than overruled *Roe v. Wade* and with persistent antiabortion protests, killings of abortion doctors, and efforts to publicize the human nature of the fetuses being aborted. The key here is to understand that there is no *explicit* mention in the Constitution of any right of privacy. As Justice Harry Blackmun argued in his majority opinion in *Roe v. Wade*,

*The Constitution does not explicitly mention any right of privacy. In a line of decisions, however, the Court has recognized that a right of personal privacy or a*

*guarantee of certain areas or zones of privacy, does exist under the Constitution....[T]hey also make it clear that the right has some extension to activities relating to marriage...procreation...contraception...family relationships...and child rearing and education....The right of privacy...is broad enough to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy.*

In short, justices interpreting the Constitution wield quiet yet enormous power through judicial review. In deciding that the right of privacy applied to a woman's decision to abort in the first trimester, the Supreme Court did not act on the basis of a popular mandate or clear and unequivocal language in the Constitution, and it made illegal any state or federal legislative or executive action contrary to its interpretation. Only a constitutional amendment or the court's repudiation of *Roe v. Wade* as a precedent could change that interpretation.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The Constitution gives voice to the idea that people have basic rights and that a civilian president is also the commander in chief of the armed forces. It gives instructions as to how the various branches of government must share power and also tries to balance power between the states and the federal government. It does not expressly allow for judicial review, but the Supreme Court's ability to declare what laws are (or are not) constitutional has given the judicial branch a kind of power not seen in other industrialized democracies.

#### EXERCISES

1. Suppose the Supreme Court declares that Congress and the president cannot authorize the indefinite detention of terrorist suspects without a trial of some sort, whether military or civilian. Suppose also that the people of the United States favor such indefinite detention and that Congress wants to pass a law rebuking the court's decision. What kind of law would have to be passed, by what institutions, and by what voting percentages?
2. When does a prior decision of the Supreme Court deserve overturning? Name one decision of the Supreme Court that you think is no longer "good law." Does the court have to wait one hundred years to overturn its prior case precedents?

[1] In *Scott v. Sanford* (the Dred Scott decision), the court states that Scott should remain a slave, that as a slave he is not a citizen of the United States and thus not eligible to bring suit in a federal court, and that as a slave he is personal property and thus has never been free.

[2] *Roe v. Wade*, 410 US 113 (1973).

[3] *Kimel v. Florida Board of Regents*, 528 US 62 (2000).

## 4.2 The Commerce Clause

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Name the specific clause through which Congress has the power to regulate commerce. What, specifically, does this clause say?
2. Explain how early decisions of the Supreme Court interpreted the scope of the commerce clause and how that impacted the legislative proposals and programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression.
3. Describe both the wider use of the commerce clause from World War II through the 1990s and the limitations the Supreme Court imposed in *Lopez* and other cases.

First, turn to Article I, Section 8. The commerce clause gives Congress the exclusive power to make laws relating to foreign trade and commerce and to commerce among the various states. Most of the federally created legal environment springs from this one clause: if Congress is not authorized in the Constitution to make certain laws, then it acts unconstitutionally and its actions may be ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Lately, the Supreme Court has not been shy about ruling acts of Congress unconstitutional.

Here are the first five parts of Article I, Section 8, which sets forth the powers of the federal legislature. The commerce clause is in boldface. It is short, but most federal legislation affecting business depends on this very clause:

### **Section 8**

*[Clause 1] The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States; but all Duties, Imposts and Excises shall be uniform throughout the United States;*

*[Clause 2] To borrow Money on the credit of the United States;*

***[Clause 3] To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes;***

*[Clause 4] To establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization, and uniform Laws on the subject of Bankruptcies throughout the United States;*

*[Clause 5] To coin Money, regulate the Value thereof, and of foreign Coin, and fix the Standard of Weights and Measures;*

### **Early Commerce Clause Cases**

For many years, the Supreme Court was very strict in applying the commerce clause: Congress could only use it to legislate aspects of the movement of goods from one state to another. Anything else was deemed local rather than national. For example, in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, decided in 1918, a 1916 federal statute had barred transportation in interstate commerce of goods produced in mines or factories employing children under fourteen or employing children fourteen and above for more than eight hours a day. A complaint was filed in the US District Court for the Western District of North Carolina by a father in his own behalf and on behalf of his two minor sons, one under the age of fourteen years and the other between fourteen and sixteen years, who were employees in a cotton mill in Charlotte, North Carolina. The father's lawsuit asked the court to enjoin (block) the enforcement of the act of Congress intended to prevent interstate commerce in the products of child labor.

The Supreme Court saw the issue as whether Congress had the power under the commerce clause to control interstate shipment of goods made by children under the age of fourteen. The court found that Congress did not. The court cited several cases that had considered what interstate commerce could be constitutionally regulated by Congress. In *Hipolite Egg Co. v. United States*, the Supreme Court had sustained the power of Congress to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act, which prohibited the introduction into the states by means of interstate commerce impure foods and drugs.<sup>[1]</sup> In *Hoke v. United States*, the Supreme Court had sustained the constitutionality of the so-called White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, whereby the transportation of a woman in interstate commerce for the purpose of prostitution was forbidden. In that case, the court said that Congress had the power to protect the channels of

interstate commerce: “If the facility of interstate transportation can be taken away from the demoralization of lotteries, the debasement of obscene literature, the contagion of diseased cattle or persons, the impurity of food and drugs, the like facility can be taken away from the systematic enticement to, and the enslavement in prostitution and debauchery of women, and, more insistently, of girls.” [2]

In each of those instances, the Supreme Court said, “[T]he use of interstate transportation was necessary to the accomplishment of harmful results.” In other words, although the power over interstate transportation was to regulate, that could only be accomplished by prohibiting the use of the facilities of interstate commerce to effect the evil intended. But in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, that essential element was lacking. The law passed by Congress aimed to standardize among all the states the ages at which children could be employed in mining and manufacturing, while the goods themselves are harmless. Once the labor is done and the articles have left the factory, the “labor of their production is over, and the mere fact that they were intended for interstate commerce transportation does not make their production subject to federal control under the commerce power.”

In short, the early use of the commerce clause was limited to the movement of physical goods between states. Just because something might enter the channels of interstate commerce later on does not make it a fit subject for national regulation. The production of articles intended for interstate commerce is a matter of local regulation. The court therefore upheld the result from the district and circuit court of appeals; the application of the federal law was enjoined. Goods produced by children under the age of fourteen could be shipped anywhere in the United States without violating the federal law.

### **From the New Deal to the New Frontier and the Great Society:1930s–1970**

During the global depression of the 1930s, the US economy saw jobless rates of a third of all workers, and President Roosevelt’s New Deal program required more active federal legislation. Included in the New Deal program was the recognition of a “right” to form labor unions without undue interference from employers. Congress created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in 1935 to investigate and to enjoin employer practices that violated this right.

In *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation*, a union dispute with management at a large steel-producing facility near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, became a court case. In this case, the NLRB had charged the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation with discriminating against employees who were union members. The company's position was that the law authorizing the NLRB was unconstitutional, exceeding Congress's powers. The court held that the act was narrowly constructed so as to regulate industrial activities that had the potential to restrict interstate commerce. The earlier decisions under the commerce clause to the effect that labor relations had only an indirect effect on commerce were effectively reversed. Since the ability of employees to engage in collective bargaining (one activity protected by the act) is "an essential condition of industrial peace," the national government was justified in penalizing corporations engaging in interstate commerce that "refuse to confer and negotiate" with their workers. This was, however, a close decision, and the switch of one justice made this ruling possible. Without this switch, the New Deal agenda would have been effectively derailed.

### **The Substantial Effects Doctrine: World War II to the 1990s**

Subsequent to *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation*, Congress and the courts generally accepted that even modest impacts on interstate commerce were "reachable" by federal legislation. For example, the case of *Wickard v. Filburn*, from 1942, represents a fairly long reach for Congress in regulating what appear to be very local economic decisions ([Section 4.6.2](#)). *Wickard* established that "substantial effects" in interstate commerce could be very local indeed! But commerce clause challenges to federal legislation continued. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was challenged on the ground that Congress lacked the power under the commerce clause to regulate what was otherwise fairly local conduct. For example, Title II of the act prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations (such as hotels, motels, and restaurants), leading to the famous case of *Katzenbach v. McClung* (1964).

Ollie McClung's barbeque place in Birmingham, Alabama, allowed "colored" people to buy takeout at the back of the restaurant but not to sit down with "white" folks inside. The US attorney sought a court order to require Ollie to serve all races and colors, but Ollie resisted on commerce clause grounds: the federal government had no business regulating a purely local establishment. Indeed, Ollie did not advertise nationally, or even regionally, and had customers



only from the local area. But the court found that some 42 percent of the supplies for Ollie's restaurant had moved in the channels of interstate commerce. This was enough to sustain federal regulation based on the commerce clause. <sup>[3]</sup>

For nearly thirty years following, it was widely assumed that Congress could almost always find some interstate commerce connection for any law it might pass. It thus came as something of a shock in 1995 when the Rehnquist court decided *U.S. v. Lopez*. Lopez had been convicted under a federal law that prohibited possession of firearms within 1,000 feet of a school. The law was part of a twenty-year trend (roughly 1970 to 1990) for senators and congressmen to pass laws that were tough on crime. Lopez's lawyer admitted that Lopez had had a gun within 1,000 feet of a San Antonio school yard but challenged the law itself, arguing that Congress exceeded its authority under the commerce clause in passing this legislation. The US government's Solicitor General argued on behalf of the Department of Justice to the Supreme Court that Congress was within its constitutional rights under the commerce clause because education of the future workforce was the foundation for a sound economy and because guns at or near school yards detracted from students' education. The court rejected this analysis, noting that with the government's analysis, an interstate commerce connection could be conjured from almost anything. Lopez went free because the law itself was unconstitutional, according to the court. Congress made no attempt to pass similar legislation after the case was decided. But in passing subsequent legislation, Congress was often careful to make a record as to why it believed it was addressing a problem that related to interstate commerce. In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), having held hearings to establish why violence against women on a local level would impair interstate commerce. In 1994, while enrolled at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), Christy Brzonkala alleged that Antonio Morrison and James Crawford, both students and varsity football players at Virginia Tech, had raped her. In 1995, Brzonkala filed a complaint against Morrison and Crawford under Virginia Tech's sexual assault policy. After a hearing, Morrison was found guilty of sexual assault and sentenced to immediate suspension for two semesters. Crawford was not punished. A second hearing again found Morrison guilty. After an appeal through the university's administrative system, Morrison's punishment was set aside, as it was found to be "excessive." Ultimately, Brzonkala

dropped out of the university. Brzonkala then sued Morrison, Crawford, and Virginia Tech in federal district court, alleging that Morrison's and Crawford's attack violated 42 USC Section 13981, part of the VAWA), which provides a federal civil remedy for the victims of gender-motivated violence. Morrison and Crawford moved to dismiss Brzonkala's suit on the ground that Section 13981's civil remedy was unconstitutional. In dismissing the complaint, the district court found that that Congress lacked authority to enact Section 13981 under either the commerce clause or the Fourteenth Amendment, which Congress had explicitly identified as the sources of federal authority for the VAWA. Ultimately, the court of appeals affirmed, as did the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court held that Congress lacked the authority to enact a statute under the commerce clause or the Fourteenth Amendment because the statute did not regulate an activity that substantially affected interstate commerce nor did it redress harm caused by the state. Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist wrote for the court that "under our federal system that remedy must be provided by the Commonwealth of Virginia, and not by the United States." Dissenting, Justice Stephen G. Breyer argued that the majority opinion "illustrates the difficulty of finding a workable judicial Commerce Clause touchstone." Justice David H. Souter, dissenting, noted that VAWA contained a "mountain of data assembled by Congress...showing the effects of violence against women on interstate commerce."

The absence of a workable judicial commerce clause touchstone remains. In 1996, California voters passed the Compassionate Use Act, legalizing marijuana for medical use. California's law conflicted with the federal Controlled Substances Act (CSA), which banned possession of marijuana. After the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) seized doctor-prescribed marijuana from a patient's home, a group of medical marijuana users sued the DEA and US Attorney General John Ashcroft in federal district court.

The medical marijuana users argued that the CSA—which Congress passed using its constitutional power to regulate interstate commerce—exceeded Congress's commerce clause power. The district court ruled against the group, but the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed and ruled the CSA unconstitutional because it applied to medical marijuana use solely within one state. In doing so, the Ninth Circuit relied on *U.S. v. Lopez* (1995) and *U.S. v.*

*Morrison* (2000) to say that using medical marijuana did not “substantially affect” interstate commerce and therefore could not be regulated by Congress.

But by a 6–3 majority, the Supreme Court held that the commerce clause gave Congress authority to prohibit the local cultivation and use of marijuana, despite state law to the contrary. Justice John Paul Stevens argued that the court’s precedents established Congress’s commerce clause power to regulate purely local activities that are part of a “class of activities” with a substantial effect on interstate commerce. The majority argued that Congress could ban local marijuana use because it was part of such a class of activities: the national marijuana market. Local use affected supply and demand in the national marijuana market, making the regulation of intrastate use “essential” to regulating the drug’s national market.

Notice how similar this reasoning is to the court’s earlier reasoning in *Wickard v.*

*Filburn* (Section 4.6.2). In contrast, the court’s conservative wing was adamant that federal power had been exceeded. Justice Clarence Thomas’s dissent in *Gonzalez v. Raich* stated that Raich’s local cultivation and consumption of marijuana was not “Commerce...among the several States.” Representing the “originalist” view that the Constitution should mostly mean what the Founders meant it to mean, he also said that in the early days of the republic, it would have been unthinkable that Congress could prohibit the local cultivation, possession, and consumption of marijuana.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The commerce clause is the basis on which the federal government regulates interstate economic activity. The phrase “interstate commerce” has been subject to differing interpretations by the Supreme Court over the past one hundred years. There are certain matters that are essentially local or intrastate, but the range of federal involvement in local matters is still considerable.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why would Congress have power under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to require restaurants and hotels to not discriminate against interstate travelers on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin? Suppose the Holiday Restaurant near I-80 in Des Moines, Iowa, has a sign that says, “We reserve the right to refuse service to any Muslim or person of Middle Eastern descent.” Suppose also that the restaurant is very popular locally and that

only 40 percent of its patrons are travelers on I-80. Are the owners of the Holiday Restaurant in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964? What would happen if the owners resisted enforcement by claiming that Title II of the act (relating to “public accommodations” such as hotels, motels, and restaurants) was unconstitutional?

2. If the Supreme Court were to go back to the days of *Hammer v. Dagenhart* and rule that only goods and services involving interstate movement could be subject to federal law, what kinds of federal programs might be lacking a sound basis in the commerce clause? “Obamacare”? Medicare? Homeland security? Social Security? What other powers are granted to Congress under the Constitution to legislate for the general good of society?

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[1] *Hipolite Egg Co. v. United States*, 220 US 45 (1911).

[2] *Hoke v. United States*, 227 US 308 (1913).

[3] *Katzenbach v. McClung*, 379 US 294 (1964).

## 4.3 Dormant Commerce Clause

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand that when Congress does not exercise its powers under the commerce clause, the Supreme Court may still limit state legislation that discriminates against interstate commerce or places an undue burden on interstate commerce.
2. Distinguish between “discrimination” dormant-commerce-clause cases and “undue burden” dormant-commerce-clause cases.

Congress has the power to legislate under the commerce clause and often does legislate. For example, Congress might say that trucks moving on interstate highways must not be more than seventy feet in length. But if Congress does not exercise its powers and regulate in certain areas (such as the size and length of trucks on interstate highways), states may make their own rules. States may do so under the so-called historic police powers of states that were never yielded up to the federal government.

These police powers can be broadly exercised by states for purposes of health, education, welfare, safety, morals, and the environment. But the Supreme Court has reserved for itself the power to determine when state action is excessive, even when Congress has not used the commerce clause to regulate. This power is claimed to exist in the dormant commerce clause. There are two ways that a state may violate the dormant commerce clause. If a state passes a law that is an “undue burden” on interstate commerce or that “discriminates” against interstate commerce, it will be struck down. *Kassel v. Consolidated Freightways*, in [Section 4.7 "Summary and Exercises"](#), is an example of a case where Iowa imposed an undue burden on interstate commerce by prohibiting double trailers on its highways. <sup>[1]</sup> Iowa’s prohibition was judicially declared void when the Supreme Court judged it to be an undue burden.

Discrimination cases such as *Hunt v. Washington Apple Advertising Commission* ([Section 4.6 "Cases"](#)) pose a different standard. The court has been fairly inflexible here: if one state discriminates in its treatment of any article of commerce based on its state of origin, the court will strike down the law. For example, in *Oregon Waste Systems v. Department of Environmental Quality*, the state wanted to place a slightly higher charge on waste coming from out of state. <sup>[2]</sup> The state’s reasoning was that in-state residents had already contributed to roads and other infrastructure and that tipping fees at waste facilities should reflect the prior contributions of in-state companies and residents. Out-of-state waste handlers who wanted to use Oregon landfills objected and won their dormant commerce clause claim that Oregon’s law discriminated “on its face” against interstate commerce. Under the Supreme Court’s rulings, anything that moves in channels of interstate commerce is “commerce,” even if someone is paying to get rid of something instead of buying something.

Thus the states are bound by Supreme Court decisions under the dormant commerce clause to do nothing that differentiates between articles of commerce that originate from within the state from those that originate elsewhere. If Michigan were to let counties decide for themselves whether to take garbage from outside of the county or not, this could also be a discrimination based on a place of origin outside the state. (Suppose, for instance, each county were to decide not to take waste from outside the county; then all Michigan counties would effectively be excluding waste from outside of Michigan, which is discriminatory.) <sup>[3]</sup>

The Supreme Court probably would uphold any solid waste requirements that did not differentiate on the basis of origin. If, for example, all waste had to be inspected for specific hazards, then the law would apply equally to in-state and out-of-state garbage. Because this is the dormant commerce clause, Congress could still act (i.e., it could use its broad commerce clause powers) to say that states are free to keep out-of-state waste from coming into their own borders. But Congress has declined to do so. What follows is a statement from one of the US senators from Michigan, Carl Levin, in 2003, regarding the significant amounts of waste that were coming into Michigan from Toronto, Canada.

## Dealing with Unwelcome Waste

Senator Carl Levin, January 2003

*Michigan is facing an intolerable situation with regard to the importation of waste from other states and Canada.*

*Canada is the largest source of waste imports to Michigan. Approximately 65 truckloads of waste come in to Michigan per day from Toronto alone, and an estimated 110–130 trucks come in from Canada each day.*

*This problem isn't going to get any better. Ontario's waste shipments are growing as the Toronto area signs new contracts for waste disposal here and closes its two remaining landfills. At the beginning of 1999, the Toronto area was generating about 2.8 million tons of waste annually, about 700,000 tons of which were shipped to Michigan. By early this year, barring unforeseen developments, the entire 2.8 million tons will be shipped to Michigan for disposal.*

*Why can't Canada dispose of its trash in Canada? They say that after 20 years of searching they have not been able to find a suitable Ontario site for Toronto's garbage. Ontario has about 345,000 square miles compared to Michigan's 57,000 square miles. With six times the land mass, that argument is laughable.*

*The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality estimates that, for every five years of disposal of Canadian waste at the current usage volume, Michigan is losing a full year of landfill capacity. The environmental impacts on landfills, including*

*groundwater contamination, noise pollution and foul odors, are exacerbated by the significant increase in the use of our landfills from sources outside of Michigan. I have teamed up with Senator Stabenow and Congressman Dingell to introduce legislation that would strengthen our ability to stop shipments of waste from Canada. We have protections contained in a 17 year-old international agreement between the U.S. and Canada called the Agreement Concerning the Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Waste. The U.S. and Canada entered into this agreement in 1986 to allow the shipment of hazardous waste across the U.S./Canadian border for treatment, storage or disposal. In 1992, the two countries decided to add municipal solid waste to the agreement. To protect both countries, the agreement requires notification of shipments to the importing country and it also provides that the importing country may withdraw consent for shipments. Both reasons are evidence that these shipments were intended to be limited. However, the agreement's provisions have not been enforced by the United States.*

*Canada could not export waste to Michigan without the 1986 agreement, but the U.S. has not implemented the provisions that are designed to protect the people of Michigan. Although those of us that introduced this legislation believe that the Environmental Protection Agency has the authority to enforce this agreement, they have not done so. Our bill would require the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] to enforce the agreement.*

*In order to protect the health and welfare of the citizens of Michigan and our environment, we must consider the impact of the importation of trash on state and local recycling efforts, landfill capacity, air emissions, road deterioration resulting from increased vehicular traffic and public health and the environment.*

*Our bill would require the EPA to consider these factors in determining whether to accept imports of trash from Canada. It is my strong view that such a review should lead the EPA to say "no" to the status quo of trash imports.*

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Where Congress does not act pursuant to its commerce clause powers, the states are free to legislate on matters of commerce under their historic police powers. However, the Supreme Court has set limits on such powers. Specifically, states may not impose undue burdens on interstate commerce and may not discriminate against articles in interstate commerce.

## EXERCISES

1. Suppose that the state of New Jersey wishes to limit the amount of hazardous waste that enters into its landfills. The general assembly in New Jersey passes a law that specifically forbids any hazardous waste from entering into the state. All landfills are subject to tight regulations that will allow certain kinds of hazardous wastes originating in New Jersey to be put in New Jersey landfills but that impose significant criminal fines on landfill operators that accept out-of-state hazardous waste. The Baldessari Brothers Landfill in Linden, New Jersey, is fined for taking hazardous waste from a New York State transporter and appeals that ruling on the basis that New Jersey's law is unconstitutional. What is the result?
2. The state of Arizona determines through its legislature that trains passing through the state cannot be longer than seventy cars. There is some evidence that in Eastern US states longer trains pose some safety hazards. There is less evidence that long trains are a problem in Western states. Several major railroads find the Arizona legislation costly and burdensome and challenge the legislation after applied-for permits for longer trains are denied. What kind of dormant commerce clause challenge is this, and what would it take for the challenge to be successful?

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[1] *Kassell v. Consolidated Freightways*, 450 US 662 (1981).

[2] *Oregon Waste Systems v. Department of Environmental Quality*, 511 US 93 (1994).

[3] *Fort Gratiot Sanitary Landfill v. Michigan Dep't of Natural Resources*, 504 US 353 (1992).

## 4.4 Preemption: The Supremacy Clause

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES



1. Understand the role of the supremacy clause in the balance between state and federal power.
2. Give examples of cases where state legislation is preempted by federal law and cases where state legislation is not preempted by federal law.

When Congress does use its power under the commerce clause, it can expressly state that it wishes to have exclusive regulatory authority. For example, when Congress determined in the 1950s to promote nuclear power (“atoms for peace”), it set up the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and provided a limitation of liability for nuclear power plants in case of a nuclear accident. The states were expressly told to stay out of the business of regulating nuclear power or the movement of nuclear materials. Thus Rochester, Minnesota, or Berkeley, California, could declare itself a nuclear-free zone, but the federal government would have preempted such legislation. If Michigan wished to set safety standards at Detroit Edison’s Fermi II nuclear reactor that were more stringent than the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s standards, Michigan’s standards would be preempted and thus be void.

Even where Congress does not expressly preempt state action, such action may be impliedly preempted. States cannot constitutionally pass laws that interfere with the accomplishment of the purposes of the federal law. Suppose, for example, that Congress passes a comprehensive law that sets standards for foreign vessels to enter the navigable waters and ports of the United States. If a state creates a law that sets standards that conflict with the federal law or sets standards so burdensome that they interfere with federal law, the doctrine of **preemption** will (in accordance with the supremacy clause) void the state law or whatever parts of it are inconsistent with federal law.

But Congress can allow what might appear to be inconsistencies; the existence of federal statutory standards does not always mean that local and state standards cannot be more stringent. If California wants cleaner air or water than other states, it can set stricter standards—nothing in the Clean Water Act or Clean Air Act forbids the state from setting stricter pollution standards. As the auto industry well knows, California has set stricter standards for auto emissions. Since the 1980s, most automakers have made both a federal car and a California car,

because federal Clean Air Act emissions restrictions do not preempt more rigorous state standards.

Large industries and companies actually prefer regulation at the national level. It is easier for a large company or industry association to lobby in Washington, DC, than to lobby in fifty different states. Accordingly, industry often asks Congress to put preemptive language into its statutes. The tobacco industry is a case in point.

The cigarette warning legislation of the 1960s (where the federal government required warning labels on cigarette packages) effectively preempted state negligence claims based on failure to warn. When the family of a lifetime smoker who had died sued in New Jersey court, one cause of action was the company's failure to warn of the dangers of its product. The Supreme Court reversed the jury's award based on the federal preemption of failure to warn claims under state law. <sup>[1]</sup>

## The Supremacy Clause

### Article VI

*This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and the Judges in every State shall be bound thereby, any Thing in the Constitution or Laws of any State to the Contrary notwithstanding.*

The preemption doctrine derives from the supremacy clause of the Constitution, which states that the “Constitution and the Laws of the United States...shall be the supreme Law of the Land...any Thing in the Constitutions or Laws of any State to the Contrary notwithstanding.”

This means of course, that *any* federal law—even a regulation of a federal agency—would control over *any* conflicting state law.

Preemption can be either express or implied. When Congress chooses to expressly preempt state law, the only question for courts becomes determining whether the challenged state law is one that the federal law is intended to preempt. Implied preemption presents more difficult issues.

The court has to look beyond the express language of federal statutes to determine whether Congress has “occupied the field” in which the state is attempting to regulate, or whether a state

law directly conflicts with federal law, or whether enforcement of the state law might frustrate federal purposes.

Federal “occupation of the field” occurs, according to the court in *Pennsylvania v.*

*Nelson* (1956), when there is “no room” left for state regulation. Courts are to look to the pervasiveness of the federal scheme of regulation, the federal interest at stake, and the danger of frustration of federal goals in making the determination as to whether a challenged state law can stand.

In *Silkwood v. Kerr-McGee* (1984), the court, voting 5–4, found that a \$10 million punitive damages award (in a case litigated by famed attorney Gerry Spence) against a nuclear power plant was not impliedly preempted by federal law. Even though the court had recently held that state regulation of the safety aspects of a federally licensed nuclear power plant was preempted, the court drew a different conclusion with respect to Congress’s desire to displace state tort law—even though the tort actions might be premised on a violation of federal safety regulations.

*Cipollone v. Liggett Group* (1993) was a closely watched case concerning the extent of an express preemption provision in two cigarette labeling laws of the 1960s. The case was a wrongful death action brought against tobacco companies on behalf of Rose Cipollone, a lung cancer victim who had started smoking cigarette in the 1940s. The court considered the preemptive effect on state law of a provision that stated, “No requirement based on smoking and health shall be imposed under state law with respect to the advertising and promotion of cigarettes.” The court concluded that several types of state tort actions were preempted by the provision but allowed other types to go forward.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

In cases of conflicts between state and federal law, federal law will preempt (or control) state law because of the supremacy clause. Preemption can be express or implied. In cases where preemption is implied, the court usually finds that compliance with both state and federal law is not possible or that a federal regulatory scheme is comprehensive (i.e., “occupies the field”) and should not be modified by state actions.

#### EXERCISES

1. For many years, the United States engaged in discussions with friendly nations as to the reciprocal use of ports and harbors. These discussions led to various multilateral agreements

between the nations as to the configuration of oceangoing vessels and how they would be piloted. At the same time, concern over oil spills in Puget Sound led the state of Washington to impose fairly strict standards on oil tankers and requirements for the training of oil tanker pilots. In addition, Washington's state law imposed many other requirements that went above and beyond agreed-upon requirements in the international agreements negotiated by the federal government. Are the Washington state requirements preempted by federal law?

2. The Federal Arbitration Act of 1925 requires that all contracts for arbitration be treated as any other contract at common law. Suppose that the state of Alabama wishes to protect its citizens from a variety of arbitration provisions that they might enter into unknowingly. Thus the legislation provides that all predispute arbitration clauses be in bold print, that they be of twelve-point font or larger, that they be clearly placed within the first two pages of any contract, and that they have a separate signature line where the customer, client, or patient acknowledges having read, understood, and signed the arbitration clause in addition to any other signatures required on the contract. The legislation does preserve the right of consumers to litigate in the event of a dispute arising with the product or service provider; that is, with this legislation, consumers will not unknowingly waive their right to a trial at common law. Is the Alabama law preempted by the Federal Arbitration Act?

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[1] *Cippolone v. Liggett Group*, 505 US 504 (1993).

## 4.5 Business and the Bill of Rights

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand and describe which articles in the Bill of Rights apply to business activities and how they apply.
2. Explain the application of the Fourteenth Amendment—including the due process clause and the equal protection clause—to various rights enumerated in the original Bill of Rights.

We have already seen the Fourteenth Amendment's application in *Burger King v. Rudzewicz* (Section 3.9 "Cases"). In that case, the court considered whether it was

constitutionally correct for a court to assert personal jurisdiction over a nonresident. The states cannot constitutionally award a judgment against a nonresident if doing so would offend traditional notions of fair play and substantial justice. Even if the state's long-arm statute would seem to allow such a judgment, other states should not give it full faith and credit (see Article V of the Constitution). In short, a state's long-arm statute cannot confer personal jurisdiction that the state cannot constitutionally claim.

The Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments to the Constitution) was originally meant to apply to federal actions only. During the twentieth century, the court began to apply selected rights to state action as well. So, for example, federal agents were prohibited from using evidence seized in violation of the Fourth Amendment, but state agents were not, until *Mapp v. Ohio* (1960), when the court applied the guarantees (rights) of the Fourth Amendment to state action as well. In this and in similar cases, the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause was the basis for the court's action. The due process clause commanded that states provide due process in cases affecting the life, liberty, or property of US citizens, and the court saw in this command certain "fundamental guarantees" that states would have to observe. Over the years, most of the important guarantees in the Bill of Rights came to apply to state as well as federal action. The court refers to this process as selective incorporation.

Here are some very basic principles to remember:

1. The guarantees of the Bill of Rights apply *only* to state and federal government action. They do not limit what a company or person in the private sector may do. For example, states may not impose censorship on the media or limit free speech in a way that offends the First Amendment, but your boss (in the private sector) may order you not to talk to the media.
2. In some cases, a private company may be regarded as participating in "state action." For example, a private defense contractor that gets 90 percent of its business from the federal government has been held to be public for purposes of enforcing the constitutional right to free speech (the company had a rule barring its employees from speaking out in public against its corporate position). It has even been argued that public regulation of private activity is sufficient to convert the private into public activity, thus subjecting it to the requirements of due process. But the Supreme Court rejected this extreme view in 1974 when it refused to require private

power companies, regulated by the state, to give customers a hearing before cutting off electricity for failure to pay the bill. <sup>[1]</sup>

3. States have rights, too. While “states rights” was a battle cry of Southern states before the Civil War, the question of what balance to strike between state sovereignty and federal union has never been simple. In *Kimel v. Florida*, for example, the Supreme Court found in the words of the Eleventh Amendment a basis for declaring that states may not have to obey certain federal statutes.

## First Amendment

In part, the First Amendment states that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” The Founding Fathers believed that democracy would work best if people (and the press) could talk or write freely, without governmental interference. But the First Amendment was also not intended to be as absolute as it sounded. Oliver Wendell Holmes’s famous dictum that the law does not permit you to shout “Fire!” in a crowded theater has seldom been answered, “But why not?” And no one in 1789 thought that defamation laws (torts for slander and libel) had been made unconstitutional. Moreover, because the apparent purpose of the First Amendment was to make sure that the nation had a continuing, vigorous debate over matters political, political speech has been given the highest level of protection over such other forms of speech as (1) “commercial speech,” (2) speech that can and should be limited by reasonable “time, place, and manner” restrictions, or (3) obscene speech.

Because of its higher level of protection, political speech can be false, malicious, mean-spirited, or even a pack of lies. A public official in the United States must be prepared to withstand all kinds of false accusations and cannot succeed in an action for defamation unless the defendant has acted with “malice” and “reckless disregard” of the truth. Public figures, such as CEOs of the largest US banks, must also be prepared to withstand accusations that are false. In any defamation action, truth is a defense, but a defamation action brought by a public figure or public official must prove that the defendant not only has his facts wrong but also lies to the public in a malicious way with reckless disregard of the truth. Celebrities such as Lindsay Lohan and Jon Stewart have the same burden to go forward with a defamation action. It is for this reason that the *National Enquirer* writes exclusively about public figures, public officials, and

celebrities; it is possible to say many things that aren't completely true and still have the protection of the First Amendment.

Political speech is so highly protected that the court has recognized the right of people to support political candidates through campaign contributions and thus promote the particular viewpoints and speech of those candidates. Fearing the influence of money on politics, Congress has from time to time placed limitations on corporate contributions to political campaigns. But the Supreme Court has had mixed reactions over time. Initially, the court recognized the First Amendment right of a corporation to donate money, subject to certain limits. <sup>[2]</sup> In another case, *Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce* (1990), the Michigan Campaign Finance Act prohibited corporations from using treasury money for independent expenditures to support or oppose candidates in elections for state offices. But a corporation could make such expenditures if it set up an independent fund designated solely for political purposes. The law was passed on the assumption that “the unique legal and economic characteristics of corporations necessitate some regulation of their political expenditures to avoid corruption or the appearance of corruption.”

The Michigan Chamber of Commerce wanted to support a candidate for Michigan's House of Representatives by using general funds to sponsor a newspaper advertisement and argued that as a nonprofit organization, it was not really like a business firm. The court disagreed and upheld the Michigan law. Justice Marshall found that the chamber was akin to a business group, given its activities, linkages with community business leaders, and high percentage of members (over 75 percent) that were business corporations. Furthermore, Justice Marshall found that the statute was narrowly crafted and implemented to achieve the important goal of maintaining integrity in the political process. But as you will see in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* ([Section 4.6 "Cases"](#)), *Austin* was overruled; corporations are recognized as “persons” with First Amendment political speech rights that cannot be impaired by Congress or the states without some compelling governmental interest with restrictions on those rights that are “narrowly tailored.”

## Fourth Amendment

The Fourth Amendment says, “all persons shall be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects from unreasonable searches and seizures, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, before a magistrate and upon Oath, specifically describing the persons to be searched and places to be seized.”

The court has read the Fourth Amendment to prohibit only those government searches or seizures that are “unreasonable.” Because of this, businesses that are in an industry that is “closely regulated” can be searched more frequently and can be searched without a warrant. In one case, an auto parts dealer at a junkyard was charged with receiving stolen auto parts. Part of his defense was to claim that the search that found incriminating evidence was unconstitutional. But the court found the search reasonable, because the dealer was in a “closely regulated industry.”

In the 1980s, Dow Chemical objected to an overflight by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA had rented an airplane to fly over the Midland, Michigan, Dow plant, using an aerial mapping camera to photograph various pipes, ponds, and machinery that were not covered by a roof. Because the court’s precedents allowed governmental intrusions into “open fields,” the EPA search was ruled constitutional. Because the literal language of the Fourth Amendment protected “persons, houses, papers, and effects,” anything searched by the government in “open fields” was reasonable. (The court’s opinion suggested that if Dow had really wanted privacy from governmental intrusion, it could have covered the pipes and machinery that were otherwise outside and in open fields.)

Note again that constitutional guarantees like the Fourth Amendment apply to governmental action. Your employer or any private enterprise is not bound by constitutional limits. For example, if drug testing of all employees every week is done by government agency, the employees may have a cause of action to object based on the Fourth Amendment. However, if a private employer begins the same kind of routine drug testing, employees have no constitutional arguments to make; they can simply leave that employer, or they may pursue whatever statutory or common-law remedies are available.

## **Fifth Amendment**



The Fifth Amendment states, “No person shall be...deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.”

The Fifth Amendment has three principal aspects: procedural due process, the takings clause, and substantive due process. In terms of procedural due process, the amendment prevents government from arbitrarily taking the life of a criminal defendant. In civil lawsuits, it is also constitutionally essential that the proceedings be fair. This is why, for example, the defendant in *Burger King v. Rudzewicz* had a serious constitutional argument, even though he lost.

The takings clause of the Fifth Amendment ensures that the government does not take private property without just compensation. In the international setting, governments that take private property engage in what is called expropriation. The standard under customary international law is that when governments do that, they must provide prompt, adequate, and effective compensation. This does not always happen, especially where foreign owners' property is being expropriated. The guarantees of the Fifth Amendment (incorporated against state action by the Fourteenth Amendment) are available to property owners where state, county, or municipal government uses the power of eminent domain to take private property for public purposes. Just what is a public purpose is a matter of some debate. For example, if a city were to condemn economically viable businesses or neighborhoods to construct a baseball stadium with public money to entice a private enterprise (the baseball team) to stay, is a public purpose being served?

In *Kelo v. City of New London*, Mrs. Kelo and other residents fought the city of New London, in its attempt to use powers of eminent domain to create an industrial park and recreation area that would have Pfizer & Co. as a principal tenant.<sup>[3]</sup> The city argued that increasing its tax base was a sufficient public purpose. In a very close decision, the Supreme Court determined that New London's actions did not violate the takings clause. However, political reactions in various states resulted in a great deal of new state legislation that would limit the scope of public purpose in eminent domain takings and provide additional compensation to property owners in many cases.

In addition to the takings clause and aspects of procedural due process, the Fifth Amendment is also the source of what is called substantive due process. During the first third of the twentieth century, the Supreme Court often nullified state and federal laws using substantive due process. In 1905, for example, in *Lochner v. New York*, the Supreme Court voided a New York statute that limited the number of hours that bakers could work in a single week. New York had passed the law to protect the health of employees, but the court found that this law interfered with the basic constitutional right of private parties to freely contract with one another. Over the next thirty years, dozens of state and federal laws were struck down that aimed to improve working conditions, secure social welfare, or establish the rights of unions. However, in 1934, during the Great Depression, the court reversed itself and began upholding the kinds of laws it had struck down earlier.

Since then, the court has employed a two-tiered analysis of substantive due process claims. Under the first tier, legislation on economic matters, employment relations, and other business affairs is subject to minimal judicial scrutiny. This means that a law will be overturned only if it serves no rational government purpose. Under the second tier, legislation concerning fundamental liberties is subject to “heightened judicial scrutiny,” meaning that a law will be invalidated unless it is “narrowly tailored to serve a significant government purpose.”

The Supreme Court has identified two distinct categories of fundamental liberties. The first category includes most of the liberties expressly enumerated in the Bill of Rights. Through a process known as selective incorporation, the court has interpreted the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to bar states from denying their residents the most important freedoms guaranteed in the first ten amendments to the federal Constitution. Only the Third Amendment right (against involuntary quartering of soldiers) and the Fifth Amendment right to be indicted by a grand jury have not been made applicable to the states. Because these rights are still not applicable to state governments, the Supreme Court is often said to have “selectively incorporated” the Bill of Rights into the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The second category of fundamental liberties includes those liberties that are not expressly stated in the Bill of Rights but that can be seen as essential to the concepts of freedom and equality in a democratic society. These unstated liberties come from Supreme Court precedents,

common law, moral philosophy, and deeply rooted traditions of US legal history. The Supreme Court has stressed that the word *liberty* cannot be defined by a definitive list of rights; rather, it must be viewed as a rational continuum of freedom through which every aspect of human behavior is protected from arbitrary impositions and random restraints. In this regard, as the Supreme Court has observed, the due process clause protects abstract liberty interests, including the right to personal autonomy, bodily integrity, self-dignity, and self-determination.

These liberty interests often are grouped to form a general right to privacy, which was first recognized in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (Section 4.6.1), where the Supreme Court struck down a state statute forbidding married adults from using, possessing, or distributing contraceptives on the ground that the law violated the sanctity of the marital relationship. According to Justice Douglas's plurality opinion, this penumbra of privacy, though not expressly mentioned in the Bill of Rights, must be protected to establish a buffer zone or breathing space for those freedoms that are constitutionally enumerated.

But substantive due process has seen fairly limited use since the 1930s. During the 1990s, the Supreme Court was asked to recognize a general right to die under the doctrine of substantive due process. Although the court stopped short of establishing such a far-reaching right, certain patients may exercise a constitutional liberty to hasten their deaths under a narrow set of circumstances. In *Cruzan v. Missouri Department of Health*, the Supreme Court ruled that the due process clause guarantees the right of competent adults to make advanced directives for the withdrawal of life-sustaining measures should they become incapacitated by a disability that leaves them in a persistent vegetative state.<sup>[4]</sup> Once it has been established by clear and convincing evidence that a mentally incompetent and persistently vegetative patient made such a prior directive, a spouse, parent, or other appropriate guardian may seek to terminate any form of artificial hydration or nutrition.

### **Fourteenth Amendment: Due Process and Equal Protection Guarantees**

The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) requires that states treat citizens of other states with due process. This can be either an issue of procedural due process (as in Section 3.9 "Cases", *Burger King v. Rudzewicz*) or an issue of substantive due process. For substantive due process, consider what happened in an Alabama court not too long ago.<sup>[5]</sup>

The plaintiff, Dr. Ira Gore, bought a new BMW for \$40,000 from a dealer in Alabama. He later discovered that the vehicle's exterior had been slightly damaged in transit from Europe and had therefore been repainted by the North American distributor prior to his purchase. The vehicle was, by best estimates, worth about 10 percent less than he paid for it. The distributor, BMW of North America, had routinely sold slightly damaged cars as brand new if the damage could be fixed for less than 3 percent of the cost of the car. In the trial, Dr. Gore sought \$4,000 in compensatory damages and also punitive damages. The Alabama trial jury considered that BMW was engaging in a fraudulent practice and wanted to punish the defendant for a number of frauds it estimated at somewhere around a thousand nationwide. The jury awarded not only the \$4,000 in compensatory damages but also \$4 million in punitive damages, which was later reduced to \$2 million by the Alabama Supreme Court. On appeal to the US Supreme Court, the court found that punitive damages may not be "grossly excessive." If they are, then they violate substantive due process. Whatever damages a state awards must be limited to what is reasonably necessary to vindicate the state's legitimate interest in punishment and deterrence. "Equal protection of the laws" is a phrase that originates in the Fourteenth Amendment, adopted in 1868. The amendment provides that no state shall "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." This is the equal protection clause. It means that, generally speaking, governments must treat people equally. Unfair classifications among people or corporations will not be permitted. A well-known example of unfair classification would be race discrimination: requiring white children and black children to attend different public schools or requiring "separate but equal" public services, such as water fountains or restrooms. Yet despite the clear intent of the 1868 amendment, "separate but equal" was the law of the land until *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).<sup>[6]</sup>

Governments make classifications every day, so not all classifications can be illegal under the equal protection clause. People with more income generally pay a greater percentage of their income in taxes. People with proper medical training are licensed to become doctors; people without that training cannot be licensed and commit a criminal offense if they do practice medicine. To know what classifications are permissible under the Fourteenth Amendment, we need to know what is being classified. The court has created three classifications, and the

outcome of any equal protection case can usually be predicted by knowing how the court is likely to classify the case:

- Minimal scrutiny: economic and social relations. Government actions are usually upheld if there is a rational basis for them.
- Intermediate scrutiny: gender. Government classifications are sometimes upheld.
- Strict scrutiny: race, ethnicity, and fundamental rights. Classifications based on any of these are almost never upheld.

Under minimal scrutiny for economic and social regulation, laws that regulate economic or social issues are presumed valid and will be upheld if they are rationally related to legitimate goals of government. So, for example, if the city of New Orleans limits the number of street vendors to some rational number (more than one but fewer than the total number that could possibly fit on the sidewalks), the local ordinance would not be overturned as a violation of equal protection.

Under intermediate scrutiny, the city of New Orleans might limit the number of street vendors who are men. For example, suppose that the city council decreed that all street vendors must be women, thinking that would attract even more tourism. A classification like this, based on sex, will have to meet a sterner test than a classification resulting from economic or social regulation. A law like this would have to substantially relate to important government objectives.

Increasingly, courts have nullified government sex classifications as societal concern with gender equality has grown. (See Shannon Faulkner's case against The Citadel, an all-male state school.)<sup>[7]</sup>

Suppose, however, that the city of New Orleans decided that no one of Middle Eastern heritage could drive a taxicab or be a street vendor. That kind of classification would be examined with strict scrutiny to see if there was any compelling justification for it. As noted, classifications such as this one are almost never upheld. The law would be upheld only if it were necessary to promote a compelling state interest. Very few laws that have a racial or ethnic classification meet that test.

The strict scrutiny test will be applied to classifications involving racial and ethnic criteria as well as classifications that interfere with a fundamental right. In *Palmore v. Sidoti*, the state

refused to award custody to the mother because her new spouse was racially different from the child. <sup>[8]</sup> This practice was declared unconstitutional because the state had made a racial classification; this was presumptively invalid, and the government could not show a compelling need to enforce such a classification through its law. An example of government action interfering with a fundamental right will also receive strict scrutiny. When New York State gave an employment preference to veterans who had been state residents at the time of entering the military, the court declared that veterans who were new to the state were less likely to get jobs and that therefore the statute interfered with the right to travel, which was deemed a fundamental right. <sup>[9]</sup>

### KEY TAKEAWAY

The Bill of Rights, through the Fourteenth Amendment, largely applies to state actions. The Bill of Rights has applied to federal actions from the start. Both the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment apply to business in various ways, but it is important to remember that the rights conferred are rights against governmental action and not the actions of private enterprise.

### EXERCISES

1. John Hanks works at ProLogis. The company decides to institute a drug-testing policy. John is a good and longtime employee but enjoys smoking marijuana on the weekends. The drug testing will involve urine samples and, semiannually, a hair sample. It is nearly certain that the drug-testing protocol that ProLogis proposes will find that Hanks is a marijuana user. The company has made it clear that it will have zero tolerance for any kind of nonprescribed controlled substances. John and several fellow employees wish to go to court to challenge the proposed testing as “an unreasonable search and seizure.” Can he possibly succeed?
2. Larry Reed, majority leader in the Senate, is attacked in his reelection campaign by a series of ads sponsored by a corporation (Global Defense, Inc.) that does not like his voting record. The corporation is upset that Reed would not write a special provision that would favor Global Defense in a defense appropriations bill. The ads run constantly on television and radio in the weeks immediately preceding election day and contain numerous falsehoods. For example, in order to keep the government running financially, Reed found it necessary to vote for a bill that included a last-minute rider that defunded a small government program

for the handicapped, sponsored by someone in the opposing party that wanted to privatize all programs for the handicapped. The ad is largely paid for by Global Defense and depicts a handicapped child being helped by the existing program and large letters saying “Does Larry Reed Just Not Care?” The ad proclaims that it is sponsored by Citizens Who Care for a Better Tomorrow. Is this protected speech? Why or why not? Can Reed sue for defamation? Why or why not?

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- [1] *Jackson v. Metropolitan Edison Co.*, 419 US 345 (1974).
  - [2] *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 US 1 (1976).
  - [3] *Kelo v. City of New London*, 545 US 469 (2005).
  - [4] *Cruzan v. Missouri Department of Health*, 497 US 261 (1990).
  - [5] *BMW of North America, Inc. v. Gore*, 517 U.S. 559 (1996)
  - [6] *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 US 537 (1896).
  - [7] *United States v. Virginia*, 518 US 515 (1996).
  - [8] *Palmore v. Sidoti*, 466 US 429 (1984).
  - [9] *Atty. Gen. of New York v. Soto-Lopez*, 476 US 898 (1986).

## 4.6 Cases

### ***Griswold v. Connecticut***

*Griswold v. Connecticut*

381 U.S. 479 (U.S. Supreme Court 1965)

*A nineteenth-century Connecticut law made the use, possession, or distribution of birth control devices illegal. The law also prohibited anyone from giving information about such devices. The executive director and medical director of a planned parenthood association were found guilty of giving out such information to a married couple that wished to delay having children for a few years. The directors were fined \$100 each.*

*They appealed throughout the Connecticut state court system, arguing that the state law violated (infringed) a basic or fundamental right of privacy of a married couple: to live together and have sex together without the restraining power of the state to tell them they may legally have intercourse but not if they use condoms or other birth control devices. At each level (trial court, court of appeals, and Connecticut Supreme Court), the Connecticut courts upheld the constitutionality of the convictions.*

Plurality Opinion by Justice William O. Douglass

We do not sit as a super legislature to determine the wisdom, need, and propriety of laws that touch economic problems, business affairs, or social conditions. The [Connecticut] law, however, operates directly on intimate relation of husband and wife and their physician's role in one aspect of that relation.

[Previous] cases suggest that specific guarantees in the Bill of Rights have penumbras, formed by emanations from those guarantees that help give them life and substance....Various guarantees create zones of privacy. The right of association contained in the penumbra of the First Amendment is one....The Third Amendment in its prohibition against the quartering of soldiers "in any house" in time of peace without the consent of the owner is another facet of that privacy. The Fourth Amendment explicitly affirms the "right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures." The Fifth Amendment in its Self-Incrimination Clause enables the citizen to create a zone of privacy which the government may not force him to surrender to his detriment. The Ninth Amendment provides: "The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."

The Fourth and Fifth Amendments were described...as protection against all governmental invasions "of the sanctity of a man's home and the privacies of life." We recently referred in *Mapp v. Ohio*...to the Fourth Amendment as creating a "right to privacy, no less important than any other right carefully and particularly reserved to the people."

[The law in question here], in forbidding the *use* of contraceptives rather than regulating their manufacture or sale, seeks to achieve its goals by having a maximum destructive impact on [the marital] relationship. Such a law cannot stand....Would we allow the police to search the sacred



precincts of marital bedrooms for telltale signs of the use of contraceptives? The very idea is repulsive to the notions of privacy surrounding the marital relationship.

We deal with a right of privacy older than the Bill of Rights—older than our political parties, older than our school system. Marriage is a coming together for better or for worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred. It is an association that promotes a way of life, not causes; a harmony in living, not political faiths; a bilateral loyalty, not commercial or social projects. Yet it is an association for as noble a purpose as any involved in our prior decisions.

Mr. Justice Stewart, whom Mr. Justice Black joins, dissenting.

Since 1879 Connecticut has had on its books a law which forbids the use of contraceptives by anyone. I think this is an uncommonly silly law. As a practical matter, the law is obviously unenforceable, except in the oblique context of the present case. As a philosophical matter, I believe the use of contraceptives in the relationship of marriage should be left to personal and private choice, based upon each individual's moral, ethical, and religious beliefs. As a matter of social policy, I think professional counsel about methods of birth control should be available to all, so that each individual's choice can be meaningfully made. But we are not asked in this case to say whether we think this law is unwise, or even asinine. We are asked to hold that it violates the United States Constitution. And that I cannot do.

In the course of its opinion the Court refers to no less than six Amendments to the Constitution: the First, the Third, the Fourth, the Fifth, the Ninth, and the Fourteenth. But the Court does not say which of these Amendments, if any, it thinks is infringed by this Connecticut law.

...

As to the First, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Amendments, I can find nothing in any of them to invalidate this Connecticut law, even assuming that all those Amendments are fully applicable against the States. It has not even been argued that this is a law “respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” And surely, unless the solemn process of constitutional adjudication is to descend to the level of a play on words, there is not involved here any abridgment of “the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” No soldier

has been quartered in any house. There has been no search, and no seizure. Nobody has been compelled to be a witness against himself.

The Court also quotes the Ninth Amendment, and my Brother Goldberg’s concurring opinion relies heavily upon it. But to say that the Ninth Amendment has anything to do with this case is to turn somersaults with history. The Ninth Amendment, like its companion the Tenth, which this Court held “states but a truism that all is retained which has not been surrendered,” *United States v. Darby*, 312 U.S. 100, 124, was framed by James Madison and adopted by the States simply to make clear that the adoption of the Bill of Rights did not alter the plan that the *Federal* Government was to be a government of express and limited powers, and that all rights and powers not delegated to it were retained by the people and the individual States. Until today no member of this Court has ever suggested that the Ninth Amendment meant anything else, and the idea that a federal court could ever use the Ninth Amendment to annul a law passed by the elected representatives of the people of the State of Connecticut would have caused James Madison no little wonder.

What provision of the Constitution, then, does make this state law invalid? The Court says it is the right of privacy “created by several fundamental constitutional guarantees.” With all deference, I can find no such general right of privacy in the Bill of Rights, in any other part of the Constitution, or in any case ever before decided by this Court.

At the oral argument in this case we were told that the Connecticut law does not “conform to current community standards.” But it is not the function of this Court to decide cases on the basis of community standards. We are here to decide cases “agreeably to the Constitution and laws of the United States.” It is the essence of judicial duty to subordinate our own personal views, our own ideas of what legislation is wise and what is not. If, as I should surely hope, the law before us does not reflect the standards of the people of Connecticut, the people of Connecticut can freely exercise their true Ninth and Tenth Amendment rights to persuade their elected representatives to repeal it. That is the constitutional way to take this law off the books.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Which opinion is the strict constructionist opinion here—Justice Douglas’s or that of Justices Stewart and Black?

2. What would have happened if the Supreme Court had allowed the Connecticut Supreme Court decision to stand and followed Justice Black's reasoning? Is it likely that the citizens of Connecticut would have persuaded their elected representatives to repeal the law challenged here?

### ***Wickard v. Filburn***

*Wickard v. Filburn*

*317 U.S. 111 (U.S. Supreme Court 1942)*

Mr. Justice Jackson delivered the opinion of the Court.

Mr. Filburn for many years past has owned and operated a small farm in Montgomery County, Ohio, maintaining a herd of dairy cattle, selling milk, raising poultry, and selling poultry and eggs. It has been his practice to raise a small acreage of winter wheat, sown in the Fall and harvested in the following July; to sell a portion of the crop; to feed part to poultry and livestock on the farm, some of which is sold; to use some in making flour for home consumption; and to keep the rest for the following seeding.

His 1941 wheat acreage allotment was 11.1 acres and a normal yield of 20.1 bushels of wheat an acre. He sowed, however, 23 acres, and harvested from his 11.9 acres of excess acreage 239 bushels, which under the terms of the Act as amended on May 26, 1941, constituted farm marketing excess, subject to a penalty of 49 cents a bushel, or \$117.11 in all.

The general scheme of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 as related to wheat is to control the volume moving in interstate and foreign commerce in order to avoid surpluses and shortages and the consequent abnormally low or high wheat prices and obstructions to commerce. [T]he Secretary of Agriculture is directed to ascertain and proclaim each year a national acreage allotment for the next crop of wheat, which is then apportioned to the states and their counties, and is eventually broken up into allotments for individual farms.

It is urged that under the Commerce Clause of the Constitution, Article I, § 8, clause 3, Congress does not possess the power it has in this instance sought to exercise. The question would merit little consideration since our decision in *United States v. Darby*, 312 U.S. 100, sustaining the federal power to regulate production of goods for commerce, except for the fact that this Act

extends federal regulation to production not intended in any part for commerce but wholly for consumption on the farm.

***Kassel v. Consolidated Freightways Corp.***

*Kassel v. Consolidated Freightways Corp.*

*450 U.S. 662 (U.S. Supreme Court 1981)*

JUSTICE POWELL announced the judgment of the Court and delivered an opinion, in which JUSTICE WHITE, JUSTICE BLACKMUN, and JUSTICE STEVENS joined.

The question is whether an Iowa statute that prohibits the use of certain large trucks within the State unconstitutionally burdens interstate commerce.

I

Appellee Consolidated Freightways Corporation of Delaware (Consolidated) is one of the largest common carriers in the country: it offers service in 48 States under a certificate of public convenience and necessity issued by the Interstate Commerce Commission. Among other routes, Consolidated carries commodities through Iowa on Interstate 80, the principal east-west route linking New York, Chicago, and the west coast, and on Interstate 35, a major north-south route. Consolidated mainly uses two kinds of trucks. One consists of a three-axle tractor pulling a 40-foot two-axle trailer. This unit, commonly called a single, or “semi,” is 55 feet in length overall. Such trucks have long been used on the Nation’s highways. Consolidated also uses a two-axle tractor pulling a single-axle trailer which, in turn, pulls a single-axle dolly and a second single-axle trailer. This combination, known as a double, or twin, is 65 feet long overall. Many trucking companies, including Consolidated, increasingly prefer to use doubles to ship certain kinds of commodities. Doubles have larger capacities, and the trailers can be detached and routed separately if necessary. Consolidated would like to use 65-foot doubles on many of its trips through Iowa.

The State of Iowa, however, by statute, restricts the length of vehicles that may use its highways. Unlike all other States in the West and Midwest, Iowa generally prohibits the use of 65-foot doubles within its borders.

...

Because of Iowa's statutory scheme, Consolidated cannot use its 65-foot doubles to move commodities through the State. Instead, the company must do one of four things: (i) use 55-foot singles; (ii) use 60-foot doubles; (iii) detach the trailers of a 65-foot double and shuttle each through the State separately; or (iv) divert 65-foot doubles around Iowa. Dissatisfied with these options, Consolidated filed this suit in the District Court averring that Iowa's statutory scheme unconstitutionally burdens interstate commerce. Iowa defended the law as a reasonable safety measure enacted pursuant to its police power. The State asserted that 65-foot doubles are more dangerous than 55-foot singles and, in any event, that the law promotes safety and reduces road wear within the State by diverting much truck traffic to other states.

In a 14-day trial, both sides adduced evidence on safety and on the burden on interstate commerce imposed by Iowa's law. On the question of safety, the District Court found that the "evidence clearly establishes that the twin is as safe as the semi." 475 F.Supp. 544, 549 (SD Iowa 1979). For that reason, "there is no valid safety reason for barring twins from Iowa's highways because of their configuration....The evidence convincingly, if not overwhelmingly, establishes that the 65-foot twin is as safe as, if not safer than, the 60-foot twin and the 55-foot semi...." "Twins and semis have different characteristics. Twins are more maneuverable, are less sensitive to wind, and create less splash and spray. However, they are more likely than semis to jackknife or upset. They can be backed only for a short distance. The negative characteristics are not such that they render the twin less safe than semis overall. Semis are more stable, but are more likely to 'rear-end' another vehicle."

In light of these findings, the District Court applied the standard we enunciated in *Raymond Motor Transportation, Inc. v. Rice*, 434 U.S. 429 (1978), and concluded that the state law impermissibly burdened interstate commerce: "[T]he balance here must be struck in favor of the federal interests. The *total effect* of the law as a safety measure in reducing accidents and casualties is so slight and problematical that it does not outweigh the national interest in keeping interstate commerce free from interferences that seriously impede it."

The Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit affirmed. 612 F.2d 1064 (1979). It accepted the District Court's finding that 65-foot doubles were as safe as 55-foot singles. *Id.* at 1069. Thus, the only apparent safety benefit to Iowa was that resulting from forcing large trucks to detour

around the State, thereby reducing overall truck traffic on Iowa's highways. The Court of Appeals noted that this was not a constitutionally permissible interest. It also commented that the several statutory exemptions identified above, such as those applicable to border cities and the shipment of livestock, suggested that the law, in effect, benefited Iowa residents at the expense of interstate traffic. *Id.* at 1070-1071. The combination of these exemptions weakened the presumption of validity normally accorded a state safety regulation. For these reasons, the Court of Appeals agreed with the District Court that the Iowa statute unconstitutionally burdened interstate commerce.

Iowa appealed, and we noted probable jurisdiction. 446 U.S. 950 (1980). We now affirm.

## II

It is unnecessary to review in detail the evolution of the principles of Commerce Clause adjudication. The Clause is both a "prolific ' of national power and an equally prolific source of conflict with legislation of the state[s]." *H. P. Hood & Sons, Inc. v. Du Mond*, 336 U.S. 525, 336 U.S. 534 (1949). The Clause permits Congress to legislate when it perceives that the national welfare is not furthered by the independent actions of the States. It is now well established, also, that the Clause itself is "a limitation upon state power even without congressional implementation." *Hunt v. Washington Apple Advertising Comm'n*, 432 U.S. 333 at 350 (1977). The Clause requires that some aspects of trade generally must remain free from interference by the States. When a State ventures excessively into the regulation of these aspects of commerce, it "trespasses upon national interests," *Great A&P Tea Co. v. Cottrell*, 424 U.S. 366, 424 U.S. 373 (1976), and the courts will hold the state regulation invalid under the Clause alone.

The Commerce Clause does not, of course, invalidate all state restrictions on commerce. It has long been recognized that, "in the absence of conflicting legislation by Congress, there is a residuum of power in the state to make laws governing matters of local concern which nevertheless in some measure affect interstate commerce or even, to some extent, regulate it." *Southern Pacific Co. v. Arizona*, 325 U.S. 761 (1945).

The extent of permissible state regulation is not always easy to measure. It may be said with confidence, however, that a State's power to regulate commerce is never greater than in matters traditionally of local concern. *Washington Apple Advertising Comm'n, supra* at 432 U.S. 350.

For example, regulations that touch upon safety—especially highway safety—are those that “the Court has been most reluctant to invalidate.” *Raymond, supra* at 434 U.S. 443 (and other cases cited). Indeed, “if safety justifications are not illusory, the Court will not second-guess legislative judgment about their importance in comparison with related burdens on interstate commerce.” *Raymond, supra* at 434 U.S. at 449. Those who would challenge such bona fide safety regulations must overcome a “strong presumption of validity.” *Bibb v. Navajo Freight Lines, Inc.*, 359 U.S. 520 at (1959).

But the incantation of a purpose to promote the public health or safety does not insulate a state law from Commerce Clause attack. Regulations designed for that salutary purpose nevertheless may further the purpose so marginally, and interfere with commerce so substantially, as to be invalid under the Commerce Clause. In the Court’s recent unanimous decision in *Raymond* we declined to “accept the State’s contention that the inquiry under the Commerce Clause is ended without a weighing of the asserted safety purpose against the degree of interference with interstate commerce.” This “weighing” by a court requires—and indeed the constitutionality of the state regulation depends on—“a sensitive consideration of the weight and nature of the state regulatory concern in light of the extent of the burden imposed on the course of interstate commerce.” *Id.* at 434 U.S. at 441; *accord, Pike v. Bruce Church, Inc.*, 397 U.S. 137 at 142 (1970); *Bibb, supra*, at 359 U.S. at 525-530.

### III

Applying these general principles, we conclude that the Iowa truck length limitations unconstitutionally burden interstate commerce.

In *Raymond Motor Transportation, Inc. v. Rice*, the Court held that a Wisconsin statute that precluded the use of 65-foot doubles violated the Commerce Clause. This case is *Raymond* revisited. Here, as in *Raymond*, the State failed to present any persuasive evidence that 65-foot doubles are less safe than 55-foot singles. Moreover, Iowa’s law is now out of step with the laws of all other Midwestern and Western States. Iowa thus substantially burdens the interstate flow of goods by truck. In the absence of congressional action to set uniform standards, some burdens associated with state safety regulations must be tolerated. But where, as here, the State’s safety interest has been found to be illusory, and its regulations impair

significantly the federal interest in efficient and safe interstate transportation, the state law cannot be harmonized with the Commerce Clause.

## A

Iowa made a more serious effort to support the safety rationale of its law than did Wisconsin in *Raymond*, but its effort was no more persuasive. As noted above, the District Court found that the “evidence clearly establishes that the twin is as safe as the semi.” The record supports this finding. The trial focused on a comparison of the performance of the two kinds of trucks in various safety categories. The evidence showed, and the District Court found, that the 65-foot double was at least the equal of the 55-foot single in the ability to brake, turn, and maneuver. The double, because of its axle placement, produces less splash and spray in wet weather. And, because of its articulation in the middle, the double is less susceptible to dangerous “off-tracking,” and to wind.

None of these findings is seriously disputed by Iowa. Indeed, the State points to only three ways in which the 55-foot single is even arguably superior: singles take less time to be passed and to clear intersections; they may back up for longer distances; and they are somewhat less likely to jackknife.

The first two of these characteristics are of limited relevance on modern interstate highways. As the District Court found, the negligible difference in the time required to pass, and to cross intersections, is insignificant on 4-lane divided highways, because passing does not require crossing into oncoming traffic lanes, *Raymond*, 434 U.S. at 444, and interstates have few, if any, intersections. The concern over backing capability also is insignificant, because it seldom is necessary to back up on an interstate. In any event, no evidence suggested any difference in backing capability between the 60-foot doubles that Iowa permits and the 65-foot doubles that it bans. Similarly, although doubles tend to jackknife somewhat more than singles, 65-foot doubles actually are less likely to jackknife than 60-foot doubles.

Statistical studies supported the view that 65-foot doubles are at least as safe overall as 55-foot singles and 60-foot doubles. One such study, which the District Court credited, reviewed Consolidated’s comparative accident experience in 1978 with its own singles and doubles. Each kind of truck was driven 56 million miles on identical routes. The singles were involved in 100



accidents resulting in 27 injuries and one fatality. The 65-foot doubles were involved in 106 accidents resulting in 17 injuries and one fatality. Iowa's expert statistician admitted that this study provided "moderately strong evidence" that singles have a higher injury rate than doubles. Another study, prepared by the Iowa Department of Transportation at the request of the state legislature, concluded that "[s]ixty-five foot twin trailer combinations have *not* been shown by experiences in other states to be less safe than 60-foot twin trailer combinations *or* conventional tractor-semitrailers."

In sum, although Iowa introduced more evidence on the question of safety than did Wisconsin in *Raymond*, the record as a whole was not more favorable to the State.

## **B**

Consolidated, meanwhile, demonstrated that Iowa's law substantially burdens interstate commerce. Trucking companies that wish to continue to use 65-foot doubles must route them around Iowa or detach the trailers of the doubles and ship them through separately.

Alternatively, trucking companies must use the smaller 55-foot singles or 65-foot doubles permitted under Iowa law. Each of these options engenders inefficiency and added expense. The record shows that Iowa's law added about \$12.6 million each year to the costs of trucking companies.

Consolidated alone incurred about \$2 million per year in increased costs.

In addition to increasing the costs of the trucking companies (and, indirectly, of the service to consumers), Iowa's law may aggravate, rather than, ameliorate, the problem of highway accidents. Fifty-five-foot singles carry less freight than 65-foot doubles. Either more small trucks must be used to carry the same quantity of goods through Iowa or the same number of larger trucks must drive longer distances to bypass Iowa. In either case, as the District Court noted, the restriction requires more highway miles to be driven to transport the same quantity of goods. Other things being equal, accidents are proportional to distance traveled. Thus, if 65-foot doubles are as safe as 55-foot singles, Iowa's law tends to increase the number of accidents and to shift the incidence of them from Iowa to other States.

## **[IV. Omitted]**

## **V**

In sum, the statutory exemptions, their history, and the arguments Iowa has advanced in support of its law in this litigation all suggest that the deference traditionally accorded a State's safety judgment is not warranted. *See Raymond, supra* at 434 U.S. at 444-447. The controlling factors thus are the findings of the District Court, accepted by the Court of Appeals, with respect to the relative safety of the types of trucks at issue, and the substantiality of the burden on interstate commerce.

Because Iowa has imposed this burden without any significant countervailing safety interest, its statute violates the Commerce Clause. The judgment of the Court of Appeals is affirmed.

It is so ordered.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Under the Constitution, what gives Iowa the right to make rules regarding the size or configuration of trucks upon highways within the state?
2. Did Iowa try to exempt trucking lines based in Iowa, or was the statutory rule nondiscriminatory as to the origin of trucks that traveled on Iowa highways?
3. Are there any federal size or weight standards noted in the case? Is there any kind of truck size or weight that could be limited by Iowa law, or must Iowa simply accept federal standards or, if none, impose no standards at all?

### ***Hunt v. Washington Apple Advertising Commission***

*Hunt v. Washington Apple Advertising Commission*

432 U.S. 33 (U.S. Supreme Court 1977)

MR. CHIEF JUSTICE BURGER delivered the opinion of the Court.

In 1973, North Carolina enacted a statute which required, inter alia, all closed containers of apples sold, offered for sale, or shipped into the State to bear "no grade other than the applicable U.S. grade or standard."...Washington State is the Nation's largest producer of apples, its crops accounting for approximately 30% of all apples grown domestically and nearly half of all apples shipped in closed containers in interstate commerce. [Because] of the importance of the apple industry to the State, its legislature has undertaken to protect and enhance the reputation of Washington apples by establishing a stringent, mandatory inspection program [that] requires all apples shipped in interstate commerce to be tested under strict quality standards and graded

accordingly. In all cases, the Washington State grades [are] the equivalent of, or superior to, the comparable grades and standards adopted by the [U.S. Dept. of] Agriculture (USDA).

[In] 1972, the North Carolina Board of Agriculture adopted an administrative regulation, unique in the 50 States, which in effect required all closed containers of apples shipped into or sold in the State to display either the applicable USDA grade or a notice indicating no classification.

State grades were expressly prohibited. In addition to its obvious consequence—prohibiting the display of Washington State apple grades on containers of apples shipped into North Carolina—the regulation presented the Washington apple industry with a marketing problem of potentially nationwide significance. Washington apple growers annually ship in commerce approximately 40 million closed containers of apples, nearly 500,000 of which eventually find their way into North Carolina, stamped with the applicable Washington State variety and grade. [Compliance] with North Carolina’s unique regulation would have required Washington growers to obliterate the printed labels on containers shipped to North Carolina, thus giving their product a damaged appearance. Alternatively, they could have changed their marketing practices to accommodate the needs of the North Carolina market, i.e., repack apples to be shipped to North Carolina in containers bearing only the USDA grade, and/or store the estimated portion of the harvest destined for that market in such special containers. As a last resort, they could discontinue the use of the preprinted containers entirely. None of these costly and less efficient options was very attractive to the industry. Moreover, in the event a number of other States followed North Carolina’s lead, the resultant inability to display the Washington grades could force the Washington growers to abandon the State’s expensive inspection and grading system which their customers had come to know and rely on over the 60-odd years of its existence....

Unsuccessful in its attempts to secure administrative relief [with North Carolina], the Commission instituted this action challenging the constitutionality of the statute. [The] District Court found that the North Carolina statute, while neutral on its face, actually discriminated against Washington State growers and dealers in favor of their local counterparts [and] concluded that this discrimination [was] not justified by the asserted local interest—the elimination of deception and confusion from the marketplace—arguably furthered by the [statute].

...

[North Carolina] maintains that [the] burdens on the interstate sale of Washington apples were far outweighed by the local benefits flowing from what they contend was a valid exercise of North Carolina's [police powers]. Prior to the statute's enactment,...apples from 13 different States were shipped into North Carolina for sale. Seven of those States, including [Washington], had their own grading systems which, while differing in their standards, used similar descriptive labels (e.g., fancy, extra fancy, etc.). This multiplicity of inconsistent state grades [posed] dangers of deception and confusion not only in the North Carolina market, but in the Nation as a whole. The North Carolina statute, appellants claim, was enacted to eliminate this source of deception and confusion. [Moreover], it is contended that North Carolina sought to accomplish this goal of uniformity in an evenhanded manner as evidenced by the fact that its statute applies to all apples sold in closed containers in the State without regard to their point of origin. [As] the appellants properly point out, not every exercise of state authority imposing some burden on the free flow of commerce is invalid, [especially] when the State acts to protect its citizenry in matters pertaining to the sale of foodstuffs. By the same token, however, a finding that state legislation furthers matters of legitimate local concern, even in the health and consumer protection areas, does not end the inquiry. Rather, when such state legislation comes into conflict with the Commerce Clause's overriding requirement of a national "common market," we are confronted with the task of effecting an accommodation of the competing national and local interests. We turn to that task.

As the District Court correctly found, the challenged statute has the practical effect of not only burdening interstate sales of Washington apples, but also discriminating against them. This discrimination takes various forms. The first, and most obvious, is the statute's consequence of raising *the costs* of doing business in the North Carolina market for Washington apple growers and dealers, while leaving those of their North Carolina counterparts unaffected. [This] disparate effect results from the fact that North Carolina apple producers, unlike their Washington competitors, were not forced to alter their marketing practices in order to comply with the statute. They were still free to market their wares under the USDA grade or none at all as they had done prior to the statute's enactment. Obviously, the increased costs imposed by the

statute would tend to shield the local apple industry from the competition of Washington apple growers and dealers who are already at a competitive disadvantage because of their great distance from the North Carolina market.

Second, the statute has the effect of *stripping away* from the Washington apple industry the competitive and economic advantages it has earned for itself through its expensive inspection and grading system. The record demonstrates that the Washington apple-grading system has gained nationwide acceptance in the apple trade. [The record] contains numerous affidavits [stating a] preference [for] apples graded under the Washington, as opposed to the USDA, system because of the former's greater consistency, its emphasis on color, and its supporting mandatory inspections. Once again, the statute had no similar impact on the North Carolina apple industry and thus operated to its benefit.

Third, by *prohibiting* Washington growers and dealers from marketing apples under their State's grades, the statute has a *leveling effect* which insidiously operates to the advantage of local apple producers. [With] free market forces at work, Washington sellers would normally enjoy a distinct market advantage vis-à-vis local producers in those categories where the Washington grade is superior. However, because of the statute's operation, Washington apples which would otherwise qualify for and be sold under the superior Washington grades will now have to be marketed under their inferior USDA counterparts. Such "downgrading" offers the North Carolina apple industry the very sort of protection against competing out-of-state products that the Commerce Clause was designed to prohibit. At worst, it will have the effect of an embargo against those Washington apples in the superior grades as Washington dealers withhold them from the North Carolina market. At best, it will deprive Washington sellers of the market premium that such apples would otherwise command.

Despite the statute's facial neutrality, the Commission suggests that its discriminatory impact on interstate commerce was not an unintended by-product, and there are some indications in the record to that effect. The most glaring is the response of the North Carolina Agriculture Commissioner to the Commission's request for an exemption following the statute's passage in which he indicated that before he could support such an exemption, he would "want to have the sentiment from our apple producers *since they were mainly responsible for this legislation*

*being passed.*” [Moreover], we find it somewhat suspect that North Carolina singled out only closed containers of apples, the very means by which apples are transported in commerce, to effectuate the statute’s ostensible consumer protection purpose when apples are not generally sold at retail in their shipping containers. However, we need not ascribe an economic protection motive to the North Carolina Legislature to resolve this case; we conclude that the challenged statute cannot stand insofar as it prohibits the display of Washington State grades even if enacted for the declared purpose of protecting consumers from deception and fraud in the marketplace.

...

Finally, we note that any potential for confusion and deception created by the Washington grades was not of the type that led to the statute’s enactment. Since Washington grades are in all cases equal or superior to their USDA counterparts, they could only “deceive” or “confuse” a consumer to his benefit, hardly a harmful result.

In addition, it appears that nondiscriminatory alternatives to the outright ban of Washington State grades are readily available. For example, North Carolina could effectuate its goal by permitting out-of-state growers to utilize state grades only if they also marked their shipments with the applicable USDA label. In that case, the USDA grade would serve as a benchmark against which the consumer could evaluate the quality of the various state grades....

[The court affirmed the lower court’s holding that the North Carolina statute was unconstitutional.]

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. Was the North Carolina law discriminatory on its face? Was it, possibly, an undue burden on interstate commerce? Why wouldn’t it be?
2. What evidence was there of discriminatory intent behind the North Carolina law? Did that evidence even matter? Why or why not?

### ***Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission***

*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*

588 U.S. \_\_\_\_; 130 S.Ct. 876 (U.S. Supreme Court 2010)

Justice Kennedy delivered the opinion of the Court.

Federal law prohibits corporations and unions from using their general treasury funds to make independent expenditures for speech defined as an “electioneering communication” or for speech expressly advocating the election or defeat of a candidate. 2 U.S.C. §441b. Limits on electioneering communications were upheld in *McConnell v. Federal Election Comm’n*, 540 U.S. 93, 203–209 (2003). The holding of *McConnell* rested to a large extent on an earlier case, *Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce*, 494 U.S. 652 (1990). *Austin* had held that political speech may be banned based on the speaker’s corporate identity.

In this case we are asked to reconsider *Austin* and, in effect, *McConnell*. It has been noted that “*Austin* was a significant departure from ancient First Amendment principles,” *Federal Election Comm’n v. Wisconsin Right to Life, Inc.*, 551 U.S. 449, 490 (2007) (*WRTL*) (Scalia, J., concurring in part and concurring in judgment). We agree with that conclusion and hold that *stare decisis* does not compel the continued acceptance of *Austin*. The Government may regulate corporate political speech through disclaimer and disclosure requirements, but it may not suppress that speech altogether. We turn to the case now before us.

I

A

Citizens United is a nonprofit corporation. It has an annual budget of about \$12 million. Most of its funds are from donations by individuals; but, in addition, it accepts a small portion of its funds from for-profit corporations.

In January 2008, Citizens United released a film entitled *Hillary: The Movie*. We refer to the film as *Hillary*. It is a 90-minute documentary about then-Senator Hillary Clinton, who was a candidate in the Democratic Party’s 2008 Presidential primary elections. *Hillary* mentions Senator Clinton by name and depicts interviews with political commentators and other persons, most of them quite critical of Senator Clinton....

In December 2007, a cable company offered, for a payment of \$1.2 million, to make *Hillary* available on a video-on-demand channel called “Elections ’08.”...Citizens United was prepared to pay for the video-on-demand; and to promote the film, it produced two 10-second ads and one 30-second ad for *Hillary*. Each ad includes a short (and, in our view, pejorative) statement about Senator Clinton, followed by the name of the movie and the movie’s

Website address. Citizens United desired to promote the video-on-demand offering by running advertisements on broadcast and cable television.

## B

Before the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA), federal law prohibited—and still does prohibit—corporations and unions from using general treasury funds to make direct contributions to candidates or independent expenditures that expressly advocate the election or defeat of a candidate, through any form of media, in connection with certain qualified federal elections....BCRA §203 amended §441b to prohibit any “electioneering communication” as well. An electioneering communication is defined as “any broadcast, cable, or satellite communication” that “refers to a clearly identified candidate for Federal office” and is made within 30 days of a primary or 60 days of a general election. §434(f)(3)(A). The Federal Election Commission’s (FEC) regulations further define an electioneering communication as a communication that is “publicly distributed.” 11 CFR §100.29(a)(2) (2009). “In the case of a candidate for nomination for President...*publicly distributed* means” that the communication “[c]an be received by 50,000 or more persons in a State where a primary election...is being held within 30 days.” 11 CFR §100.29(b)(3)(ii). Corporations and unions are barred from using their general treasury funds for express advocacy or electioneering communications. They may establish, however, a “separate segregated fund” (known as a political action committee, or PAC) for these purposes. 2 U.S.C. §441b(b)(2). The moneys received by the segregated fund are limited to donations from stockholders and employees of the corporation or, in the case of unions, members of the union. *Ibid.*

## C

Citizens United wanted to make *Hillary* available through video-on-demand within 30 days of the 2008 primary elections. It feared, however, that both the film and the ads would be covered by §441b’s ban on corporate-funded independent expenditures, thus subjecting the corporation to civil and criminal penalties under §437g. In December 2007, Citizens United sought declaratory and injunctive relief against the FEC. It argued that (1) §441b is unconstitutional as applied to *Hillary*; and (2) BCRA’s disclaimer and disclosure requirements, BCRA §§201 and 311, are unconstitutional as applied to *Hillary* and to the three ads for the movie.



The District Court denied Citizens United’s motion for a preliminary injunction, and then granted the FEC’s motion for summary judgment.

...

The court held that §441b was facially constitutional under *McConnell*, and that §441b was constitutional as applied to *Hillary* because it was “susceptible of no other interpretation than to inform the electorate that Senator Clinton is unfit for office, that the United States would be a dangerous place in a President Hillary Clinton world, and that viewers should vote against her.” 530 F. Supp. 2d, at 279. The court also rejected Citizens United’s challenge to BCRA’s disclaimer and disclosure requirements. It noted that “the Supreme Court has written approvingly of disclosure provisions triggered by political speech even though the speech itself was constitutionally protected under the First Amendment.” *Id.* at 281.

II

[Omitted: the court considers whether it is possible to reject the BCRA without declaring certain provisions unconstitutional. The court concludes it cannot find a basis to reject the BCRA that does not involve constitutional issues.]

III

The First Amendment provides that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech.” Laws enacted to control or suppress speech may operate at different points in the speech process....The law before us is an outright ban, backed by criminal sanctions. Section 441b makes it a felony for all corporations—including nonprofit advocacy corporations—either to expressly advocate the election or defeat of candidates or to broadcast electioneering communications within 30 days of a primary election and 60 days of a general election. Thus, the following acts would all be felonies under §441b: The Sierra Club runs an ad, within the crucial phase of 60 days before the general election, that exhorts the public to disapprove of a Congressman who favors logging in national forests; the National Rifle Association publishes a book urging the public to vote for the challenger because the incumbent U.S. Senator supports a handgun ban; and the American Civil Liberties Union creates a Web site telling the public to vote for a Presidential candidate in light of that candidate’s defense of free speech. These prohibitions are classic examples of censorship.

Section 441b is a ban on corporate speech notwithstanding the fact that a PAC created by a corporation can still speak. PACs are burdensome alternatives; they are expensive to administer and subject to extensive regulations. For example, every PAC must appoint a treasurer, forward donations to the treasurer promptly, keep detailed records of the identities of the persons making donations, preserve receipts for three years, and file an organization statement and report changes to this information within 10 days.

And that is just the beginning. PACs must file detailed monthly reports with the FEC, which are due at different times depending on the type of election that is about to occur....

PACs have to comply with these regulations just to speak. This might explain why fewer than 2,000 of the millions of corporations in this country have PACs. PACs, furthermore, must exist before they can speak. Given the onerous restrictions, a corporation may not be able to establish a PAC in time to make its views known regarding candidates and issues in a current campaign. Section 441b's prohibition on corporate independent expenditures is thus a ban on speech. As a "restriction on the amount of money a person or group can spend on political communication during a campaign," that statute "necessarily reduces the quantity of expression by restricting the number of issues discussed, the depth of their exploration, and the size of the audience reached." *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 at 19 (1976)....

Speech is an essential mechanism of democracy, for it is the means to hold officials accountable to the people. See *Buckley, supra*, at 14–15 ("In a republic where the people are sovereign, the ability of the citizenry to make informed choices among candidates for office is essential.") The right of citizens to inquire, to hear, to speak, and to use information to reach consensus is a precondition to enlightened self-government and a necessary means to protect it. The First Amendment "'has its fullest and most urgent application' to speech uttered during a campaign for political office."

For these reasons, political speech must prevail against laws that would suppress it, whether by design or inadvertence. Laws that burden political speech are "subject to strict scrutiny," which requires the Government to prove that the restriction "furthers a compelling interest and is narrowly tailored to achieve that interest."

...

The Court has recognized that First Amendment protection extends to corporations. This protection has been extended by explicit holdings to the context of political speech. Under the rationale of these precedents, political speech does not lose First Amendment protection “simply because its source is a corporation.” *Bellotti, supra*, at 784. The Court has thus rejected the argument that political speech of corporations or other associations should be treated differently under the First Amendment simply because such associations are not “natural persons.”

The purpose and effect of this law is to prevent corporations, including small and nonprofit corporations, from presenting both facts and opinions to the public. This makes *Austin’s* antidistortion rationale all the more an aberration. “[T]he First Amendment protects the right of corporations to petition legislative and administrative bodies.” *Bellotti*, 435 U.S., at 792, n. 31.... Even if §441b’s expenditure ban were constitutional, wealthy corporations could still lobby elected officials, although smaller corporations may not have the resources to do so. And wealthy individuals and unincorporated associations can spend unlimited amounts on independent expenditures. See, e.g., *WRTL*, 551 U.S., at 503–504 (opinion of Scalia, J.) (“In the 2004 election cycle, a mere 24 individuals contributed an astounding total of \$142 million to [26 U.S.C. §527 organizations]”). Yet certain disfavored associations of citizens—those that have taken on the corporate form—are penalized for engaging in the same political speech.

When Government seeks to use its full power, including the criminal law, to command where a person may get his or her information or what distrusted source he or she may not hear, it uses censorship to control thought. This is unlawful. The First Amendment confirms the freedom to think for ourselves.

What we have said also shows the invalidity of other arguments made by the Government. For the most part relinquishing the anti-distortion rationale, the Government falls back on the argument that corporate political speech can be banned in order to prevent corruption or its appearance....

When Congress finds that a problem exists, we must give that finding due deference; but Congress may not choose an unconstitutional remedy. If elected officials succumb to improper influences from independent expenditures; if they surrender their best judgment; and if they put expediency before principle, then surely there is cause for concern. We must give weight to

attempts by Congress to seek to dispel either the appearance or the reality of these influences. The remedies enacted by law, however, must comply with the First Amendment; and, it is our law and our tradition that more speech, not less, is the governing rule. An outright ban on corporate political speech during the critical preelection period is not a permissible remedy. Here Congress has created categorical bans on speech that are asymmetrical to preventing *quid pro quo* corruption.

Our precedent is to be respected unless the most convincing of reasons demonstrates that adherence to it puts us on a course that is sure error. “Beyond workability, the relevant factors in deciding whether to adhere to the principle of *stare decisis* include the antiquity of the precedent, the reliance interests at stake, and of course whether the decision was well reasoned.” [citing prior cases]

These considerations counsel in favor of rejecting *Austin*, which itself contravened this Court’s earlier precedents in *Buckley* and *Bellotti*. “This Court has not hesitated to overrule decisions offensive to the First Amendment.” *WRTL*, 551 U.S., at 500 (opinion of Scalia, J.). “[*S*]tare *decisis* is a principle of policy and not a mechanical formula of adherence to the latest decision.” *Helvering v. Hallock*, 309 U.S. 106 at 119 (1940).

*Austin* is undermined by experience since its announcement. Political speech is so ingrained in our culture that speakers find ways to circumvent campaign finance laws. See, e.g., *McConnell*, 540 U.S., at 176–177 (“Given BCRA’s tighter restrictions on the raising and spending of soft money, the incentives...to exploit [26 U.S.C. §527] organizations will only increase”). Our Nation’s speech dynamic is changing, and informative voices should not have to circumvent onerous restrictions to exercise their First Amendment rights. Speakers have become adept at presenting citizens with sound bites, talking points, and scripted messages that dominate the 24-hour news cycle. Corporations, like individuals, do not have monolithic views. On certain topics corporations may possess valuable expertise, leaving them the best equipped to point out errors or fallacies in speech of all sorts, including the speech of candidates and elected officials. Rapid changes in technology—and the creative dynamic inherent in the concept of free expression—counsel against upholding a law that restricts political speech in certain media or by certain speakers. Today, 30-second television ads may be the most effective way to convey a

political message. Soon, however, it may be that Internet sources, such as blogs and social networking Web sites, will provide citizens with significant information about political candidates and issues. Yet, §441b would seem to ban a blog post expressly advocating the election or defeat of a candidate if that blog were created with corporate funds. The First Amendment does not permit Congress to make these categorical distinctions based on the corporate identity of the speaker and the content of the political speech.

Due consideration leads to this conclusion: *Austin* should be and now is overruled. We return to the principle established in *Buckley* and *Bellotti* that the Government may not suppress political speech on the basis of the speaker's corporate identity. No sufficient governmental interest justifies limits on the political speech of nonprofit or for-profit corporations.

#### [IV. Omitted]

#### V

When word concerning the plot of the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* reached the circles of Government, some officials sought, by persuasion, to discourage its distribution. See Smoodin, "Compulsory" Viewing for Every Citizen: *Mr. Smith* and the Rhetoric of Reception, 35 *Cinema Journal* 3, 19, and n. 52 (Winter 1996) (citing *Mr. Smith Riles Washington*, *Time*, Oct. 30, 1939, p. 49); Nugent, *Capra's Capitol Offense*, *N. Y. Times*, Oct. 29, 1939, p. X5.

Under *Austin*, though, officials could have done more than discourage its distribution—they could have banned the film. After all, it, like *Hillary*, was speech funded by a corporation that was critical of Members of Congress. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* may be fiction and caricature; but fiction and caricature can be a powerful force.

Modern day movies, television comedies, or skits on YouTube.com might portray public officials or public policies in unflattering ways. Yet if a covered transmission during the blackout period creates the background for candidate endorsement or opposition, a felony occurs solely because a corporation, other than an exempt media corporation, has made the "purchase, payment, distribution, loan, advance, deposit, or gift of money or anything of value" in order to engage in political speech. 2 U.S.C. §431(9)(A)(i). Speech would be suppressed in the realm where its necessity is most evident: in the public dialogue preceding a real election. Governments are

often hostile to speech, but under our law and our tradition it seems stranger than fiction for our Government to make this political speech a crime. Yet this is the statute's purpose and design. Some members of the public might consider *Hillary* to be insightful and instructive; some might find it to be neither high art nor a fair discussion on how to set the Nation's course; still others simply might suspend judgment on these points but decide to think more about issues and candidates. Those choices and assessments, however, are not for the Government to make. "The First Amendment underwrites the freedom to experiment and to create in the realm of thought and speech. Citizens must be free to use new forms, and new forums, for the expression of ideas. The civic discourse belongs to the people, and the Government may not prescribe the means used to conduct it." *McConnell, supra*, at 341 (opinion of Kennedy, J.).

The judgment of the District Court is reversed with respect to the constitutionality of 2 U.S.C. §441b's restrictions on corporate independent expenditures. The case is remanded for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.

It is so ordered.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What does the case say about disclosure? Corporations have a right of free speech under the First Amendment and may exercise that right through unrestricted contributions of money to political parties and candidates. Can the government condition that right by requiring that the parties and candidates disclose to the public the amount and origin of the contribution? What would justify such a disclosure requirement?
2. Are a corporation's contributions to political parties and candidates tax deductible as a business expense? Should they be?
3. How is the donation of money equivalent to speech? Is this a strict construction of the Constitution to hold that it is?
4. Based on the Court's description of the *Austin* case, what purpose do you think the *Austin* court was trying to achieve by limiting corporate campaign contributions? Was that purpose consistent (or inconsistent) with anything in the Constitution, or is the Constitution essentially silent on this issue?

## 4.7 Summary and Exercises

## Summary

The US Constitution sets the framework for all other laws of the United States, at both the federal and the state level. It creates a shared balance of power between states and the federal government (federalism) and shared power among the branches of government (separation of powers), establishes individual rights against governmental action (Bill of Rights), and provides for federal oversight of matters affecting interstate commerce and commerce with foreign nations. Knowing the contours of the US legal system is not possible without understanding the role of the US Constitution.

The Constitution is difficult to amend. Thus when the Supreme Court uses its power of judicial review to determine that a law is unconstitutional, it actually shapes what the Constitution means. New meanings that emerge must do so by the process of amendment or by the passage of time and new appointments to the court. Because justices serve for life, the court changes its philosophical outlook slowly.

The Bill of Rights is an especially important piece of the Constitutional framework. It provides legal causes of action for infringements of individual rights by government, state or federal. Through the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment and the Fourteenth Amendment, both procedural and (to some extent) substantive due process rights are given to individuals.

### EXERCISES

1. For many years, the Supreme Court believed that “commercial speech” was entitled to less protection than other forms of speech. One defining element of commercial speech is that its dominant theme is to propose a commercial transaction. This kind of speech is protected by the First Amendment, but the government is permitted to regulate it more closely than other forms of speech. However, the government must make reasonable distinctions, must narrowly tailor the rules restricting commercial speech, and must show that government has a legitimate goal that the law furthers.

Edward Salib owned a Winchell’s Donut House in Mesa, Arizona. To attract customers, he displayed large signs in store windows. The city ordered him to remove the signs because they violated the city’s sign code, which prohibited

covering more than 30 percent of a store's windows with signs. Salib sued, claiming that the sign code violated his First Amendment rights. What was the result, and why?

2. Jennifer is a freshman at her local public high school. Her sister, Jackie, attends a nearby private high school. Neither school allows them to join its respective wrestling team; only boys can wrestle at either school. Do either of them have a winning case based on the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment?
3. The employees of the US Treasury Department that work the border crossing between the United States and Mexico learned that they will be subject to routine drug testing. The customs bureau, which is a division of the treasury department, announces this policy along with its reasoning: since customs agents must routinely search for drugs coming into the United States, it makes sense that border guards must themselves be completely drug-free. Many border guards do not use drugs, have no intention of using drugs, and object to the invasion of their privacy. What is the constitutional basis for their objection?
4. Happy Time Chevrolet employs Jim Bydalek as a salesman. Bydalek takes part in a Gay Pride March in Los Angeles, is interviewed by a local news camera crew, and reports that he is gay and proud of it. His employer is not, and he is fired. Does he have any constitutional causes of action against his employer?
5. You begin work at the Happy-Go-Lucky Corporation on Halloween. On your second day at work, you wear a political button on your coat, supporting your choice for US senator in the upcoming election. Your boss, who is of a different political persuasion, looks at the button and says, "Take that stupid button off or you're fired." Has your boss violated your constitutional rights?
6. David Lucas paid \$975,000 for two residential parcels on the Isle of Palms near Charleston, South Carolina. His intention was to build houses on them. Two years later, the South Carolina legislature passed a statute that prohibited building beachfront properties. The purpose was to leave the dunes system in place to mitigate the effects of hurricanes and strong storms. The South Carolina Coastal Commission created the rules and regulations with substantial input from the community and from experts and with protection of the dune



system primarily in mind. People had been building on the shoreline for years, with harmful results to localities and the state treasury. When Lucas applied for permits to build two houses near the shoreline, his permits were rejected. He sued, arguing that the South Carolina legislation had effectively “taken” his property. At trial, South Carolina conceded that because of the legislation, Lucas’s property was effectively worth zero. Has there been a taking under the Fifth Amendment (as incorporated through the Fourteenth Amendment), and if so, what should the state owe to Lucas? Suppose that Lucas could have made an additional \$1 million by building a house on each of his parcels. Is he entitled to recover his original purchase price or his potential profits?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Harvey filed a suit against the state of Colorado, claiming that a Colorado state law violates the commerce clause. The court will agree if the statute
- places an undue burden on interstate commerce
  - promotes the public health, safety, morals, or general welfare of Colorado
  - regulates economic activities within the state’s borders
  - a and b
  - b and c

The state legislature in Maine enacts a law that directly conflicts with a federal law. Mapco Industries, located in Portland, Maine, cannot comply with both the state and the federal law.

- Because of federalism, the state law will have priority, as long as Maine is using its police powers.
- Because there’s a conflict, both laws are invalid; the state and the federal government will have to work out a compromise of some sort.
- The federal law preempts the state law.
- Both laws govern concurrently.

Hannah, who lives in Ada, is the owner of Superior Enterprises, Inc. She believes that certain actions in the state of Ohio infringe on her federal

constitutional rights, especially those found in the Bill of Rights. Most of these rights apply to the states under

- a. the supremacy clause
- b. the protection clause
- c. the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment
- d. the Tenth Amendment

Minnesota enacts a statute that bans all advertising that is in “bad taste,” “vulgar,” or “indecent.” In Michigan, Aaron Calloway and his brother, Clarence “Cab” Calloway, create unique beer that they decide to call Old Fart Ale. In their marketing, the brothers have a label in which an older man in a dirty T-shirt is sitting in easy chair, looking disheveled and having a three-day growth of stubble on his chin. It appears that the man is in the process of belching. He is also holding a can of Old Fart Ale. The Minnesota liquor commission orders all Minnesota restaurants, bars, and grocery stores to remove Old Fart Ale from their shelves. The state statute and the commission’s order are likely to be held by a court to be

- a. a violation of the Tenth Amendment
- b. a violation of the First Amendment
- c. a violation of the Calloways’ right to equal protection of the laws
- d. a violation of the commerce clause, since only the federal laws can prevent an article of commerce from entering into Minnesota’s market

Raunch Unlimited, a Virginia partnership, sells smut whenever and wherever it can. Some of its material is “obscene” (meeting the Supreme Court’s definition under *Miller v. California*) and includes child pornography. North Carolina has a statute that criminalizes obscenity. What are possible results if a store in Raleigh, North Carolina, carries Raunch merchandise?

- a. The partners could be arrested in North Carolina and may well be convicted.
- b. The materials in Raleigh may be the basis for a criminal conviction.
- c. The materials are protected under the First Amendment’s right of free speech.

- d. The materials are protected under state law.
- e. a and b

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. a
- 2. c
- 3. c
- 4. b
- 5. e

## Chapter 5 Administrative Law

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- 1. Understand the purpose served by federal administrative agencies.
- 2. Know the difference between executive branch agencies and independent agencies.
- 3. Understand the political control of agencies by the president and Congress.
- 4. Describe how agencies make rules and conduct hearings.
- 5. Describe how courts can be used to challenge administrative rulings.

From the 1930s on, administrative agencies, law, and procedures have virtually remade our government and much of private life. Every day, business must deal with rules and decisions of state and federal administrative agencies. Informally, such rules are often called regulations, and they differ (only in their source) from laws passed by Congress and signed into law by the president. The rules created by agencies are voluminous: thousands of new regulations pour forth each year. The overarching question of whether there is too much regulation—or the wrong kind of regulation—of our economic activities is an important one but well beyond the scope of this chapter, in which we offer an overview of the purpose of administrative agencies, their structure, and their impact on business.

### 5.1 Administrative Agencies: Their Structure and Powers

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain the reasons why we have federal administrative agencies.
2. Explain the difference between executive branch agencies and independent agencies.
3. Describe the constitutional issue that questions whether administrative agencies could have authority to make enforceable rules that affect business.

## Why Have Administrative Agencies?

The US Constitution mentions only three branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial (Articles I, II, and III). There is no mention of agencies in the Constitution, even though federal agencies are sometimes referred to as “the fourth branch of government.” The Supreme Court has recognized the legitimacy of federal administrative agencies to make rules that have the same binding effect as statutes by Congress.

Most commentators note that having agencies with rule-making power is a practical necessity: (1) Congress does not have the expertise or continuity to develop specialized knowledge in various areas (e.g., communications, the environment, aviation). (2) Because of this, it makes sense for Congress to set forth broad statutory guidance to an agency and delegate authority to the agency to propose rules that further the statutory purposes. (3) As long as Congress makes this delegating guidance sufficiently clear, it is not delegating improperly. If Congress’s guidelines are too vague or undefined, it is (in essence) giving away its constitutional power to some other group, and this it cannot do.

## Why Regulate the Economy at All?

The market often does not work properly, as economists often note. Monopolies, for example, happen in the natural course of human events but are not always desirable. To fix this, well-conceived and objectively enforced competition law (what is called antitrust law in the United States) is needed.

Negative externalities must be “fixed,” as well. For example, as we see in tort law ([Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort Law"](#)), people and business organizations often do things that impose costs (damages) on others, and the legal system will try—through the award of compensatory damages—to make fair adjustments. In terms of the ideal conditions for a free market, think of tort law as the legal system’s attempt to compensate for negative externalities: those costs imposed on people who have not voluntarily consented to bear those costs.

In terms of freedoms to enter or leave the market, the US constitutional guarantees of equal protection can prevent local, state, and federal governments from imposing discriminatory rules for commerce that would keep minorities, women, and gay people from full participation in business. For example, if the small town of Xenophobia, Colorado, passed a law that required all business owners and their employees to be Christian, heterosexual, and married, the equal protection clause (as well as numerous state and federal equal opportunity employment laws) would empower plaintiffs to go to court and have the law struck down as unconstitutional. Knowing that information is power, we will see many laws administered by regulatory agencies that seek to level the playing field of economic competition by requiring disclosure of the most pertinent information for consumers (consumer protection laws), investors (securities laws), and citizens (e.g., the toxics release inventory laws in environmental law).

### **Ideal Conditions for a Free Market**

1. There are many buyers and many sellers, and none of them has a substantial share of the market.
2. All buyers and sellers in the market are free to enter the market or leave it.
3. All buyers and all sellers have full and perfect knowledge of what other buyers and sellers are up to, including knowledge of prices, quantity, and quality of all goods being bought or sold.
4. The goods being sold in the market are similar enough to each other that participants do not have strong preferences as to which seller or buyer they deal with.
5. The costs and benefits of making or using the goods that are exchanged in the market are borne only by those who buy or sell those goods and not by third parties or people “external” to the market transaction. (That is, there are no “externalities.”)
6. All buyers and sellers are utility maximizers; each participant in the market tries to get as much as possible for as little as possible.
7. There are no parties, institutions, or governmental units regulating the price, quantity, or quality of any of the goods being bought and sold in the market.

In short, some forms of legislation and regulation are needed to counter a tendency toward consolidation of economic power ([Chapter 23 "Antitrust Law"](#)) and discriminatory attitudes

toward certain individuals and groups and to insist that people and companies clean up their own messes and not hide information that would empower voluntary choices in the free market. But there are additional reasons to regulate. For example, in economic systems, it is likely for natural monopolies to occur. These are where one firm can most efficiently supply all of the good or service. Having duplicate (or triplicate) systems for supplying electricity, for example, would be inefficient, so most states have a public utilities commission to determine both price and quality of service. This is direct regulation.

Sometimes destructive competition can result if there is no regulation. Banking and insurance are good examples of this. Without government regulation of banks (setting standards and methods), open and fierce competition would result in widespread bank failures. That would erode public confidence in banks and business generally. The current situation (circa 2011) of six major banks that are “too big to fail” is, however, an example of destructive *noncompetition*. Other market imperfections can yield a demand for regulation. For example, there is a need to regulate frequencies for public broadcast on radio, television, and other wireless transmissions (for police, fire, national defense, etc.). Many economists would also list an adequate supply of public goods as something that must be created by government. On its own, for example, the market would not provide public goods such as education, a highway system, lighthouses, a military for defense.

True laissez-faire capitalism—a market free from any regulation—would not try to deal with market imperfections and would also allow people to freely choose products, services, and other arrangements that historically have been deemed socially unacceptable. These would include making enforceable contracts for the sale and purchase of persons (slavery), sexual services, “street drugs” such as heroin or crack cocaine, votes for public office, grades for this course in business law, and even marriage partnership.

Thus the free market in actual terms—and not in theory—consists of commerce legally constrained by what is economically desirable and by what is socially desirable as well. Public policy objectives in the social arena include ensuring equal opportunity in employment, protecting employees from unhealthy or unsafe work environments, preserving environmental quality and resources, and protecting consumers from unsafe products. Sometimes these

objectives are met by giving individuals statutory rights that can be used in bringing a complaint (e.g., Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, for employment discrimination), and sometimes they are met by creating agencies with the right to investigate and monitor and enforce statutory law and regulations created to enforce such law (e.g., the Environmental Protection Agency, for bringing a lawsuit against a polluting company).

## **History of Federal Agencies**

Through the commerce clause in the US Constitution, Congress has the power to regulate trade between the states and with foreign nations. The earliest federal agency therefore dealt with trucking and railroads, to literally set the rules of the road for interstate commerce. The first federal agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), was created in 1887. Congress delegated to the ICC the power to enforce federal laws against railroad rate discrimination and other unfair pricing practices. By the early part of this century, the ICC gained the power to fix rates. From the 1970s through 1995, however, Congress passed deregulatory measures, and the ICC was formally abolished in 1995, with its powers transferred to the Surface Transportation Board.

Beginning with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in 1914, Congress has created numerous other agencies, many of them familiar actors in American government. Today more than eighty-five federal agencies have jurisdiction to regulate some form of private activity. Most were created since 1930, and more than a third since 1960. A similar growth has occurred at the state level. Most states now have dozens of regulatory agencies, many of them overlapping in function with the federal bodies.

## **Classification of Agencies**

Independent agencies are different from federal executive departments and other executive agencies by their structural and functional characteristics. Most executive departments have a single director, administrator, or secretary appointed by the president of the United States. Independent agencies almost always have a commission or board consisting of five to seven members who share power over the agency. The president appoints the commissioners or board subject to Senate confirmation, but they often serve with staggered terms and often for longer terms than a usual four-year presidential term. They cannot be removed except for “good cause.”

This means that most presidents will not get to appoint all the commissioners of a given independent agency. Most independent agencies have a statutory requirement of bipartisan membership on the commission, so the president cannot simply fill vacancies with members of his own political party.

In addition to the ICC and the FTC, the major independent agencies are the Federal Communications Commission (1934), Securities and Exchange Commission (1934), National Labor Relations Board (1935), and Environmental Protection Agency (1970). See [Note 5.4 "Ideal Conditions for a Free Market"](#) in the sidebar.

By contrast, members of executive branch agencies serve at the pleasure of the president and are therefore far more amenable to political control. One consequence of this distinction is that the rules that independent agencies promulgate may not be reviewed by the president or his staff—only Congress may directly overrule them—whereas the White House or officials in the various cabinet departments may oversee the work of the agencies contained within them (unless specifically denied the power by Congress).

### **Powers of Agencies**

Agencies have a variety of powers. Many of the original statutes that created them, like the Federal Communications Act, gave them licensing power. No party can enter into the productive activity covered by the act without prior license from the agency—for example, no utility can start up a nuclear power plant unless first approved by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. In recent years, the move toward deregulation of the economy has led to diminution of some licensing power. Many agencies also have the authority to set the rates charged by companies subject to the agency's jurisdiction. Finally, the agencies can regulate business practices. The FTC has general jurisdiction over all business in interstate commerce to monitor and root out “unfair acts” and “deceptive practices.” The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) oversees the issuance of corporate securities and other investments and monitors the practices of the stock exchanges.

Unlike courts, administrative agencies are charged with the responsibility of carrying out a specific assignment or reaching a goal or set of goals. They are not to remain neutral on the various issues of the day; they must act. They have been given legislative powers because in a



society growing ever more complex, Congress does not know how to legislate with the kind of detail that is necessary, nor would it have the time to approach all the sectors of society even if it tried. Precisely because they are to do what general legislative bodies cannot do, agencies are specialized bodies. Through years of experience in dealing with similar problems they accumulate a body of knowledge that they can apply to accomplish their statutory duties.

All administrative agencies have two different sorts of personnel. The heads, whether a single administrator or a collegial body of commissioners, are political appointees and serve for relatively limited terms. Below them is a more or less permanent staff—the bureaucracy. Much policy making occurs at the staff level, because these employees are in essential control of gathering facts and presenting data and argument to the commissioners, who wield the ultimate power of the agencies.

### **The Constitution and Agencies**

Congress can establish an agency through legislation. When Congress gives powers to an agency, the legislation is known as an enabling act. The concept that Congress can delegate power to an agency is known as the delegation doctrine. Usually, the agency will have all three kinds of power: executive, legislative, and judicial. (That is, the agency can set the rules that business must comply with, can investigate and prosecute those businesses, and can hold administrative hearings for violations of those rules. They are, in effect, rule maker, prosecutor, and judge.)

Because agencies have all three types of governmental powers, important constitutional questions were asked when Congress first created them. The most important question was whether Congress was giving away its legislative power. Was the separation of powers violated if agencies had power to make rules that were equivalent to legislative statutes?

In 1935, in *Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States*, the Supreme Court overturned the National Industrial Recovery Act on the ground that the congressional delegation of power was too broad. <sup>[1]</sup> Under the law, industry trade groups were granted the authority to devise a code of fair competition for the entire industry, and these codes became law if approved by the president. No administrative body was created to scrutinize the arguments for a particular code, to develop evidence, or to test one version of a code against another. Thus it was unconstitutional for the Congress to transfer all of its legislative powers to an agency. In later

decisions, it was made clear that Congress could delegate some of its legislative powers, but only if the delegation of authority was not overly broad.

Still, some congressional enabling acts are very broad, such as the enabling legislation for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which is given the authority to make rules to provide for safe and healthful working conditions in US workplaces. Such a broad initiative power gives OSHA considerable discretion. But, as noted in [Section 5.2 "Controlling Administrative Agencies"](#), there are both executive and judicial controls over administrative agency activities, as well as ongoing control by Congress through funding and the continuing oversight of agencies, both in hearings and through subsequent statutory amendments.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Congress creates administrative agencies through enabling acts. In these acts, Congress must delegate authority by giving the agency some direction as to what it wants the agency to do. Agencies are usually given broad powers to investigate, set standards (promulgating regulations), and enforce those standards. Most agencies are executive branch agencies, but some are independent.

#### EXERCISES

1. Explain why Congress needs to delegate rule-making authority to a specialized agency.
2. Explain why there is any need for interference in the market by means of laws or regulations.

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[1] *Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States*, 295 US 495 (1935).

## 5.2 Controlling Administrative Agencies

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how the president controls administrative agencies.
2. Understand how Congress controls administrative agencies.
3. Understand how the courts can control administrative agencies.

During the course of the past seventy years, a substantial debate has been conducted, often in shrill terms, about the legitimacy of administrative lawmaking. One criticism is that agencies are “captured” by the industry they are directed to regulate. Another is that they overregulate,

stifling individual initiative and the ability to compete. During the 1960s and 1970s, a massive outpouring of federal law created many new agencies and greatly strengthened the hands of existing ones. In the late 1970s during the Carter administration, Congress began to deregulate American society, and deregulation increased under the Reagan administration. But the accounting frauds of WorldCom, Enron, and others led to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, and the financial meltdown of 2008 has led to reregulation of the financial sector. It remains to be seen whether the Deepwater Horizon oil blowout of 2010 will lead to more environmental regulations or a rethinking on how to make agencies more effective regulators.

Administrative agencies are the focal point of controversy because they are policy-making bodies, incorporating facets of legislative, executive, and judicial power in a hybrid form that fits uneasily at best in the framework of American government (see [Figure 5.1 "Major Administrative Agencies of the United States"](#)). They are necessarily at the center of tugging and hauling by the legislature, the executive branch, and the judiciary, each of which has different means of exercising political control over them. In early 1990, for example, the Bush administration approved a Food and Drug Administration regulation that limited disease-prevention claims by food packagers, reversing a position by the Reagan administration in 1987 permitting such claims.

*Figure 5.1 Major Administrative Agencies of the United States*



## Legislative Control

Congress can always pass a law repealing a regulation that an agency promulgates. Because this is a time-consuming process that runs counter to the reason for creating administrative bodies, it happens rarely. Another approach to controlling agencies is to reduce or threaten to reduce their appropriations. By retaining ultimate control of the purse strings, Congress can exercise considerable informal control over regulatory policy.

## Executive Control

The president (or a governor, for state agencies) can exercise considerable control over agencies that are part of his cabinet departments and that are not statutorily defined as independent. Federal agencies, moreover, are subject to the fiscal scrutiny of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), subject to the direct control of the president. Agencies are not permitted to go directly to Congress for increases in budget; these requests must be submitted through the

OMB, giving the president indirect leverage over the continuation of administrators' programs and policies.

## Judicial Review of Agency Actions

Administrative agencies are creatures of law and like everyone else must obey the law. The courts have jurisdiction to hear claims that the agencies have overstepped their legal authority or have acted in some unlawful manner.

Courts are unlikely to overturn administrative actions, believing in general that the agencies are better situated to judge their own jurisdiction and are experts in rulemaking for those matters delegated to them by Congress. Some agency activities are not reviewable, for a number of reasons. However, after a business (or some other interested party) has exhausted all administrative remedies, it may seek judicial review of a final agency decision. The reviewing court is often asked to strike down or modify agency actions on several possible bases (see [Section 5.5.2 "Strategies for Obtaining Judicial Review"](#) on "Strategies for Obtaining Judicial Review").

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Administrative agencies are given unusual powers: to legislate, investigate, and adjudicate. But these powers are limited by executive and legislative controls and by judicial review.

### EXERCISES

1. Find the website of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). Identify from that site a product that has been banned by the CPSC for sale in the United States. What reasons were given for its exclusion from the US market?
2. What has Congress told the CPSC to do in its enabling act? Is this a clear enough mandate to guide the agency? What could Congress do if the CPSC does something that may be outside of the scope of its powers? What can an affected business do?

## 5.3 The Administrative Procedure Act

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why the Administrative Procedure Act was needed.
2. Understand how hearings are conducted under the act.
3. Understand how the act affects rulemaking by agencies.

In 1946, Congress enacted the Administrative Procedure Act (APA). This fundamental statute detailed for all federal administrative agencies how they must function when they are deciding cases or issuing regulations, the two basic tasks of administration. At the state level, the Model State Administrative Procedure Act, issued in 1946 and revised in 1961, has been adopted in twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia; three states have adopted the 1981 revision. The other states have statutes that resemble the model state act to some degree.

### **Trial-Type Hearings**

Deciding cases is a major task of many agencies. For example, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is empowered to charge a company with having violated the Federal Trade Commission Act. Perhaps a seller is accused of making deceptive claims in its advertising. Proceeding in a manner similar to a court, staff counsel will prepare a case against the company, which can defend itself through its lawyers. The case is tried before an administrative law judge (ALJ), formerly known as an administrative hearing examiner. The change in nomenclature was made in 1972 to enhance the prestige of ALJs and more accurately reflect their duties. Although not appointed for life as federal judges are, the ALJ must be free of assignments inconsistent with the judicial function and is not subject to supervision by anyone in the agency who carries on an investigative or prosecutorial function.

The accused parties are entitled to receive notice of the issues to be raised, to present evidence, to argue, to cross-examine, and to appear with their lawyers. *Ex parte* (eks PAR-tay) communications—contacts between the ALJ and outsiders or one party when both parties are not present—are prohibited. However, the usual burden-of-proof standard followed in a civil proceeding in court does not apply: the ALJ is not bound to decide in favor of that party producing the more persuasive evidence. The rule in most administrative proceedings is “substantial evidence,” evidence that is not flimsy or weak, but is not necessarily overwhelming evidence, either. The ALJ in most cases will write an opinion. That opinion is not the decision of the agency, which can be made only by the commissioners or agency head. In effect, the ALJ’s opinion is appealed to the commission itself.

Certain types of agency actions that have a direct impact on individuals need not be filtered through a full-scale hearing. Safety and quality inspections (grading of food, inspection of

airplanes) can be made on the spot by skilled inspectors. Certain licenses can be administered through tests without a hearing (a test for a driver's license), and some decisions can be made by election of those affected (labor union elections).

## Rulemaking

Trial-type hearings generally impose on particular parties liabilities based on past or present facts. Because these cases will serve as precedents, they are a partial guide to future conduct by others. But they do not directly apply to nonparties, who may argue in a subsequent case that their conduct does not fit within the holding announced in the case. Agencies can affect future conduct far more directly by announcing rules that apply to all who come within the agency's jurisdiction.

The acts creating most of the major federal agencies expressly grant them authority to engage in rulemaking. This means, in essence, authority to legislate. The outpouring of federal regulations has been immense. The APA directs agencies about to engage in rulemaking to give notice in the *Federal Register* of their intent to do so.

The *Federal Register* is published daily, Monday through Friday, in Washington, DC, and contains notice of various actions, including announcements of proposed rulemaking and regulations as adopted. The notice must specify the time, place, and nature of the rulemaking and offer a description of the proposed rule or the issues involved. Any interested person or organization is entitled to participate by submitting written "data, views or arguments."

Agencies are not legally required to air debate over proposed rules, though they often do so.

The procedure just described is known as "informal" rulemaking. A different procedure is required for "formal" rulemaking, defined as those instances in which the enabling legislation directs an agency to make rules "on the record after opportunity for an agency hearing." When engaging in formal rulemaking, agencies must *hold* an adversary hearing.

Administrative regulations are not legally binding unless they are published. Agencies must publish in the *Federal Register* the text of final regulations, which ordinarily do not become effective until thirty days later. Every year the annual output of regulations is collected and reprinted in

the *Code of Federal Regulations (CFR)*, a

multivolume paperback series containing all federal rules and regulations keyed to the fifty titles of the US Code (the compilation of *all* federal statutes enacted by Congress and grouped according to subject).

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Agencies make rules that have the same effect as laws passed by Congress and the president. But such rules (regulations) must allow for full participation by interested parties. The Administrative Procedure Act (APA) governs both rulemaking and the agency enforcement of regulations, and it provides a process for fair hearings.

#### EXERCISES

1. Go to <http://www.regulations.gov/search/Regs/home.html#home>. Browse the site. Find a topic that interests you, and then find a proposed regulation. Notice how comments on the proposed rule are invited.
2. Why would there be a trial by an administrative agency? Describe the process.

## 5.4 Administrative Burdens on Business Operations

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the paperwork burden imposed by administrative agencies.
2. Explain why agencies have the power of investigation, and what limits there are to that power.
3. Explain the need for the Freedom of Information Act and how it works in the US legal system.

### The Paperwork Burden

The administrative process is not frictionless. The interplay between government agency and private enterprise can burden business operations in a number of ways. Several of these are noted in this section.

Deciding whether and how to act are not decisions that government agencies reach out of the blue. They rely heavily on information garnered from business itself. Dozens of federal agencies require corporations to keep hundreds of types of records and to file numerous periodic reports. The Commission on Federal Paperwork, established during the Ford administration to consider ways of reducing the paperwork burden, estimated in its final report in 1977 that the total annual cost of federal paperwork amounted to \$50 billion and that the 10,000 largest business



enterprises spent \$10 billion annually on paperwork alone. The paperwork involved in licensing a single nuclear power plant, the commission said, costs upward of \$15 million.

Not surprisingly, therefore, businesses have sought ways of avoiding requests for data. Since the 1940s, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has collected economic data on corporate performance from individual companies for statistical purposes. As long as each company engages in a single line of business, data are comparable. When the era of conglomerates began in the 1970s, with widely divergent types of businesses brought together under the roof of a single corporate parent, the data became useless for purposes of examining the competitive behavior of different industries. So the FTC ordered dozens of large companies to break out their economic information according to each line of business that they carried on. The companies resisted, but the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, where much of the litigation over federal administrative action is decided, directed the companies to comply with the commission's order, holding that the Federal Trade Commission Act clearly permits the agency to collect information for investigatory purposes. <sup>[1]</sup>

In 1980, responding to cries that businesses, individuals, and state and local governments were being swamped by federal demands for paperwork, Congress enacted the Paperwork Reduction Act. It gives power to the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to develop uniform policies for coordinating the gathering, storage, and transmission of all the millions of reports flowing in each year to the scores of federal departments and agencies requesting information. These reports include tax and Medicare forms, financial loan and job applications, questionnaires of all sorts, compliance reports, and tax and business records. The OMB was given the power also to determine whether new kinds of information are needed. In effect, any agency that wants to collect new information from outside must obtain the OMB's approval.

## **Inspections**

No one likes surprise inspections. A section of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 empowers agents of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to search work areas for safety hazards and for violations of OSHA regulations. The act does not specify whether inspectors are required to obtain search warrants, required under the Fourth Amendment in criminal cases. For many years, the government insisted that surprise

inspections are not unreasonable and that the time required to obtain a warrant would defeat the surprise element. The Supreme Court finally ruled squarely on the issue in 1978.

In *Marshall v. Barlow's, Inc.*, the court held that no less than private individuals, businesses are entitled to refuse police demands to search the premises unless a court has issued a search warrant. <sup>[2]</sup>

But where a certain type of business is closely regulated, surprise inspections are the norm, and no warrant is required. For example, businesses with liquor licenses that might sell to minors are subject to both overt and covert inspections (e.g., an undercover officer may “search” a liquor store by sending an underage patron to the store). Or a junkyard that specializes in automobiles and automobile parts may also be subject to surprise inspections, on the rationale that junkyards are highly likely to be active in the resale of stolen autos or stolen auto parts. <sup>[3]</sup>

It is also possible for inspections to take place without a search warrant and without the permission of the business. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) wished to inspect parts of the Dow Chemical facility in Midland, Michigan, without the benefit of warrant. When they were refused, agents of the EPA obtained a fairly advanced aerial mapping camera and rented an airplane to fly over the Dow facility. Dow went to court for a restraining order against the EPA and a request to have the EPA turn over all photographs taken. But the Supreme Court ruled that the areas photographed were “open fields” and not subject to the protections of the Fourth Amendment. <sup>[4]</sup>

### **Access to Business Information in Government Files**

In 1966, Congress enacted the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), opening up to the citizenry many of the files of the government. (The act was amended in 1974 and again in 1976 to overcome a tendency of many agencies to stall or refuse access to their files.) Under the FOIA, any person has a legally enforceable right of access to all government documents, with nine specific exceptions, such as classified military intelligence, medical files, and trade secrets and commercial or financial information if “obtained from a person and privileged or confidential.” Without the trade-secret and financial-information exemptions, business competitors could, merely by requesting it, obtain highly sensitive competitive information sitting in government files.

A federal agency is required under the FOIA to respond to a document request within ten days. But in practice, months or even years may pass before the government actually responds to an FOIA request. Requesters must also pay the cost of locating and copying the records. Moreover, not all documents are available for public inspection. Along with the trade-secret and financial-information exemptions, the FOIA specifically exempts the following:

- records required by executive order of the president to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or public policy
- records related solely to the internal personnel rules and practice of an agency
- records exempted from disclosure by another statute
- interagency memos or decisions reflecting the deliberative process
- personnel files and other files that if disclosed, would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy
- information compiled for law enforcement purposes
- geological information concerning wells

Note that the government may provide such information but is not required to provide such information; it retains discretion to provide information or not.

Regulated companies are often required to submit confidential information to the government. For these companies, submitting such information presents a danger under the FOIA of disclosure to competitors. To protect information from disclosure, the company is well advised to mark each document as privileged and confidential so that government officials reviewing it for a FOIA request will not automatically disclose it. Most agencies notify a company whose data they are about to disclose. But these practices are not legally required under the FOIA.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Government agencies, in order to do their jobs, collect a great deal of information from businesses. This can range from routine paperwork (often burdensome) to inspections, those with warrants and those without. Surprise inspections are allowed for closely regulated industries but are subject to Fourth Amendment requirements in general. Some information collected by agencies can be accessed using the Freedom of Information Act.

#### EXERCISES

1. Give two examples of a closely regulated industry. Explain why some warrantless searches would be allowed.
2. Find out why FOIA requests often take months or years to accomplish.

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[1] *In re FTC Line of Business Report Litigation*, 595 F.2d 685 (D.C. Cir. 1978).

[2] *Marshall v. Barlow's, Inc.*, 436 US 307 (1978).

[3] *New York v. Burger*, 482 US 691 (1987).

[4] *Dow Chemical Co. v. United States Environmental Protection Agency*, 476 US 227 (1986).

## 5.5 The Scope of Judicial Review

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the “exhaustion of remedies” requirement.
2. Detail various strategies for obtaining judicial review of agency rules.
3. Explain under what circumstances it is possible to sue the government.

Neither an administrative agency’s adjudication nor its issuance of a regulation is necessarily final. Most federal agency decisions are appealable to the federal circuit courts. To get to court, the appellant must overcome numerous complex hurdles. He or she must have standing—that is, be in some sense directly affected by the decision or regulation. The case must be ripe for review; administrative remedies such as further appeal within the agency must have been exhausted.

### Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies

Before you can complain to court about an agency’s action, you must first try to get the agency to reconsider its action. Generally, you must have asked for a hearing at the hearing examiner level, there must have been a decision reached that was unfavorable to you, and you must have appealed the decision to the full board. The full board must rule against you, and only then will you be heard by a court. The broadest exception to this exhaustion of administrative remedies requirement is if the agency had no authority to issue the rule or regulation in the first place, if exhaustion of remedies would be impractical or futile,

or if great harm would happen should the rule or regulation continue to apply. Also, if the agency is not acting in good faith, the courts will hear an appeal without exhaustion.

### **Strategies for Obtaining Judicial Review**

Once these obstacles are cleared, the court may look at one of a series of claims. The appellant might assert that the agency's action was *ultra vires* (UL-truh VI-reez)—beyond the scope of its authority as set down in the statute. This attack is rarely successful. A somewhat more successful claim is that the agency did not abide by its own procedures or those imposed upon it by the Administrative Procedure Act.

In formal rulemaking, the appellant also might insist that the agency lacked substantial evidence for the determination that it made. If there is virtually no evidence to support the agency's findings, the court may reverse. But findings of fact are not often overturned by the courts.

Likewise, there has long been a presumption that when an agency issues a regulation, it has the authority to do so: those opposing the regulation must bear a heavy burden in court to upset it.

This is not a surprising rule, for otherwise courts, not administrators, would be the authors of regulations. Nevertheless, regulations cannot exceed the scope of the authority conferred by

Congress on the agency. In an important 1981 case before the Supreme Court, the issue was whether the secretary of labor, acting through the Occupational Health and Safety

Administration (OSHA), could lawfully issue a standard limiting exposure to cotton dust in the workplace without first undertaking a cost-benefit analysis. A dozen cotton textile

manufacturers and the American Textile Manufacturers Institute, representing 175 companies, asserted that the cotton dust standard was unlawful because it did not rationally relate the

benefits to be derived from the standard to the costs that the standard would impose.

See [Section 5.6 "Cases"](#), *American Textile Manufacturers Institute v. Donovan*.

In summary, then, an individual or a company may (after exhaustion of administrative remedies) challenge agency action where such action is the following:

- not in accordance with the agency's scope of authority
- not in accordance with the US Constitution or the Administrative Procedure Act
- not in accordance with the substantial evidence test
- unwarranted by the facts

- arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of discretion, or otherwise not in accord with the law
- Section 706 of the Administrative Procedure Act sets out those standards. While it is difficult to show that an agency's action is arbitrary and capricious, there are cases that have so held. For example, after the Reagan administration set aside a Carter administration rule from the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration on passive restraints in automobiles, State Farm and other insurance companies challenged the reversal as arbitrary and capricious. Examining the record, the Supreme Court found that the agency had failed to state enough reasons for its reversal and required the agency to review the record and the rule and provide adequate reasons for its reversal. State Farm and other insurance companies thus gained a legal benefit by keeping an agency rule that placed costs on automakers for increased passenger safety and potentially reducing the number of injury claims from those it had insured. <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Suing the Government**

In the modern administrative state, the range of government activity is immense, and administrative agencies frequently get in the way of business enterprise. Often, bureaucratic involvement is wholly legitimate, compelled by law; sometimes, however, agencies or government officials may overstep their bounds, in a fit of zeal or spite. What recourse does the private individual or company have?

Mainly for historical reasons, it has always been more difficult to sue the government than to sue private individuals or corporations. For one thing, the government has long had recourse to the doctrine of sovereign immunity as a shield against lawsuits. Yet in 1976, Congress amended the Administrative Procedure Act to waive any federal claim to sovereign immunity in cases of injunctive or other nonmonetary relief. Earlier, in 1946, in the Federal Tort Claims Act, Congress had waived sovereign immunity of the federal government for most tort claims for money damages, although the act contains several exceptions for specific agencies (e.g., one cannot sue for injuries resulting from fiscal operations of the Treasury Department or for injuries stemming from activities of the military in wartime). The act also contains a major exception for claims "based upon [an official's] exercise or performance or the failure to exercise or perform a discretionary function or duty." This exception prevents suits against parole boards for paroling dangerous criminals who then kill or maim in the course of another crime and suits

against officials whose decision to ship explosive materials by public carrier leads to mass deaths and injuries following an explosion en route. <sup>[2]</sup>

In recent years, the Supreme Court has been stripping away the traditional immunity enjoyed by many government officials against personal suits. Some government employees—judges, prosecutors, legislators, and the president, for example—have absolute immunity against suit for official actions. But many public administrators and government employees have at best a qualified immunity. Under a provision of the Civil Rights Act of 1871 (so-called Section 1983 actions), *state* officials can be sued in federal court for money damages whenever “under color of any state law” they deprive anyone of his rights under the Constitution or federal law. In *Bivens v. Six Unknown Federal Narcotics Agents*, the Supreme Court held that *federal* agents may be sued for violating the plaintiff’s Fourth Amendment rights against an unlawful search of his home. <sup>[3]</sup> Subsequent cases have followed this logic to permit suits for violations of other constitutional provisions. This area of the law is in a state of flux, and it is likely to continue to evolve.

Sometimes damage is done to an individual or business because the government has given out erroneous information. For example, suppose that Charles, a bewildered, disabled navy employee, is receiving a federal disability annuity. Under the regulations, he would lose his pension if he took a job that paid him in each of two succeeding years more than 80 percent of what he earned in his old navy job. A few years later, Congress changed the law, making him ineligible if he earned more than 80 percent in anyone year. For many years, Charles earned considerably less than the ceiling amount. But then one year he got the opportunity to make some extra money. Not wishing to lose his pension, he called an employee relations specialist in the US Navy and asked how much he could earn and still keep his pension. The specialist gave him erroneous information over the telephone and then sent him an out-of-date form that said Charles could safely take on the extra work. Unfortunately, as it turned out, Charles did exceed the salary limit, and so the government cut off his pension during the time he earned too much. Charles sues to recover his lost pension. He argues that he relied to his detriment on false information supplied by the navy and that in fairness the government should be estopped from denying his claim.

Unfortunately for Charles, he will lose his case. In *Office of Personnel Management v. Richmond*, the Supreme Court reasoned that it would be unconstitutional to permit recovery. <sup>[4]</sup> The appropriations clause of Article I says that federal money can be paid out only through an appropriation made by law. The law prevented this particular payment to be made. If the court were to make an exception, it would permit executive officials in effect to make binding payments, even though unauthorized, simply by misrepresenting the facts. The harsh reality, therefore, is that mistakes of the government are generally held against the individual, not the government, unless the law specifically provides for recompense (as, for example, in the Federal Tort Claims Act just discussed).

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

After exhausting administrative remedies, there are numerous grounds for seeking judicial review of an agency's order or of a final rule. While courts defer to agencies to some degree, an agency must follow its own rules, comply with the Administrative Procedure Act, act within the scope of its delegated authority, avoid acting in an arbitrary manner, and make final rules that are supported by substantial evidence.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why would US courts require that someone seeking judicial review of an agency order first exhaust administrative remedies?
2. On the Internet, find a case where someone has successfully sued the US government under the Federal Tort Claims Act. What kind of case was it? Did the government argue sovereign immunity? Does sovereign immunity even make sense to you?

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[1] *Motor Vehicle Manufacturers' Assn. v. State Farm Mutual Ins.*, 463 US 29 (1983).

[2] *Dalehite v. United States*, 346 US 15 (1953).

[3] *Bivens v. Six Unknown Federal Narcotics Agents*, 403 US 388 (1971).

[4] *Office of Personnel Management v. Richmond*, 110 S. Ct. 2465 (1990).

## 5.6 Cases



## ***Marshall v. Barlow's, Inc.***

*Marshall v. Barlow's, Inc.*

*436 U.S. 307 (U.S. Supreme Court 1978)*

MR. JUSTICE WHITE delivered the opinion of the Court.

Section 8(a) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSHA or Act) empowers agents of the Secretary of Labor (Secretary) to search the work area of any employment facility within the Act's jurisdiction. The purpose of the search is to inspect for safety hazards and violations of OSHA regulations. No search warrant or other process is expressly required under the Act.

On the morning of September 11, 1975, an OSHA inspector entered the customer service area of Barlow's, Inc., an electrical and plumbing installation business located in Pocatello, Idaho. The president and general manager, Ferrol G. "Bill" Barlow, was on hand; and the OSHA inspector, after showing his credentials, informed Mr. Barlow that he wished to conduct a search of the working areas of the business. Mr. Barlow inquired whether any complaint had been received about his company. The inspector answered no, but that Barlow's, Inc., had simply turned up in the agency's selection process. The inspector again asked to enter the nonpublic area of the business; Mr. Barlow's response was to inquire whether the inspector had a search warrant. The inspector had none. Thereupon, Mr. Barlow refused the inspector admission to the employee area of his business. He said he was relying on his rights as guaranteed by the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution.

Three months later, the Secretary petitioned the United States District Court for the District of Idaho to issue an order compelling Mr. Barlow to admit the inspector. The requested order was issued on December 30, 1975, and was presented to Mr. Barlow on January 5, 1976. Mr. Barlow again refused admission, and he sought his own injunctive relief against the warrantless searches assertedly permitted by OSHA....The Warrant Clause of the Fourth Amendment protects commercial buildings as well as private homes. To hold otherwise would belie the origin of that Amendment, and the American colonial experience.

An important forerunner of the first 10 Amendments to the United States Constitution, the Virginia Bill of Rights, specifically opposed "general warrants, whereby an officer or messenger may be commanded to search suspected places without evidence of a fact committed." The

general warrant was a recurring point of contention in the Colonies immediately preceding the Revolution. The particular offensiveness it engendered was acutely felt by the merchants and businessmen whose premises and products were inspected for compliance with the several parliamentary revenue measures that most irritated the colonists....

\* \* \*

This Court has already held that warrantless searches are generally unreasonable, and that this rule applies to commercial premises as well as homes. In *Camara v. Municipal Court*, we held:

*[E]xcept in certain carefully defined classes of cases, a search of private property without proper consent is 'unreasonable' unless it has been authorized by a valid search warrant.*

*On the same day, we also ruled: As we explained in Camara, a search of private houses is presumptively unreasonable if conducted without a warrant. The businessman, like the occupant of a residence, has a constitutional right to go about his business free from unreasonable official entries upon his private commercial property. The businessman, too, has that right placed in jeopardy if the decision to enter and inspect for violation of regulatory laws can be made and enforced by the inspector in the field without official authority evidenced by a warrant. These same cases also held that the Fourth Amendment prohibition against unreasonable searches protects against warrantless intrusions during civil as well as criminal investigations. The reason is found in the "basic purpose of this Amendment...[which] is to safeguard the privacy and security of individuals against arbitrary invasions by governmental officials." If the government intrudes on a person's property, the privacy interest suffers whether the government's motivation is to investigate violations of criminal laws or breaches of other statutory or regulatory standards....*

[A]n exception from the search warrant requirement has been recognized for "pervasively regulated business[es]," *United States v. Biswell*, 406 U.S. 311, 316 (1972), and for "closely regulated" industries "long subject to close supervision and inspection," *Colonnade Catering Corp. v. United States*, 397 U.S. 72, 74, 77 (1970). These cases are indeed exceptions, but they represent responses to relatively unique circumstances. Certain industries have such a history of

government oversight that no reasonable expectation of privacy could exist for a proprietor over the stock of such an enterprise. Liquor (*Colonnade*) and firearms (*Biswell*) are industries of this type when an entrepreneur embarks upon such a business, he has voluntarily chosen to subject himself to a full arsenal of governmental regulation.

\* \* \*

The clear import of our cases is that the closely regulated industry of the type involved in *Colonnade* and *Biswell* is the exception. The Secretary would make it the rule. Invoking the Walsh-Healey Act of 1936, 41 U.S.C. § 35 et seq., the Secretary attempts to support a conclusion that all businesses involved in interstate commerce have long been subjected to close supervision of employee safety and health conditions. But...it is quite unconvincing to argue that the imposition of minimum wages and maximum hours on employers who contracted with the Government under the Walsh-Healey Act prepared the entirety of American interstate commerce for regulation of working conditions to the minutest detail. Nor can any but the most fictional sense of voluntary consent to later searches be found in the single fact that one conducts a business affecting interstate commerce. Under current practice and law, few businesses can be conducted without having some effect on interstate commerce.

\* \* \*

The critical fact in this case is that entry over Mr. Barlow's objection is being sought by a Government agent. Employees are not being prohibited from reporting OSHA violations. What they observe in their daily functions is undoubtedly beyond the employer's reasonable expectation of privacy. The Government inspector, however, is not an employee. Without a warrant he stands in no better position than a member of the public. What is observable by the public is observable, without a warrant, by the Government inspector as well. The owner of a business has not, by the necessary utilization of employees in his operation, thrown open the areas where employees alone are permitted to the warrantless scrutiny of Government agents. That an employee is free to report, and the Government is free to use, any evidence of noncompliance with OSHA that the employee observes furnishes no justification for federal agents to enter a place of business from which the public is restricted and to conduct their own warrantless search.

\* \* \*

[The District Court judgment is affirmed.]

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. State, as briefly and clearly as possible, the argument that Barlow's is making in this case.
2. Why would some industries or businesses be "closely regulated"? What are some of those businesses?
3. The Fourth Amendment speaks of "people" being secure in their "persons, houses, papers, and effects." Why would the Fourth Amendment apply to a business, which is not in a "house"?
4. If the Fourth Amendment does not distinguish between closely regulated industries and those that are not, why does the court do so?

### ***American Textile Manufacturers Institute v. Donovan***

*American Textile Manufacturers Institute v. Donovan*

*452 U.S. 490 (1981)*

JUSTICE BRENNAN delivered the opinion of the Court.

Congress enacted the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (Act) "to assure so far as possible every working man and woman in the Nation safe and healthful working conditions...." The Act authorizes the Secretary of Labor to establish, after notice and opportunity to comment, mandatory nationwide standards governing health and safety in the workplace. In 1978, the Secretary, acting through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), promulgated a standard limiting occupational exposure to cotton dust, an airborne particle byproduct of the preparation and manufacture of cotton products, exposure to which produces a "constellation of respiratory effects" known as "byssinosis." This disease was one of the expressly recognized health hazards that led to passage of the Act.

Petitioners in these consolidated cases representing the interests of the cotton industry, challenged the validity of the "Cotton Dust Standard" in the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit pursuant to § 6 (f) of the Act, 29 U.S.C. § 655 (f). They contend in this Court, as they did below, that the Act requires OSHA to demonstrate that its Standard reflects a reasonable relationship between the costs and benefits associated with the Standard.

Respondents, the Secretary of Labor and two labor organizations, counter that Congress balanced the costs and benefits in the Act itself, and that the Act should therefore be construed not to require OSHA to do so. They interpret the Act as mandating that OSHA enact the most protective standard possible to eliminate a significant risk of material health impairment, subject to the constraints of economic and technological feasibility.

The Court of Appeals held that the Act did not require OSHA to compare costs and benefits. We granted certiorari, 449 U.S. 817 (1980), to resolve this important question, which was presented but not decided in last Term's *Industrial Union Dept. v. American Petroleum Institute*, 448 U.S. 607 (1980), and to decide other issues related to the Cotton Dust Standard.

\* \* \*

Not until the early 1960's was byssinosis recognized in the United States as a distinct occupational hazard associated with cotton mills. In 1966, the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH), a private organization, recommended that exposure to total cotton dust be limited to a "threshold limit value" of 1,000 micrograms per cubic meter of air (1,000 g/m<sup>3</sup>.) averaged over an 8-hour workday. See 43 Fed. Reg. 27351, col. 1 (1978). The United States Government first regulated exposure to cotton dust in 1968, when the Secretary of Labor, pursuant to the Walsh-Healey Act, 41 U.S.C. 35 (e), promulgated airborne contaminant threshold limit values, applicable to public contractors, that included the 1,000 g/m<sup>3</sup> limit for total cotton dust. 34 Fed. Reg. 7953 (1969). Following passage of the Act in 1970, the 1,000 g/m<sup>3</sup> standard was adopted as an "established Federal standard" under 6 (a) of the Act, 84 Stat. 1593, 29 U.S.C. 655 (a), a provision designed to guarantee immediate protection of workers for the period between enactment of the statute and promulgation of permanent standards.

That same year, the Director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), pursuant to the Act, 29 U.S.C. §§ 669(a)(3), 671 (d)(2), submitted to the Secretary of Labor a recommendation for a cotton dust standard with a permissible exposure limit (PEL) that "should be set at the lowest level feasible, but in no case at an environmental concentration as high as 0.2 mg lint-free cotton dust/cu m," or 200 g/m<sup>3</sup> of lint-free respirable dust. Several months later, OSHA published an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 39 Fed.Reg. 44769

(1974), requesting comments from interested parties on the NIOSH recommendation and other related matters. Soon thereafter, the Textile Worker's Union of America, joined by the North Carolina Public Interest Research Group, petitioned the Secretary, urging a more stringent PEL of 100 g/m<sup>3</sup>.

On December 28, 1976, OSHA published a proposal to replace the existing federal standard on cotton dust with a new permanent standard, pursuant to § 6(b)(5) of the Act, 29 U.S.C. § 655(b)(5). 41 Fed.Reg. 56498. The proposed standard contained a PEL of 200 g/m<sup>3</sup> of vertical elutriated lint-free respirable cotton dust for all segments of the cotton industry. *Ibid.* It also suggested an implementation strategy for achieving the PEL that relied on respirators for the short term and engineering controls for the long-term. OSHA invited interested parties to submit written comments within a 90-day period.

\* \* \*

The starting point of our analysis is the language of the statute itself. Section 6(b)(5) of the Act, 29 U.S.C. § 655(b)(5) (emphasis added), provides:

*The Secretary, in promulgating standards dealing with toxic materials or harmful physical agents under this subsection, shall set the standard which most adequately assures, **to the extent feasible**, on the basis of the best available evidence, that no employee will suffer material impairment of health or functional capacity even if such employee has regular exposure to the hazard dealt with by such standard for the period of his working life. Although their interpretations differ, all parties agree that the phrase “to the extent feasible” contains the critical language in § 6(b)(5) for purposes of these cases.*

The plain meaning of the word “feasible” supports respondents’ interpretation of the statute. According to Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language 831 (1976), “feasible” means “capable of being done, executed, or effected.” In accord, the Oxford English Dictionary 116 (1933) (“Capable of being done, accomplished or carried out”); Funk & Wagnalls New “Standard” Dictionary of the English Language 903 (1957) (“That may be done, performed or effected”). Thus, § 6(b)(5) directs the Secretary to issue the standard that “most adequately assures...that no employee will suffer material impairment of health,” limited only by the extent

to which this is “capable of being done.” In effect then, as the Court of Appeals held, Congress itself defined the basic relationship between costs and benefits, by placing the “benefit” of worker health above all other considerations save those making attainment of this “benefit” unachievable. Any standard based on a balancing of costs and benefits by the Secretary that strikes a different balance than that struck by Congress would be inconsistent with the command set forth in § 6(b)(5). Thus, cost-benefit analysis by OSHA is not required by the statute because feasibility analysis is.

When Congress has intended that an agency engage in cost-benefit analysis, it has clearly indicated such intent on the face of the statute. One early example is the Flood Control Act of 1936, 33 U.S.C. § 701:

*[T]he Federal Government should improve or participate in the improvement of navigable waters or their tributaries, including watersheds thereof, for flood control purposes if the **benefits to whomsoever they may accrue are in excess of the estimated costs**, and if the lives and social security of people are otherwise adversely affected. (emphasis added)*

A more recent example is the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act Amendments of 1978, providing that offshore drilling operations shall use the best available and safest technologies which the Secretary determines to be economically *feasible*, wherever failure of equipment would have a significant effect on safety, health, or the environment, except where the Secretary determines that the *incremental benefits are clearly insufficient to justify the incremental costs of using such technologies*.

These and other statutes demonstrate that Congress uses specific language when intending that an agency engage in cost-benefit analysis. Certainly in light of its ordinary meaning, the word “feasible” cannot be construed to articulate such congressional intent. We therefore reject the argument that Congress required cost-benefit analysis in § 6(b)(5).

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. What is byssinosis? Why should byssinosis be anything that the textile companies are responsible for, ethically or legally? If it is well-known that textile workers get cotton dust in

their systems and develop brown lung, don't they nevertheless choose to work there and assume the risk of all injuries?

2. By imposing costs on the textile industry, what will be the net effect on US textile manufacturing jobs?
3. How is byssinosis a “negative externality” that is not paid for by either the manufacturer or the consumer of textile products? How should the market, to be fair and efficient, adjust for these negative externalities *other* than by setting a reasonable standard that shares the burden between manufacturers and their employees? Should *all* the burden be on the manufacturer?

## 5.7 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Administrative rules and regulations constitute the largest body of laws that directly affect business. These regulations are issued by dozens of federal and state agencies that regulate virtually every aspect of modern business life, including the natural environment, corporate finance, transportation, telecommunications, energy, labor relations, and trade practices. The administrative agencies derive their power to promulgate regulations from statutes passed by Congress or state legislatures.

The agencies have a variety of powers. They can license companies to carry on certain activities or prohibit them from doing so, lay down codes of conduct, set rates that companies may charge for their services, and supervise various aspects of business.

### EXERCISES

1. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission seeks data about the racial composition of Terrific Textiles' labor force. Terrific refuses on the grounds that inadvertent disclosure of the numbers might cause certain “elements” to picket its factories. The EEOC takes Terrific to court to get the data. What is the result?
2. In order to police the profession, the state legislature has just passed a law permitting the State Plumbers' Association the power to hold hearings to determine whether a particular plumber has violated the plumbing code of ethics, written by the association. Sam, a plumber, objects to the convening of a hearing when he is accused by Roger, a fellow



plumber, of acting unethically by soliciting business from Roger's customers. Sam goes to court, seeking to enjoin the association's disciplinary committee from holding the hearing. What is the result? How would you argue Sam's case? The association's case?

3. Assume that the new president of the United States was elected overwhelmingly by pledging in his campaign to "do away with bureaucrats who interfere in your lives." The day he takes the oath of office he determines to carry out his pledge. Discuss which of the following courses he may lawfully follow: (a) Fire all incumbent commissioners of federal agencies in order to install new appointees. (b) Demand that all pending regulations being considered by federal agencies be submitted to the White House for review and redrafting, if necessary. (c) Interview potential nominees for agency positions to determine whether their regulatory philosophy is consistent with his.
4. Dewey owned a mine in Wisconsin. He refused to allow Department of Labor agents into the mine to conduct warrantless searches to determine whether previously found safety violations had been corrected. The Federal Mine Safety and Health Amendments Act of 1977 authorizes four warrantless inspections per year. Is the provision for warrantless inspections by this agency constitutional?<sup>[1]</sup>
5. In determining the licensing requirements for nuclear reactors, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) adopted a zero-release assumption: that the permanent storage of certain nuclear waste would have no significant environmental impact and that potential storage leakages should not be a factor discussed in the appropriate environmental impact statement (EIS) required before permitting construction of a nuclear power plant. This assumption is based on the NRC's belief that technology would be developed to isolate the wastes from the environment, and it was clear from the record that the NRC had "digested a massive material and disclosed all substantial risks" and had considered that the zero-release assumption was uncertain. There was a remote possibility of contamination by water leakage into the storage facility. An environmental NGO sued, asserting that the NRC had violated the regulations governing the EIS by arbitrarily and capriciously ignoring the potential contamination. The court of appeals agreed, and the power plant appealed. Had the NRC acted arbitrarily and capriciously?<sup>[2]</sup>

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Most federal administrative agencies are created by

- a. an executive order by the president
- b. a Supreme Court decision
- c. the passage of enabling legislation by Congress, signed by the president
- d. a and c

The Federal Trade Commission, like most administrative agencies of the federal government, is part of

- a. the executive branch of government
- b. the legislative branch of government
- c. the judicial branch of government
- d. the administrative branch of government

In the Clean Water Act, Congress sets broad guidelines, but it is the Environmental Protection Agency that proposes rules to regulate industrial discharges. Where do proposed rules originally appear?

- a. in the Congressional record
- b. in the *Federal Register*
- c. in the *Code of Federal Regulations*
- d. in the United States code service

The legal basis for all administrative law, including regulations of the Federal Trade Commission, is found in

- a. the Administrative Procedure Act
- b. the US Constitution
- c. the commerce clause
- d. none of the above

The Federal Trade Commission, like other administrative agencies, has the power to

- a. issue proposed rules
- b. undertake investigations of firms that may have violated FTC regulations

- c. prosecute firms that have violated FTC regulations
- d. none of the above
- e. all of the above

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

1. c
2. a
3. b
4. b
5. e

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[1] *Donovan v. Dewey*, 452 US 594 (1981).

[2] *Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. v. Natural Resources Defense Council Inc.*, 462 US 87 (1983).

# Chapter 6

## Criminal Law

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Explain how criminal law differs from civil law.
2. Categorize the various types of crimes and define the most serious felonies.
3. Discuss and question the criminal “intent” of a corporation.
4. Explain basic criminal procedure and the rights of criminal defendants.

At times, unethical behavior by businesspeople can be extreme enough that society will respond by criminalizing certain kinds of activities. Ponzi schemes, arson, various kinds of fraud, embezzlement, racketeering, foreign corrupt practices, tax evasion, and insider trading are just a few. A corporation can face large fines, and corporate managers can face both fines and jail sentences for violating criminal laws. This chapter aims to explain how criminal law differs from civil law, to discuss various types of crimes, and to relate the basic principles of criminal procedure.

## 6.1 The Nature of Criminal Law

Criminal law is the most ancient branch of the law. Many wise observers have tried to define and explain it, but the explanations often include many complex and subtle distinctions. A traditional criminal law course would include a lot of discussions on criminal intent, the nature of criminal versus civil responsibility, and the constitutional rights accorded the accused. But in this chapter, we will consider only the most basic aspects of intent, responsibility, and constitutional rights.

Unlike civil actions, where plaintiffs seek compensation or other remedies for themselves, crimes involve “the state” (the federal government, a state government, or some subunit of state government). This is because crimes involve some “harm to society” and not just harm to certain individuals. But “harm to society” is not always evident in the act itself. For example, two friends of yours at a party argue, take the argument outside, and blows are struck; one has a bloody nose and immediately goes home. The crimes of assault and battery have been committed, even

though no one else knows about the fight and the friends later make up. By contrast, suppose a major corporation publicly announces that it is closing operations in your community and moving operations to Southeast Asia. There is plenty of harm to society as the plant closes down and no new jobs take the place of the company's jobs. Although the effects on society are greater in the second example, only the first example is a crime.

Crimes are generally defined by legislatures, in statutes; the statutes describe in general terms the nature of the conduct they wish to criminalize. For government punishment to be fair, citizens must have clear notice of what is criminally prohibited. Ex post facto laws—laws created “after the fact” to punish an act that was legal at the time—are expressly prohibited by the US Constitution. Overly vague statutes can also be struck down by courts under a constitutional doctrine known as “void for vagueness.”

What is considered a crime will also vary from society to society and from time to time. For example, while cocaine use was legal in the United States at one time, it is now a controlled substance, and unauthorized use is now a crime. Medical marijuana was not legal fifty years ago when its use began to become widespread, and in some states its use or possession was a felony. Now, some states make it legal to use or possess it under some circumstances. In the United States, you can criticize and make jokes about the president of the United States without committing a crime, but in many countries it is a serious criminal act to criticize a public official. Attitudes about appropriate punishment for crimes will also vary considerably from nation to nation. Uganda has decreed long prison sentences for homosexuals and death to repeat offenders. In Saudi Arabia, the government has proposed to deliberately paralyze a criminal defendant who criminally assaulted someone and unintentionally caused the victim's paralysis. Limits on punishment are set in the United States through the Constitution's prohibition on “cruel or unusual punishments.”

It is often said that ignorance of the law is no excuse. But there are far too many criminal laws for anyone to know them all. Also, because most people do not actually read statutes, the question of “criminal intent” comes up right away: if you don't know that the legislature has made driving without a seat belt fastened a misdemeanor, you cannot have intended to harm society. You might even argue that there is no harm to anyone but yourself!

The usual answer to this is that the phrase “ignorance of the law is no excuse” means that society (through its elected representatives) gets to decide what is harmful to society, not you. Still, you may ask, “Isn’t it my choice whether to take the risk of failing to wear a seat belt? Isn’t this a victimless crime? Where is the harm to society?” A policymaker or social scientist may answer that your injuries, statistically, are generally going to be far greater if you don’t wear one and that your choice may actually impose costs on society. For example, you might not have enough insurance, so that a public hospital will have to take care of your head injuries, injuries that would likely have been avoided by your use of a seat belt.

But, as just noted, it is hard to know the meaning of some criminal laws. Teenagers hanging around the sidewalks on Main Street were sometimes arrested for “loitering.” The constitutional void-for-vagueness doctrine has led the courts to overturn statutes that are not clear. For example, “vagrancy” was long held to be a crime, but US courts began some forty years ago to overturn vagrancy and “suspicious person” statutes on the grounds that they are too vague for people to know what they are being asked not to do.

This requirement that criminal statutes not be vague does not mean that the law always defines crimes in ways that can be easily and clearly understood. Many statutes use terminology developed by the common-law courts. For example, a California statute defines murder as “the unlawful killing of a human being, with malice aforethought.” If no history backed up these words, they would be unconstitutionally vague. But there is a rich history of judicial decisions that provides meaning for much of the arcane language like “malice aforethought” strewn about in the statute books.

Because a crime is an act that the legislature has defined as socially harmful, the parties involved cannot agree among themselves to forget a particular incident, such as a barroom brawl, if the authorities decide to prosecute. This is one of the critical distinctions between criminal and civil law. An assault is both a crime and a tort. The person who was assaulted may choose to forgive his assailant and not to sue him for damages. But he cannot stop the prosecutor from bringing an indictment against the assailant. (However, because of crowded dockets, a victim that declines to press charges may cause a busy prosecutor to choose to not to bring an indictment.)

A crime consists of an act defined as criminal—an actus reus—and the requisite “criminal intent.” Someone who has a burning desire to kill a rival in business or romance and who may actually intend to murder but does not act on his desire has not committed a crime. He may have a “guilty mind”—the translation of the Latin phrase mens rea—but he is guilty of no crime. A person who is forced to commit a crime at gunpoint is not guilty of a crime, because although there was an act defined as criminal—an actus reus—there was no criminal intent.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Crimes are usually defined by statute and constitute an offense against society. In each case, there must be both an act and some mens rea (criminal intent).

#### EXERCISES

1. Other than deterring certain kinds of conduct, what purpose does the criminal law serve?
2. Why is ignorance of the law no excuse? Why shouldn't it be an excuse, when criminal laws can be complicated and sometimes ambiguous?

## 6.2 Types of Crimes

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Categorize various types of crimes.
2. Name and define the major felonies in criminal law.
3. Explain how white-collar crime differs from other crimes.
4. Define a variety of white-collar crimes.

Most classifications of crime turn on the seriousness of the act. In general, seriousness is defined by the nature or duration of the punishment set out in the statute. A felony is a crime punishable (usually) by imprisonment of more than one year or by death. (Crimes punishable by death are sometimes known as capital crimes; they are increasingly rare in the United States.) The major felonies include murder, rape, kidnapping, armed robbery, embezzlement, insider trading, fraud, and racketeering. All other crimes are usually known as misdemeanors, petty offenses, or infractions. Another way of viewing crimes is by the type of social harm the statute is intended to prevent or deter, such as offenses against the person, offenses against property, and white-collar crime.

### Offenses against the Person

## Homicide

Homicide is the killing of one person by another. Not every killing is criminal. When the law permits one person to kill another—for example, a soldier killing an enemy on the battlefield during war, or a killing in self-defense—the death is considered the result of justifiable homicide. An *excusable homicide*, by contrast, is one in which death results from an accident in which the killer is not at fault.

All other homicides are criminal. The most severely punished form is murder, defined as homicide committed with “malice aforethought.” This is a term with a very long history. Boiled down to its essentials, it means that the defendant had the intent to kill. A killing need not be premeditated for any long period of time; the premeditation might be quite sudden, as in a bar fight that escalates in that moment when one of the fighters reaches for a knife with the intent to kill.

Sometimes a homicide can be murder even if there is no intent to kill; an intent to inflict great bodily harm can be murder if the result is the death of another person. A killing that takes place while a felony (such as armed robbery) is being committed is also murder, whether or not the killer intended any harm. This is the so-called felony murder rule. Examples are the accidental discharge of a gun that kills an innocent bystander or the asphyxiation death of a fireman from smoke resulting from a fire set by an arsonist. The felony murder rule is more significant than it sounds, because it also applies to the accomplices of one who does the killing. Thus the driver of a getaway car stationed a block away from the scene of the robbery can be convicted of murder if a gun accidentally fires during the robbery and someone is killed. Manslaughter is an act of killing that does not amount to murder. Voluntary manslaughter is an intentional killing, but one carried out in the “sudden heat of passion” as the result of some provocation. An example is a fight that gets out of hand. Involuntary manslaughter entails a lesser degree of willfulness; it usually occurs when someone has taken a reckless action that results in death (e.g., a death resulting from a traffic accident in which one driver recklessly runs a red light).

## Assault and Battery

Ordinarily, we would say that a person who has struck another has “assaulted” him. Technically, that is a battery—the unlawful application of force to another person. The force need not be



violent. Indeed, a man who kisses a woman is guilty of a battery if he does it against her will. The other person may consent to the force. That is one reason why surgeons require patients to sign consent forms, giving the doctor permission to operate. In the absence of such a consent, an operation is a battery. That is also why football players are not constantly being charged with battery. Those who agree to play football agree to submit to the rules of the game, which of course include the right to tackle. But the consent does not apply to all acts of physical force: a hockey player who hits an opponent over the head with his stick can be prosecuted for the crime of battery.

Criminal assault is an *attempt* to commit a battery or the deliberate placing of another in fear of receiving an immediate battery. If you throw a rock at a friend, but he manages to dodge it, you have committed an assault. Some states limit an assault to an attempt to commit a battery by one who has a “present ability” to do so. Pointing an unloaded gun and threatening to shoot would not be an assault, nor, of course, could it be a battery. The modern tendency, however, is to define an assault as an attempt to commit a battery by one with an *apparent* ability to do so. Assault and battery may be excused. For example, a bar owner (or her agent, the bouncer) may use reasonable force to remove an unruly patron. If the use of force is excessive, the bouncer can be found guilty of assault and battery, and a civil action could arise against the bar owner as well.

## **Offenses against Property**

### **Theft: Larceny, Robbery, Embezzlement, False Pretenses**

The concept of theft is familiar enough. Less familiar is the way the law has treated various aspects of the act of stealing. Criminal law distinguishes among many different crimes that are popularly known as theft. Many technical words have entered the language—burglary, larceny, robbery—but are often used inaccurately. Brief definitions of the more common terms are discussed here.

The basic crime of stealing personal property is larceny. By its old common-law definition, still in use today, larceny is the wrongful “taking and carrying away of the personal property of another with intent to steal the same.”

The separate elements of this offense have given rise to all kinds of difficult cases. Take the theft of fruit, for example, with regard to the essential element of “personal property.” If a man walking through an orchard plucks a peach from a tree and eats it, he is not guilty of larceny because he has not taken away *personal* property (the peach is part of the land, being connected to the tree). But if he picks up a peach lying on the ground, he is guilty of larceny. Or consider the element of “taking” or “carrying away.” Sneaking into a movie theater without paying is not an act of larceny (though in most states it is a criminal act). Taking electricity by tapping into the power lines of an electric utility was something that baffled judges late in the nineteenth century because it was not clear whether electricity is a “something” that can be taken. Modern statutes have tended to make clear that electricity can be the object of larceny. Or consider the element of an “intent to steal the same.” If you borrow your friend’s BMW without his permission in order to go to the grocery store, intending to return it within a few minutes and then do return it, you have not committed larceny. But if you meet another friend at the store who convinces you to take a long joyride with the car and you return hours later, you may have committed larceny.

A particular form of larceny is robbery, which is defined as larceny from a person by means of violence or intimidation.

Larceny involves the taking of property from the possession of another. Suppose that a person legitimately comes to possess the property of another and wrongfully appropriates it—for example, an automobile mechanic entrusted with your car refuses to return it, or a bank teller who is entitled to temporary possession of cash in his drawer takes it home with him. The common law had trouble with such cases because the thief in these cases already had possession; his crime was in assuming ownership. Today, such wrongful conversion, known as embezzlement, has been made a statutory offense in all states.

Statutes against larceny and embezzlement did not cover all the gaps in the law. A conceptual problem arises in the case of one who is tricked into giving up his title to property. In larceny and embezzlement, the thief gains possession or ownership without any consent of the owner or custodian of the property. Suppose, however, that an automobile dealer agrees to take his customer’s present car as a trade-in. The customer says that he has full title to the car. In fact,

the customer is still paying off an installment loan and the finance company has an interest in the old car. If the finance company repossesses the car, the customer—who got a new car at a discount because of his false representation—cannot be said to have taken the new car by larceny or embezzlement. Nevertheless, he tricked the dealer into selling, and the dealer will have lost the value of the repossessed car. Obviously, the customer is guilty of a criminal act; the statutes outlawing it refer to this trickery as the crime of false pretenses, defined as obtaining ownership of the property of another by making untrue representations of fact with intent to defraud.

A number of problems have arisen in the judicial interpretation of false-pretense statutes. One concerns whether the taking is permanent or only temporary. The case of *State v. Mills* (Section 6.7 "Cases") shows the subtle questions that can be presented and the dangers inherent in committing “a little fraud.”

In the *Mills* case, the claim was that a mortgage instrument dealing with one parcel of land was used instead for another. This is a false representation of fact. Suppose, by contrast, that a person misrepresents his state of mind: “I will pay you back tomorrow,” he says, knowing full well that he does not intend to. Can such a misrepresentation amount to false pretenses punishable as a criminal offense? In most jurisdictions it cannot. A false-pretense violation relates to a past event or existing fact, not to a statement of intention. If it were otherwise, anyone failing to pay a debt might find himself facing criminal prosecution, and business would be less prone to take risks.

The problem of proving intent is especially difficult when a person has availed himself of the services of another without paying. A common example is someone leaving a restaurant without paying for the meal. In most states, this is specifically defined in the statutes as *theft of services*.

### **Receiving Stolen Property**

One who engages in receiving stolen property with knowledge that it is stolen is guilty of a felony or misdemeanor, depending on the value of the property. The receipt need not be personal; if the property is delivered to a place under the control of the receiver, then he is deemed to have received it. “Knowledge” is construed broadly: not merely actual knowledge, but (correct) belief

and suspicion (strong enough not to investigate for fear that the property will turn out to have been stolen) are sufficient for conviction.

### **Forgery**

Forgery is false writing of a document of legal significance (or apparent legal significance!) with intent to defraud. It includes the making up of a false document or the alteration of an existing one. The writing need not be done by hand but can be by any means—typing, printing, and so forth. Documents commonly the subject of forgery are negotiable instruments (checks, money orders, and the like), deeds, receipts, contracts, and bills of lading. The forged instrument must itself be false, not merely contain a falsehood. If you fake your neighbor’s signature on one of his checks made out to cash, you have committed forgery. But if you sign a check of your own that is made out to cash, knowing that there is no money in your checking account, the instrument is not forged, though the act may be criminal if done with the intent to defraud.

The mere making of a forged instrument is unlawful. So is the “uttering” (or presentation) of such an instrument, whether or not the one uttering it actually forged it. The usual example of a false signature is by no means the only way to commit forgery. If done with intent to defraud, the backdating of a document, the modification of a corporate name, or the filling in of lines left blank on a form can all constitute forgery.

### **Extortion**

Under common law, extortion could only be committed by a government official, who corruptly collected an unlawful fee under color of office. A common example is a salaried building inspector who refuses to issue a permit unless the permittee pays him. Under modern statutes, the crime of extortion has been broadened to include the wrongful collection of money or something else of value by anyone by means of a threat (short of a threat of immediate physical violence, for such a threat would make the demand an act of robbery). This kind of extortion is usually called blackmail. The blackmail threat commonly is to expose some fact of the victim’s private life or to make a false accusation about him.

## **Offenses against Habitation and Other Offenses**

### **Burglary**

Burglary is not a crime against property. It is defined as “the breaking and entering of the dwelling of another in the nighttime with intent to commit a felony.” The intent to steal is not an issue: a man who sneaks into a woman’s home intent on raping her has committed a burglary, even if he does not carry out the act. The student doing critical thinking will no doubt notice that the definition provides plenty of room for argument. What is “breaking”? (The courts do not require actual destruction; the mere opening of a closed door, even if unlocked, is enough.) What is entry? When does night begin? What kind of intent? Whose dwelling? Can a landlord burglarize the dwelling of his tenant? (Yes.) Can a person burglarize his own home? (No.)

### **Arson**

Under common law, arson was the malicious burning of the dwelling of another. Burning one’s own house for purposes of collecting insurance was not an act of arson under common law. The statutes today make it a felony intentionally to set fire to any building, whether or not it is a dwelling and whether or not the purpose is to collect insurance.

### **Bribery**

Bribery is a corrupt payment (or receipt of such a payment) for official action. The payment can be in cash or in the form of any goods, intangibles, or services that the recipient would find valuable. Under common law, only a public official could be bribed. In most states, bribery charges can result from the bribe of anyone performing a public function.

Bribing a public official in government procurement (contracting) can result in serious criminal charges. Bribing a public official in a foreign country to win a contract can result in charges under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.

### **Perjury**

Perjury is the crime of giving a false oath, either orally or in writing, in a judicial or other official proceeding (lies made in proceedings other than courts are sometimes termed “false swearing”). To be perjurious, the oath must have been made corruptly—that is, with knowledge that it was false or without sincere belief that it was true. An innocent mistake is not perjury. A statement, though true, is perjury if the maker of it believes it to be false. Statements such as “I don’t remember” or “to the best of my knowledge” are not sufficient to protect a person who is lying

from conviction for perjury. To support a charge of perjury, however, the false statement must be “material,” meaning that the statement is relevant to whatever the court is trying to find out.

## **White-Collar Crime**

White-collar crime, as distinguished from “street crime,” refers generally to fraud-related acts carried out in a nonviolent way, usually connected with business. Armed bank robbery is not a white-collar crime, but embezzlement by a teller or bank officer is. Many white-collar crimes are included within the statutory definitions of embezzlement and false pretenses. Most are violations of state law. Depending on how they are carried out, many of these same crimes are also violations of federal law.

Any act of fraud in which the United States postal system is used or which involves interstate phone calls or Internet connections is a violation of federal law. Likewise, many different acts around the buying and selling of securities can run afoul of federal securities laws. Other white-collar crimes include tax fraud; price fixing; violations of food, drug, and environmental laws; corporate bribery of foreign companies; and—the newest form—computer fraud. Some of these are discussed here; others are covered in later chapters.

### **Mail and Wire Fraud**

Federal law prohibits the use of the mails or any interstate electronic communications medium for the purpose of furthering a “scheme or artifice to defraud.” The statute is broad, and it is relatively easy for prosecutors to prove a violation. The law also bans attempts to defraud, so the prosecutor need not show that the scheme worked or that anyone suffered any losses. “Fraud” is broadly construed: anyone who uses the mails or telephone to defraud anyone else of virtually anything, not just of money, can be convicted under the law. In one case, a state governor was convicted of mail fraud when he took bribes to influence the setting of racing dates. The court’s theory was that he defrauded the citizenry of its right to his “honest and faithful services” as governor. <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Violations of Antitrust Law**

In [Chapter 23 "Antitrust Law"](#) we consider the fundamentals of antitrust law, which for the most part affects the business enterprise civilly. But violations of Section 1 of the Sherman Act, which condemns activities in “restraint of trade” (including price fixing), are also crimes.

## Violations of the Food and Drug Act

The federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act prohibits any person or corporation from sending into interstate commerce any adulterated or misbranded food, drug, cosmetics, or related device. For example, in a 2010 case, Allergan had to pay a criminal fine for marketing Botox as a headache or pain reliever, a use that had not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Unlike most criminal statutes, willfulness or deliberate misconduct is not an element of the act. As the *United States v. Park* case ([Section 6.7 "Cases"](#)) shows, an executive can be held criminally liable even though he may have had no personal knowledge of the violation.

## Environmental Crimes

Many federal environmental statutes have criminal provisions. These include the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (commonly called the Clean Water Act); the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899 (the Refuse Act); the Clean Air Act; the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA); the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA); and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA). Under the Clean Water Act, for example, wrongful discharge of pollutants into navigable waters carries a fine ranging from \$2,500 to \$25,000 per day and imprisonment for up to one year. “Responsible corporate officers” are specifically included as potential defendants in criminal prosecutions under the act. They can include officers who have responsibility over a project where subcontractors and their employees actually caused the discharge.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act

As a byproduct of Watergate, federal officials at the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Internal Revenue Service uncovered many instances of bribes paid by major corporations to officials of foreign governments to win contracts with those governments. Congress responded in 1977 with the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which imposed a stringent requirement that the disposition of assets be accurately and fairly accounted for in a company’s books and records. The act also made illegal the payment of bribes to foreign officials or to anyone who will transmit the money to a foreign official to assist the payor (the one offering and delivering the money) in getting business.

## Violations of the Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act

In 1970 Congress enacted the Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), aimed at ending organized crime's infiltration into legitimate business. The act tells courts to construe its language broadly "to effectuate its remedial purpose," and many who are not part of organized crime have been successfully prosecuted under the act. It bans a "pattern of racketeering," defined as the commission of at least two acts within ten years of any of a variety of already-existing crimes, including mail, wire, and securities fraud. The act thus makes many types of fraud subject to severe penalties.

## Computer Crime

Computer crime generally falls into four categories: (1) theft of money, financial instruments, or property; (2) misappropriation of computer time; (3) theft of programs; and (4) illegal acquisition of information. The main federal statutory framework for many computer crimes is the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA; see [Table 6.1 "Summary of Provisions of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act"](#)). Congress only prohibited computer fraud and abuse where there was a federal interest, as where computers of the government were involved or where the crime was interstate in nature.

Table 6.1 Summary of Provisions of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act

Obtaining national security information	Sec. (a)(1)	10 years maximum (20 years second offense)
Trespassing in a government computer	Sec. (a)(3)	1 year (5)
Compromising the confidentiality of a computer	Sec. (a)(2)	1 year (10)
Accessing a computer to defraud and obtain value	Sec. (a)4	5 years (10)
Intentional access and reckless damage	(a)(5)(A)(ii)	5 years (20)
Trafficking in passwords	(a)(6)	1 year (10)

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Offenses can be against persons, against property, or against public policy (as when you bribe a public official, commit perjury, or use public goods such as the mails or the Internet to commit fraud, violate antitrust laws, or commit other white-collar crimes).



## EXERCISES

1. Which does more serious harm to society: street crimes or white-collar crimes?
2. Why are various crimes so difficult to define precisely?
3. Hungry Harold goes by the home of Juanita Martinez. Juanita has just finished baking a cherry pie and sets it in the open windowsill to cool. Harold smells the pie from the sidewalk. It is twilight; while still light, the sun has officially set. Harold reaches into the window frame and removes the pie. Technically, has Harold committed burglary? What are the issues here based on the definition of burglary?
4. What is fraud? How is it different from dishonesty? Is being dishonest a criminal offense? If so, have you been a criminal already today?

[1] *United States v. Isaacs*, 493 F.2d 1124 (7th Cir. 1974), cert. denied, 417 US 976 (1974).

[2] *U.S. v. Hanousek*, 176 F.3d 1116 (9th Cir. 1999).

## 6.3 The Nature of a Criminal Act

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how it is possible to commit a criminal act without actually doing anything that you think might be criminal.
2. Analyze and explain the importance of intention in criminal law and criminal prosecutions.
3. Explain how a corporation can be guilty of a crime, even though it is a corporation's agents that commit the crime.

To be guilty of a crime, you must have acted. Mental desire or intent to do so is insufficient. But what constitutes an act? This question becomes important when someone begins to commit a crime, or does so in association with others, or intends to do one thing but winds up doing something else.

### Attempt

It is not necessary to commit the intended crime to be found guilty of a criminal offense.

An *attempt* to commit the crime is punishable as well, though usually not as severely. For

example, Brett points a gun at Ashley, intending to shoot her dead. He pulls the trigger but his aim is off, and he misses her heart by four feet. He is guilty of an attempt to murder. Suppose, however, that earlier in the day, when he was preparing to shoot Ashley, Brett had been overheard in his apartment muttering to himself of his intention, and that a neighbor called the police. When they arrived, he was just snapping his gun into his shoulder holster.

At that point, courts in most states would not consider him guilty of an attempt because he had not passed beyond the stage of *preparation*. After having buttoned his jacket he might have reconsidered and put the gun away. Determining when the accused has passed beyond mere preparation and taken an actual step toward *perpetrating* the crime is often difficult and is usually for the jury to decide.

### **Impossibility**

What if a defendant is accused of attempting a crime that is factually impossible? For example, suppose that men believed they were raping a drunken, unconscious woman, and were later accused of attempted rape, but defended on the grounds of factual impossibility because the woman was actually dead at the time sexual intercourse took place? Or suppose that a husband intended to poison his wife with strychnine in her coffee, but put sugar in the coffee instead?

The “mens rea” or criminal intent was there, but the act itself was not criminal (rape requires a live victim, and murder by poisoning requires the use of poison). States are divided on this, but thirty-seven states have ruled out factual impossibility as a defense to the crime of attempt.

Legal impossibility is different, and is usually acknowledged as a valid defense. If the defendant completes all of his intended acts, but those acts do not fulfill all the required elements of a crime, there could be a successful “impossibility” defense. If Barney (who has poor sight), shoots at a tree stump, thinking it is his neighbor, Ralph, intending to kill him, has he committed an attempt? Many courts would hold that he has not. But the distinction between factual impossibility and legal impossibility is not always clear, and the trend seems to be to punish the intended attempt.

### **Conspiracy**

Under both federal and state laws, it is a separate offense to work with others toward the commission of a crime. When two or more people combine to carry out an unlawful purpose,

they are engaged in a conspiracy. The law of conspiracy is quite broad, especially when it is used by prosecutors in connection with white-collar crimes. Many people can be swept up in the net of conspiracy, because it is unnecessary to show that the actions they took were sufficient to constitute either the crime or an attempt. Usually, the prosecution needs to show only (1) an agreement and (2) a single overt act in furtherance of the conspiracy. Thus if three people agree to rob a bank, and if one of them goes to a store to purchase a gun to be used in the holdup, the three can be convicted of conspiracy to commit robbery. Even the purchase of an automobile to be used as the getaway car could support a conspiracy conviction.

The act of any one of the conspirators is imputed to the other members of the conspiracy. It does not matter, for instance, that only one of the bank robbers fired the gun that killed a guard. All can be convicted of murder. That is so even if one of the conspirators was stationed as a lookout several blocks away and even if he specifically told the others that his agreement to cooperate would end “just as soon as there is shooting.”

### **Agency and Corporations**

A person can be guilty of a crime if he acts through another. Again, the usual reason for “imputing” the guilt of the actor to another is that both were engaged in a conspiracy. But imputation of guilt is not limited to a conspiracy. The agent may be innocent even though he participates. A corporate officer directs a junior employee to take a certain bag and deliver it to the officer’s home. The employee reasonably believes that the officer is entitled to the bag. Unbeknownst to the employee, the bag contains money that belongs to the company, and the officer wishes to keep it. This is not a conspiracy. The employee is not guilty of larceny, but the officer is, because the agent’s act is imputed to him.

Since intent is a necessary component of crime, an agent’s intent cannot be imputed to his principal if the principal did not share the intent. The company president tells her sales manager, “Go make sure our biggest customer renews his contract for next year”—by which she meant, “Don’t ignore our biggest customer.” Standing before the customer’s purchasing agent, the sales manager threatens to tell the purchasing agent’s boss that the purchasing agent has been cheating on his expense account, unless he signs a new contract. The sales manager could be convicted of blackmail, but the company president could not.

Can a corporation be guilty of a crime? For many types of crimes, the guilt of individual employees may be imputed to the corporation. Thus the antitrust statutes explicitly state that the corporation may be convicted and fined for violations by employees. This is so even though the shareholders are the ones who ultimately must pay the price—and who may have had nothing to do with the crime nor the power to stop it. The law of corporate criminal responsibility has been changing in recent years. The tendency is to hold the corporation liable under criminal law if the act has been directed by a responsible officer or group within the corporation (the president or board of directors).

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Although proving the intent to commit a crime (the mens rea) is essential, the intent can be established by inference (circumstantially). Conspirators may not actually commit a crime, for example, but in preparing for a criminal act, they may be guilty of the crime of conspiracy. Certain corporate officers, as well, may not be directly committing criminal acts but may be held criminally responsible for acts of their agents and contractors.

#### EXERCISES

1. Give an example of how someone can intend to commit a crime but fail to commit one.
2. Describe a situation where there is a conspiracy to commit a crime without the crime actually taking place.
3. Create a scenario based on current events where a corporation could be found guilty of committing a crime even though the CEO, the board of directors, and the shareholders have not themselves done a criminal act.

## 6.4 Responsibility

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain why criminal law generally requires that the defendant charged with a crime have criminal "intent."
2. Know and explain the possible excuses relating to responsibility that are legally recognized by courts, including lack of capacity.

### In General

The mens rea requirement depends on the nature of the crime and all the circumstances surrounding the act. In general, though, the requirement means that the accused must in some way have intended the criminal consequences of his act. Suppose, for example, that Charlie gives Gabrielle a poison capsule to swallow. That is the act. If Gabrielle dies, is Charlie guilty of murder? The answer depends on what his state of mind was. Obviously, if he gave it to her intending to kill her, the act was murder.

What if he gave it to her knowing that the capsule was poison but believing that it would only make her mildly ill? The act is still murder, because we are all liable for the consequences of any intentional act that may cause harm to others. But suppose that Gabrielle had asked Harry for aspirin, and he handed her two pills that he reasonably believed to be aspirin (they came from the aspirin bottle and looked like aspirin) but that turned out to be poison, the act would not be murder, because he had neither intent nor a state of knowledge from which intent could be inferred.

Not every criminal law requires criminal intent as an ingredient of the crime. Many regulatory codes dealing with the public health and safety impose strict requirements. Failure to adhere to such requirements is a violation, whether or not the violator had mens rea. The *United States v. Park* case, [Section 6.7 "Cases"](#), a decision of the US Supreme Court, shows the different considerations involved in mens rea.

## **Excuses That Limit or Overcome Responsibility**

### **Mistake of Fact and Mistake of Law**

Ordinarily, ignorance of the *law* is not an excuse. If you believe that it is permissible to turn right on a red light but the city ordinance prohibits it, your belief, even if reasonable, does not excuse your violation of the law. Under certain circumstances, however, ignorance of law will be excused. If a statute imposes criminal penalties for an action taken without a license, and if the government official responsible for issuing the license formally tells you that you do not need one (though in fact you do), a conviction for violating the statute cannot stand. In rare cases, a lawyer's advice, contrary to the statute, will be held to excuse the client, but usually the client is responsible for his attorney's mistakes. Otherwise, as it is said, the lawyer would be superior to the law.

Ignorance or mistake of *fact* more frequently will serve as an excuse. If you take a coat from a restaurant, believing it to be yours, you cannot be convicted of larceny if it is not. Your honest mistake of fact negates the requisite intent. In general, the rule is that a mistaken belief of fact will excuse criminal responsibility if (1) the belief is honestly held, (2) it is reasonable to hold it, and (3) the act would not have been criminal if the facts were as the accused supposed them to have been.

### **Entrapment**

One common technique of criminal investigation is the use of an undercover agent or decoy—the policeman who poses as a buyer of drugs from a street dealer or the elaborate “sting” operations in which ostensibly stolen goods are “sold” to underworld “fences.” Sometimes these methods are the only way by which certain kinds of crime can be rooted out and convictions secured. But a rule against entrapment limits the legal ability of the police to play the role of criminals. The police are permitted to use such techniques to detect criminal activity; they are not permitted to do so to instigate crime. The distinction is usually made between a person who intends to commit a crime and one who does not. If the police provide the former with an opportunity to commit a criminal act—the sale of drugs to an undercover agent, for example—there is no defense of entrapment. But if the police knock on the door of one not known to be a drug user and persist in a demand that he purchase drugs from them, finally overcoming his will to resist, a conviction for purchase and possession of drugs can be overturned on the ground of entrapment.

### **Other Excuses**

A number of other circumstances can limit or excuse criminal liability. These include compulsion (a gun pointed at one’s head by a masked man who apparently is unafraid to use the weapon and who demands that you help him rob a store), honest consent of the “victim” (the quarterback who is tackled), adherence to the requirements of legitimate public authority lawfully exercised (a policeman directs a towing company to remove a car parked in a tow-away zone), the proper exercise of domestic authority (a parent may spank a child, within limits), and defense of self, others, property, and habitation. Each of these excuses is a complex subject in itself.

## Lack of Capacity

A further defense to criminal prosecution is the lack of mental capacity to commit the crime. Infants and children are considered incapable of committing a crime; under common law any child under the age of seven could not be prosecuted for any act. That age of incapacity varies from state to state and is now usually defined by statutes. Likewise, insanity or mental disease or defect can be a complete defense. Intoxication can be a defense to certain crimes, but the mere fact of drunkenness is not ordinarily sufficient.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

In the United States, some crimes can be committed by not following strict regulatory requirements for health, safety, or the environment. The law does provide excuses from criminal liability for mistakes of fact, entrapment, and lack of capacity.

### EXERCISES

1. Describe several situations in which compulsion, consent, or other excuses take away criminal liability.
2. Your employee is drunk on the job and commits the crime of assault and battery on a customer. He claims lack of capacity as an excuse. Should the courts accept this excuse? Why or why not?

## 6.5 Procedure

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the basic steps in pretrial criminal procedure that follow a government's determination to arrest someone for an alleged criminal act.
2. Describe the basic elements of trial and posttrial criminal procedure.

The procedure for criminal prosecutions is complex. Procedures will vary from state to state. A criminal case begins with an arrest if the defendant is caught in the act or fleeing from the scene; if the defendant is not caught, a warrant for the defendant's arrest will issue. The warrant is issued by a judge or a magistrate upon receiving a complaint detailing the charge of a specific crime against the accused. It is not enough for a police officer to go before a judge and say, "I'd like you to arrest Bonnie because I think she's just murdered Clyde." She must supply enough information to satisfy the magistrate that there is probable cause (reasonable grounds) to

believe that the accused committed the crime. The warrant will be issued to any officer or agency that has power to arrest the accused with warrant in hand.

The accused will be brought before the magistrate for a preliminary hearing. The purpose of the hearing is to determine whether there is sufficient reason to hold the accused for trial. If so, the accused can be sent to jail or be permitted to make bail. Bail is a sum of money paid to the court to secure the defendant's attendance at trial. If he fails to appear, he forfeits the money.

Constitutionally, bail can be withheld only if there is reason to believe that the accused will flee the jurisdiction.

Once the arrest is made, the case is in the hands of the prosecutor. In the fifty states, prosecution is a function of the district attorney's office. These offices are usually organized on a county-by-county basis. In the federal system, criminal prosecution is handled by the office of the US attorney, one of whom is appointed for every federal district.

Following the preliminary hearing, the prosecutor must either file an information (a document stating the crime of which the person being held is accused) or ask the grand jury for an indictment. The grand jury consists of twenty-three people who sit to determine whether there is sufficient evidence to warrant a prosecution. It does not sit to determine guilt or innocence. The indictment is the grand jury's formal declaration of charges on which the accused will be tried. If indicted, the accused formally becomes a defendant.

The defendant will then be arraigned, that is, brought before a judge to answer the accusation in the indictment. The defendant may plead guilty or not guilty. If he pleads not guilty, the case will be tried before a jury (sometimes referred to as a petit jury). The jury cannot convict unless it finds the defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

The defendant might have pleaded guilty to the offense or to a lesser charge (often referred to as a "lesser included offense"—simple larceny, for example, is a lesser included offense of robbery because the defendant may not have used violence but nevertheless stole from the victim). Such a plea is usually arranged through plea bargaining with the prosecution. In return for the plea, the prosecutor promises to recommend to the judge that the sentence be limited. The judge most often, but not always, goes along with the prosecutor's recommendation.



The defendant is also permitted to file a plea of *nolo contendere* (no contest) in prosecutions for certain crimes. In so doing, he neither affirms nor denies his guilt. He may be sentenced as though he had pleaded guilty, although usually a nolo plea is the result of a plea bargain. Why plead nolo? In some offenses, such as violations of the antitrust laws, the statutes provide that private plaintiffs may use a conviction or a guilty plea as proof that the defendant violated the law. This enables a plaintiff to prove liability without putting on witnesses or evidence and reduces the civil trial to a hearing about the damages to plaintiff. The nolo plea permits the defendant to avoid this, so that any plaintiff will have to not only prove damages but also establish civil liability.

Following a guilty plea or a verdict of guilt, the judge will impose a sentence after presentencing reports are written by various court officials (often, probation officers). Permissible sentences are spelled out in statutes, though these frequently give the judge a range within which to work (e.g., twenty years to life). The judge may sentence the defendant to imprisonment, a fine, or both, or may decide to suspend sentence (i.e., the defendant will not have to serve the sentence as long as he stays out of trouble).

Sentencing usually comes before appeal. As in civil cases, the defendant, now convicted, has the right to take at least one appeal to higher courts, where issues of procedure and constitutional rights may be argued.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Criminal procedure in US courts is designed to provide a fair process to both criminal defendants and to society. The grand jury system, prosecutorial discretion, plea bargains, and appeals for lack of a fair trial are all part of US criminal procedure.

#### EXERCISES

1. Harold is charged with the crime of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill or inflict serious bodily injury. It is a more serious crime than simple assault. Harold's attorney wants the prosecutor to give Harold a break, but Harold is guilty of at least simple assault and may also have had the intent to kill. What is Harold's attorney likely to do?
2. Kumar was driving his car, smoking marijuana, and had an accident with another vehicle. The other driver was slightly injured. When the officer arrived, she detected a strong odor of marijuana in Kumar's car and a small amount of marijuana in the glove compartment. The

other driver expects to bring a civil action against Kumar for her injuries after Kumar's criminal case. What should Kumar plead in the criminal case—careless driving or driving under the influence?

## 6.6 Constitutional Rights of the Accused

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the most significant constitutional rights of defendants in US courts, and name the source of these rights.
2. Explain the Exclusionary rule and the reason for its existence.

### Search and Seizure

The rights of those accused of a crime are spelled out in four of the ten constitutional amendments that make up the Bill of Rights (Amendments Four, Five, Six, and Eight). For the most part, these amendments have been held to apply to both the federal and the state governments. The Fourth Amendment says in part that “the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated.” Although there are numerous and tricky exceptions to the general rule, ordinarily the police may not break into a person's house or confiscate his papers or arrest him unless they have a warrant to do so. This means, for instance, that a policeman cannot simply stop you on a street corner and ask to see what is in your pockets (a power the police enjoy in many other countries), nor can your home be raided without probable cause to believe that you have committed a crime. What if the police do search or seize unreasonably?

The courts have devised a remedy for the use at trial of the fruits of an unlawful search or seizure. Evidence that is unconstitutionally seized is excluded from the trial. This is the so-called exclusionary rule, first made applicable in federal cases in 1914 and brought home to the states in 1961. The exclusionary rule is highly controversial, and there are numerous exceptions to it. But it remains generally true that the prosecutor may not use evidence willfully taken by the police in violation of constitutional rights generally, and most often in the violation of Fourth Amendment rights. (The fruits of a coerced confession are also excluded.)

### Double Jeopardy

The Fifth Amendment prohibits the government from prosecuting a person twice for the same offense. The amendment says that no person shall be “subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb.” If a defendant is acquitted, the government may not appeal. If a defendant is convicted and his conviction is upheld on appeal, he may not thereafter be reprosecuted for the same crime.

### **Self-Incrimination**

The Fifth Amendment is also the source of a person’s right against self-incrimination (no person “shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself”). The debate over the limits of this right has given rise to an immense literature. In broadest outline, the right against self-incrimination means that the prosecutor may not call a defendant to the witness stand during trial and may not comment to the jury on the defendant’s failure to take the stand. Moreover, a defendant’s confession must be excluded from evidence if it was not voluntarily made (e.g., if the police beat the person into giving a confession). In *Miranda v. Arizona*, the Supreme Court ruled that no confession is admissible if the police have not first advised a suspect of his constitutional rights, including the right to have a lawyer present to advise him during the questioning.<sup>[1]</sup> These so-called Miranda warnings have prompted scores of follow-up cases that have made this branch of jurisprudence especially complex.

### **Speedy Trial**

The Sixth Amendment tells the government that it must try defendants speedily. How long a delay is too long depends on the circumstances in each case. In 1975, Congress enacted the Speedy Trial Act to give priority to criminal cases in federal courts. It requires all criminal prosecutions to go to trial within seventy-five days (though the law lists many permissible reasons for delay).

### **Cross-Examination**

The Sixth Amendment also says that the defendant shall have the right to confront witnesses against him. No testimony is permitted to be shown to the jury unless the person making it is present and subject to cross-examination by the defendant’s counsel.

### **Assistance of Counsel**

The Sixth Amendment guarantees criminal defendants the right to have the assistance of defense counsel. During the eighteenth century and before, the British courts frequently refused to permit defendants to have lawyers in the courtroom during trial. The right to counsel is much broader in this country, as the result of Supreme Court decisions that require the state to pay for a lawyer for indigent defendants in most criminal cases.

### **Cruel and Unusual Punishment**

Punishment under the common law was frequently horrifying. Death was a common punishment for relatively minor crimes. In many places throughout the world, punishments still persist that seem cruel and unusual, such as the practice of stoning someone to death. The guillotine, famously in use during and after the French Revolution, is no longer used, nor are defendants put in stocks for public display and humiliation. In pre-Revolutionary America, an unlucky defendant who found himself convicted could face brutal torture before death.

The Eighth Amendment banned these actions with the words that “cruel and unusual punishments [shall not be] inflicted.” Virtually all such punishments either never were enacted or have been eliminated from the statute books in the United States. Nevertheless, the Eighth Amendment has become a source of controversy, first with the Supreme Court’s ruling in 1976 that the death penalty, as haphazardly applied in the various states, amounted to cruel and unusual punishment. Later Supreme Court opinions have made it easier for states to administer the death penalty. As of 2010, there were 3,300 defendants on death row in the United States. Of course, no corporation is on death row, and no corporation’s charter has ever been revoked by a US state, even though some corporations have repeatedly been indicted and convicted of criminal offenses.

### **Presumption of Innocence**

The most important constitutional right in the US criminal justice system is the presumption of innocence. The Supreme Court has repeatedly cautioned lower courts in the United States that juries must be properly instructed that the defendant is innocent until proven guilty. This is the origin of the “beyond all reasonable doubt” standard of proof and is an instruction given to juries in each criminal case. The Fifth Amendment notes the right of “due process” in federal

proceedings, and the Fourteenth Amendment requires that each state provide “due process” to defendants.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

The US Constitution provides several important protections for criminal defendants, including a prohibition on the use of evidence that has been obtained by unconstitutional means. This would include evidence seized in violation of the Fourth Amendment and confessions obtained in violation of the Fifth Amendment.

### EXERCISES

1. Do you think it is useful to have a presumption of innocence in criminal cases? What if there were not a presumption of innocence in criminal cases?
2. Do you think public humiliation, public execution, and unusual punishments would reduce the amount of crime? Why do you think so?
3. “Due process” is another phrase for “fairness.” Why should the public show fairness toward criminal defendants?

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[1] *Miranda v. Arizona*, 384 US 436 (1966).

## 6.7 Cases

### False Pretenses

*State v. Mills*

*96 Ariz. 377, 396 P.2d 5 (Ariz. 1964)*

LOCKWOOD, VICE CHIEF JUSTICE

Defendants appeal from a conviction on two counts of obtaining money by false pretenses in violation of AR.S. §§ 13-661.A3. and 13-663.A1. The material facts, viewed “...in the light most favorable to sustaining the conviction,” are as follows: Defendant William Mills was a builder and owned approximately 150 homes in Tucson in December, 1960. Mills conducted his business in his home. In 1960 defendant Winifred Mills, his wife, participated in the business generally by answering the telephone, typing, and receiving clients who came to the office.

In December 1960, Mills showed the complainant, Nathan Pivowar, a house at 1155 Knox Drive and another at 1210 Easy Street, and asked Pivowar if he would loan money on the Knox Drive house. Pivowar did not indicate at that time whether he would agree to such a transaction. Later in the same month Nathan Pivowar told the defendants that he and his brother, Joe Pivowar, would loan \$5,000 and \$4,000 on the two houses. Three or four days later Mrs. Mills, at Pivowar's request, showed him these homes again.

Mills had prepared two typed mortgages for Pivowar. Pivowar objected to the wording, so in Mills' office Mrs. Mills retyped the mortgages under Pivowar's dictation. After the mortgages had been recorded on December 31, 1960, Pivowar gave Mills a bank check for \$5,791.87, some cash, and a second mortgage formerly obtained from Mills in the approximate sum of \$3,000. In exchange Mills gave Pivowar two personal notes in the sums of \$5,250.00 and \$4,200.00 and the two mortgages as security for the loan.

Although the due date for Mills' personal notes passed without payment being made, the complainant did not present the notes for payment, did not demand that they be paid, and did not sue upon them. In 1962 the complainant learned that the mortgages which he had taken as security in the transaction were not first mortgages on the Knox Drive and Easy Street properties. These mortgages actually covered two vacant lots on which there were outstanding senior mortgages. On learning this, Pivowar signed a complaint charging the defendants with the crime of theft by false pretenses.

On appeal defendants contend that the trial court erred in denying their motion to dismiss the information. They urge that a permanent taking of property must be proved in order to establish the crime of theft. Since the complainant had the right to sue on the defendants' notes, the defendants assert that complainant cannot be said to have been deprived of his property permanently. Defendants misconceive the elements of the crime of theft by false pretenses. Stated in a different form, their argument is that although the complainant has parted with his cash, a bank check, and a second mortgage, the defendants intend to repay the loan.

Defendants admit that the proposition of law which they assert is a novel one in this jurisdiction. Respectable authority in other states persuades us that their contention is without merit. A creditor has a right to determine for himself whether he wishes to be a secured or an unsecured

creditor. In the former case, he has a right to know about the security. If he extends credit in reliance upon security which is falsely represented to be adequate, he has been defrauded even if the debtor intends to repay the debt. His position is now that of an unsecured creditor. At the very least, an unreasonable risk of loss has been forced upon him by reason of the deceit. This risk which he did not intend to assume has been imposed upon him by the intentional act of the debtor, and such action constitutes an intent to defraud.

\* \* \*

The cases cited by defendants in support of their contention are distinguishable from the instant case in that they involved theft by larceny. Since the crime of larceny is designed to protect a person's possessory interest in property whereas the crime of false pretenses protects one's title interest, the requirement of a permanent deprivation is appropriate to the former. Accordingly, we hold that an intent to repay a loan obtained on the basis of a false representation of the security for the loan is no defense.

\* \* \*

Affirmed in part, reversed in part, and remanded for resentencing.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. False pretenses is a crime of obtaining ownership of property of another by making untrue representations of fact with intent to defraud. What were the untrue representations of fact made by Mills?
2. Concisely state the defendant's argument as to why Pivowar has not been deprived of any property.
3. If Pivowar had presented the notes and Mills had paid, would a crime have been committed?

#### White-Collar Crimes

*United States v. Park*

*421 U.S. 658 (1975)*

MR. CHIEF JUSTICE BURGER delivered the opinion of the Court.

We granted certiorari to consider whether the jury instructions in the prosecution of a corporate officer under § 301 (k) of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, 52 Stat. 1042, as amended, 21 U.S.C. § 331 (k), were appropriate under *United States v. Dotterweich*, 320 U.S. 277 (1943).

Acme Markets, Inc., is a national retail food chain with approximately 36,000 employees, 874 retail outlets, 12 general warehouses, and four special warehouses. Its headquarters, including the office of the president, respondent Park, who is chief executive officer of the corporation, are located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In a five-count information filed in the United States District Court for the District of Maryland, the Government charged Acme and respondent with violations of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. Each count of the information alleged that the defendants had received food that had been shipped in interstate commerce and that, while the food was being held for sale in Acme's Baltimore warehouse following shipment in interstate commerce, they caused it to be held in a building accessible to rodents and to be exposed to contamination by rodents. These acts were alleged to have resulted in the food's being adulterated within the meaning of 21 U.S.C. §§ 342 (a)(3) and (4), in violation of 21 U.S.C. § 331 (k).

Acme pleaded guilty to each count of the information. Respondent pleaded not guilty. The evidence at trial demonstrated that in April 1970 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advised respondent by letter of insanitary conditions in Acme's Philadelphia warehouse. In 1971 the FDA found that similar conditions existed in the firm's Baltimore warehouse. An FDA consumer safety officer testified concerning evidence of rodent infestation and other insanitary conditions discovered during a 12-day inspection of the Baltimore warehouse in November and December 1971. He also related that a second inspection of the warehouse had been conducted in March 1972. On that occasion the inspectors found that there had been improvement in the sanitary conditions, but that "there was still evidence of rodent activity in the building and in the warehouses and we found some rodent-contaminated lots of food items."

The Government also presented testimony by the Chief of Compliance of the FDA's Baltimore office, who informed respondent by letter of the conditions at the Baltimore warehouse after the first inspection. There was testimony by Acme's Baltimore division vice president, who had responded to the letter on behalf of Acme and respondent and who described the steps taken to remedy the insanitary conditions discovered by both inspections. The Government's final witness, Acme's vice president for legal affairs and assistant secretary, identified respondent as the president and chief executive officer of the company and read a bylaw prescribing the duties



of the chief executive officer. He testified that respondent functioned by delegating “normal operating duties” including sanitation, but that he retained “certain things, which are the big, broad, principles of the operation of the company and had “the responsibility of seeing that they all work together.”

At the close of the Government’s case in chief, respondent moved for a judgment of acquittal on the ground that “the evidence in chief has shown that Mr. Park is not personally concerned in this Food and Drug violation.” The trial judge denied the motion, stating that *United States v. Dotterweich*, 320 U.S. 277 (1943), was controlling.

Respondent was the only defense witness. He testified that, although all of Acme’s employees were in a sense under his general direction, the company had an “organizational structure for responsibilities for certain functions” according to which different phases of its operation were “assigned to individuals who, in turn, have staff and departments under them.” He identified those individuals responsible for sanitation, and related that upon receipt of the January 1972 FDA letter, he had conferred with the vice president for legal affairs, who informed him that the Baltimore division vice president “was investigating the situation immediately and would be taking corrective action and would be preparing a summary of the corrective action to reply to the letter.” Respondent stated that he did not “believe there was anything [he] could have done more constructively than what [he] found was being done.”

On cross-examination, respondent conceded that providing sanitary conditions for food offered for sale to the public was something that he was “responsible for in the entire operation of the company” and he stated that it was one of many phases of the company that he assigned to “dependable subordinates.” Respondent was asked about and, over the objections of his counsel, admitted receiving, the April 1970 letter addressed to him from the FDA regarding insanitary conditions at Acme’s Philadelphia warehouse. He acknowledged that, with the exception of the division vice president, the same individuals had responsibility for sanitation in both Baltimore and Philadelphia. Finally, in response to questions concerning the Philadelphia and Baltimore incidents, respondent admitted that the Baltimore problem indicated the system for handling sanitation “wasn’t working perfectly” and that as Acme’s chief executive officer he was “responsible for any result which occurs in our company.”

At the close of the evidence, respondent's renewed motion for a judgment of acquittal was denied. The relevant portion of the trial judge's instructions to the jury challenged by respondent is set out in the margin. Respondent's counsel objected to the instructions on the ground that they failed fairly to reflect our decision in *United States v. Dotterweich supra*, and to define "responsible relationship." The trial judge overruled the objection. The jury found respondent guilty on all counts of the information, and he was subsequently sentenced to pay a fine of \$50 on each count. The Court of Appeals reversed the conviction and remanded for a new trial.

\* \* \*

The question presented by the Government's petition for certiorari in *United States v. Dotterweich*, and the focus of this Court's opinion, was whether the manager of a corporation, as well as the corporation itself, may be prosecuted under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938 for the introduction of misbranded and adulterated articles into interstate commerce. In *Dotterweich*, a jury had disagreed as to the corporation, a jobber purchasing drugs from manufacturers and shipping them in interstate commerce under its own label, but had convicted Dotterweich, the corporation's president and general manager. The Court of Appeals reversed the conviction on the ground that only the drug dealer, whether corporation or individual, was subject to the criminal provisions of the Act, and that where the dealer was a corporation, an individual connected therewith might be held personally only if he was operating the corporation as his 'alter ego.'

In reversing the judgment of the Court of Appeals and reinstating Dotterweich's conviction, this Court looked to the purposes of the Act and noted that they "touch phases of the lives and health of people which, in the circumstances of modern industrialism, are largely beyond self-protection. It observed that the Act is of "a now familiar type" which "dispenses with the conventional requirement for criminal conduct-awareness of some wrongdoing: In the interest of the larger good it puts the burden of acting at hazard upon a person otherwise innocent but standing in responsible relation to a public danger. Central to the Court's conclusion that individuals other than proprietors are subject to the criminal provisions of the Act was the

reality that the only way in which a corporation can act is through the individuals, who act on its behalf.

\* \* \*

The Court recognized that, because the Act dispenses with the need to prove “consciousness of wrongdoing,” it may result in hardship even as applied to those who share “responsibility in the business process resulting in” a violation....The rule that corporate employees who have “a responsible share in the furtherance of the transaction which the statute outlaws” are subject to the criminal provisions of the Act was not formulated in a vacuum. Cf. *Morissette v. United States*, 342 U.S. 246, 258 (1952). Cases under the Federal Food and Drugs Act of 1906 reflected the view both that knowledge or intent were not required to be proved in prosecutions under its criminal provisions, and that responsible corporate agents could be subjected to the liability thereby imposed.

\* \* \*

The rationale of the interpretation given the Act in *Dotterweich*...has been confirmed in our subsequent cases. Thus, the Court has reaffirmed the proposition that the public interest in the purity of its food is so great as to warrant the imposition of the highest standard of care on distributors.

Thus *Dotterweich* and the cases which have followed reveal that in providing sanctions which reach and touch the individuals who execute the corporate mission—and this is by no means necessarily confined to a single corporate agent or employee—the Act imposes not only a positive duty to seek out and remedy violations when they occur but also, and primarily, a duty to implement measures that will insure that violations will not occur. The requirements of foresight and vigilance imposed on responsible corporate agents are beyond question demanding, and perhaps onerous, but they are no more stringent than the public has a right to expect of those who voluntarily assume positions of authority in business enterprises whose services and products affect the health and well-being of the public that supports them.

\* \* \*

Reading the entire charge satisfies us that the jury’s attention was adequately focused on the issue of respondent’s authority with respect to the conditions that formed the basis of the

alleged violations. Viewed as a whole, the charge did not permit the jury to find guilt solely on the basis of respondent's position in the corporation; rather, it fairly advised the jury that to find guilt it must find respondent "had a responsible relation to the situation," and "by virtue of his position...had...authority and responsibility" to deal with the situation.

The situation referred to could only be "food...held in unsanitary conditions in a warehouse with the result that it consisted, in part, of filth or...may have been contaminated with filth."

Our conclusion that the Court of Appeals erred in its reading of the jury charge suggests as well our disagreement with that court concerning the admissibility of evidence demonstrating that respondent was advised by the FDA in 1970 of insanitary conditions in Acme's Philadelphia warehouse. We are satisfied that the Act imposes the highest standard of care and permits conviction of responsible corporate officials who, in light of this standard of care, have the power to prevent or correct violations of its provisions.

\* \* \*

Reversed.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Did Park have criminal intent to put adulterated food into commerce? If not, how can Park's conduct be criminalized?
2. To get a conviction, what does the prosecutor have to show, other than that Park was the CEO of Acme and therefore responsible for what his company did or didn't do?

## 6.8 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Criminal law is that branch of law governing offenses against society. Most criminal law requires a specific intent to commit the prohibited act (although a very few economic acts, made criminal by modern legislation, dispense with the requirement of intent). In this way, criminal law differs from much of civil law—for example, from the tort of negligence, in which carelessness, rather than intent, can result in liability.

Major crimes are known as felonies. Minor crimes are known as misdemeanors. Most people have a general notion about familiar crimes, such as murder and theft. But conventional knowledge does not suffice for understanding technical distinctions among related crimes, such

as larceny, robbery, and false pretenses. These distinctions can be important because an individual can be found guilty not merely for committing one of the acts defined in the criminal law but also for attempting or conspiring to commit such an act. It is usually easier to convict someone of attempt or conspiracy than to convict for the main crime, and a person involved in a conspiracy to commit a felony may find that very little is required to put him into serious trouble.

Of major concern to the business executive is white-collar crime, which encompasses a host of offenses, including bribery, embezzlement, fraud, restraints of trade, and computer crime.

Anyone accused of crime should know that they always have the right to consult with a lawyer and should always do so.

## EXERCISES

1. Bill is the chief executive of a small computer manufacturing company that desperately needs funds to continue operating. One day a stranger comes to Bill to induce him to take part in a cocaine smuggling deal that would net Bill millions of dollars. Unbeknownst to Bill, the stranger is an undercover policeman. Bill tells the stranger to go away. The stranger persists, and after five months of arguing and cajoling, the stranger wears down Bill's will to resist. Bill agrees to take delivery of the cocaine and hands over a down payment of \$10,000 to the undercover agent, who promptly arrests him for conspiracy to violate the narcotics laws. What defenses does Bill have?
2. You are the manager of a bookstore. A customer becomes irritated at having to stand in line and begins to shout at the salesclerk for refusing to wait on him. You come out of your office and ask the customer to calm down. He shouts at you. You tell him to leave. He refuses. So you and the salesclerk pick him up and shove him bodily out the door. He calls the police to have you arrested for assault. Should the police arrest you? Assuming that they do, how would you defend yourself in court?
3. Marilyn is arrested for arson against a nuclear utility, a crime under both state and federal law. She is convicted in state court and sentenced to five years in jail. Then the federal government decides to prosecute her for the same offense. Does she have a double-jeopardy defense against the federal prosecution?

4. Tectonics, a US corporation, is bidding on a project in Nigeria, and its employee wins the bid by secretly giving \$100,000 to the Nigerian public official that has the most say about which company will be awarded the contract. The contract is worth \$80 million, and Tectonics expects to make at least \$50 million on the project. Has a crime under US law been committed?
5. Suppose that the CEO of Tectonics, Ted Nelson, is not actually involved in bribery of the Nigerian public official Adetutu Adeleke. Instead, suppose that the CFO, Jamie Skillset, is very accomplished at insulating both top management and the board of directors from some of the “operational realities” within the company. Skillset knows that Whoopi Goldmine, a Nigerian employee of Tectonics, has made the deal with Adeleke and secured the contract for Tectonics. Is it possible that Nelson, as well as Skillset, can be found guilty of a crime?
6. You have graduated from college and, after working hard for ten years, have scraped enough money together to make a down payment on a forty-acre farm within driving distance to the small city where you work in Colorado. In town at lunch one day, you run into an old friend from high school, Hayley Mills, who tells you that she is saving her money to start a high-end consignment shop in town. You allow her to have a room in your house for a few months until she has enough money to go into business. Over the following weeks, however, you realize that old acquaintances from high school are stopping by almost daily for short visits. When you bring this up to Hayley, she admits that many old friends are now relying on her for marijuana. She is not a licensed caregiver in Colorado and is clearly violating the law. Out of loyalty, you tell her that she has three weeks to move out, but you do not prevent her from continuing sales while she is there. What crime have you committed?
7. The Center Art Galleries—Hawaii sells artwork, and much of it involves art by the famous surrealist painter Salvador Dali. The federal government suspected the center of selling forged Dali artwork and obtained search warrants for six locations controlled by the center. The warrants told the executing officer to seize any items that were “evidence of violations of federal criminal law.” The warrants did not describe the specific crime suspected, nor did the warrants limit the seizure of items solely to Dali artwork or suspected Dali forgeries. Are these search warrants valid? <sup>[1]</sup>

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Jared has made several loans to debtors who have declared bankruptcy. These are unsecured claims. Jared “doctors” the documentation to show amounts owed that are higher than the debtors actually owe. Later, Jared is charged with the federal criminal offense of filing false claims. The standard (or “burden”) of proof that the US attorney must meet in the prosecution is

- a. beyond all doubt
- b. beyond a reasonable doubt
- c. clear and convincing evidence
- d. a preponderance of the evidence

Jethro, a businessman who resides in Atlanta, creates a disturbance at a local steakhouse and is arrested for being drunk and disorderly. Drunk and disorderly is a misdemeanor under Georgia law. A misdemeanor is a crime punishable by imprisonment for up to

- a. one year
- b. two years
- c. five years
- d. none of the above

Yuan is charged with a crime. To find him guilty, the prosecutor must show

- a. actus reus and mens rea
- b. mens rea only
- c. the performance of a prohibited act
- d. none of the above

Kira works for Data Systems Ltd. and may be liable for larceny if she steals

- a. a competitor’s trade secrets
- b. company computer time
- c. the use of Data Systems’ Internet for personal business
- d. any of the above

Candace is constructing a new office building that is near its completion. She offers Paul \$500 to overlook certain things that are noncompliant with the city's construction code. Paul accepts the money and overlooks the violations.

Later, Candace is charged with the crime of bribery. This occurred when

- a. Candace offered the bribe.
- b. Paul accepted the bribe.
- c. Paul overlooked the violations.
- d. none of the above

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. b
- 2. a
- 3. a
- 4. d
- 5. a

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[1] *Center Art Galleries—Hawaii, Inc. v. United States*, 875 F.2d 747 (9th Cir. 1989).



# Chapter 7

## Introduction to Tort Law

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Know why most legal systems have tort law.
2. Identify the three kinds of torts.
3. Show how tort law relates to criminal law and contract law.
4. Understand negligent torts and defenses to claims of negligence.
5. Understand strict liability torts and the reasons for them in the US legal system.

In civil litigation, contract and tort claims are by far the most numerous. The law attempts to adjust for harms done by awarding damages to a successful plaintiff who demonstrates that the defendant was the cause of the plaintiff's losses. Torts can be intentional torts, negligent torts, or strict liability torts. Employers must be aware that in many circumstances, their employees may create liability in tort. This chapter explains the different kind of torts, as well as available defenses to tort claims.

## 7.1 Purpose of Tort Laws

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain why a sound market system requires tort law.
2. Define a tort and give two examples.
3. Explain the moral basis of tort liability.
4. Understand the purposes of damage awards in tort.

### Definition of *Tort*

The term *tort* is the French equivalent of the English word *wrong*. The word *tort* is also derived from the Latin word *tortum*, which means twisted or crooked or wrong, in contrast to the word *rectum*, which means straight (*rectitude* uses that Latin root). Thus conduct that is twisted or crooked and not straight is a tort. The term was introduced into the English law by the Norman jurists.

Long ago, *tort* was used in everyday speech; today it is left to the legal system. A judge will instruct a jury that a tort is usually defined as a wrong for which the law will provide a remedy, most often in the form of money damages. The law does not remedy all “wrongs.” The preceding definition of tort does not reveal the underlying principles that divide wrongs in the legal sphere from those in the moral sphere. Hurting someone’s feelings may be more devastating than saying something untrue about him behind his back; yet the law will not provide a remedy for saying something cruel to someone directly, while it may provide a remedy for “defaming” someone, orally or in writing, to others.

Although the word is no longer in general use, tort suits are the stuff of everyday headlines. More and more people injured by exposure to a variety of risks now seek redress (some sort of remedy through the courts). Headlines boast of multimillion-dollar jury awards against doctors who bungled operations, against newspapers that libeled subjects of stories, and against oil companies that devastate entire ecosystems. All are examples of tort suits.

The law of torts developed almost entirely in the common-law courts; that is, statutes passed by legislatures were not the source of law that plaintiffs usually relied on. Usually, plaintiffs would rely on the common law (judicial decisions). Through thousands of cases, the courts have fashioned a series of rules that govern the conduct of individuals in their noncontractual dealings with each other. Through contracts, individuals can craft their own rights and responsibilities toward each other. In the absence of contracts, tort law holds individuals legally accountable for the consequences of their actions. Those who suffer losses at the hands of others can be compensated.

Many acts (like homicide) are both criminal and tortious. But torts and crimes are different, and the difference is worth noting. A crime is an act against the people as a whole. Society punishes the murderer; it does not usually compensate the family of the victim. Tort law, on the other hand, views the death as a private wrong for which damages are owed. In a civil case, the tort victim or his family, not the state, brings the action. The judgment against a defendant in a civil tort suit is usually expressed in monetary terms, not in terms of prison times or fines, and is the legal system’s way of trying to make up for the victim’s loss.

## **Kinds of Torts**

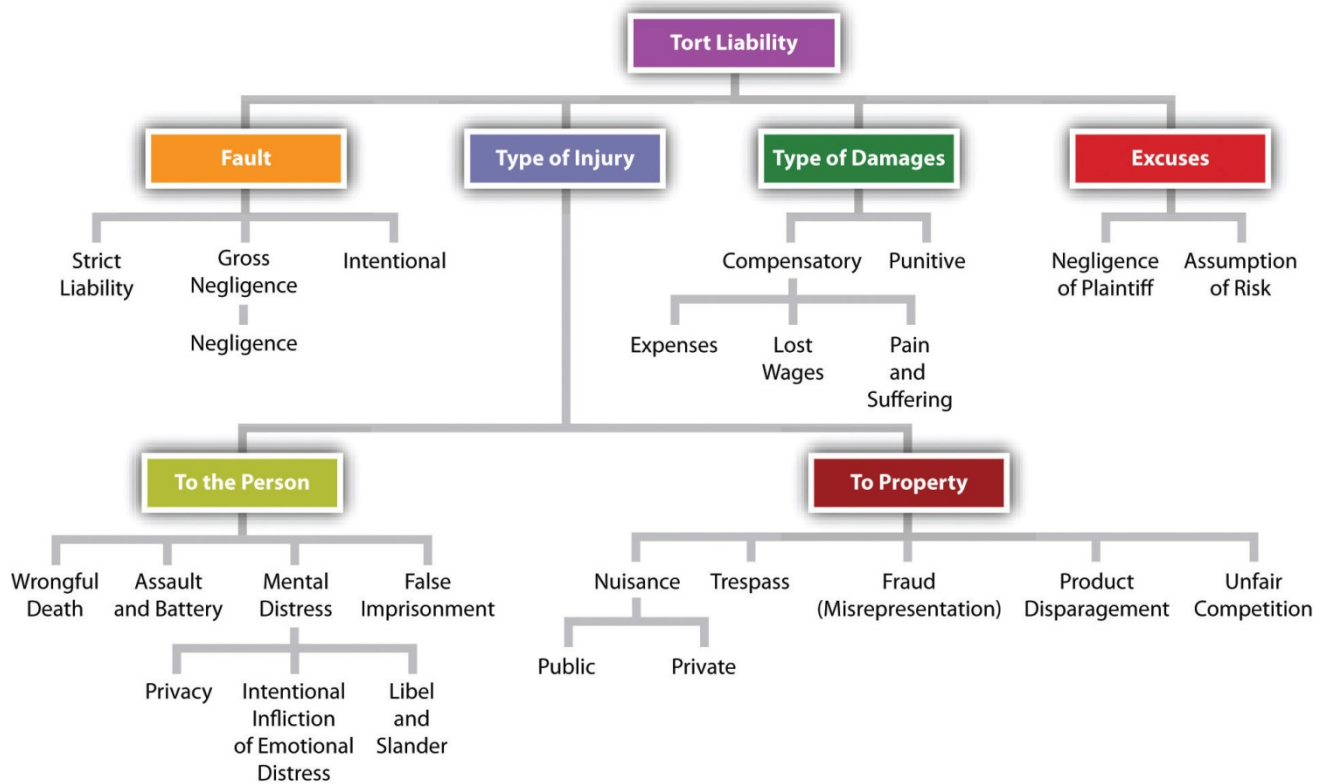
There are three kinds of torts: intentional torts, negligent torts, and strict liability torts. Intentional torts arise from intentional acts, whereas unintentional torts often result from carelessness (e.g., when a surgical team fails to remove a clamp from a patient's abdomen when the operation is finished). Both intentional torts and negligent torts imply some fault on the part of the defendant. In strict liability torts, by contrast, there may be no fault at all, but tort law will sometimes require a defendant to make up for the victim's losses even where the defendant was not careless and did not intend to do harm.

### **Dimensions of Tort Liability**

There is a clear moral basis for recovery through the legal system where the defendant has been careless (negligent) or has intentionally caused harm. Using the concepts that we are free and autonomous beings with basic rights, we can see that when others interfere with either our freedom or our autonomy, we will usually react negatively. As the old saying goes, "Your right to swing your arm ends at the tip of my nose." The law takes this even one step further: under intentional tort law, if you frighten someone by swinging your arms toward the tip of her nose, you may have committed the tort of assault, even if there is no actual touching (battery).

Under a capitalistic market system, rational economic rules also call for no negative externalities. That is, actions of individuals, either alone or in concert with others, should not negatively impact third parties. The law will try to compensate third parties who are harmed by your actions, even as it knows that a money judgment cannot actually mend a badly injured victim.

Figure 7.1 *Dimensions of Tort Liability*



### Dimensions of Tort: Fault

Tort principles can be viewed along different dimensions. One is the **fault** dimension. Like criminal law, tort law requires a wrongful act by a defendant for the plaintiff to recover. Unlike criminal law, however, there need not be a specific intent. Since tort law focuses on injury to the plaintiff, it is less concerned than criminal law about the reasons for the defendant’s actions. An innocent act or a relatively innocent one may still provide the basis for liability. Nevertheless, tort law—except for strict liability—relies on standards of fault, or blameworthiness.

The most obvious standard is willful conduct. If the defendant (often called the tortfeasor—i.e., the one committing the tort) intentionally injures another, there is little argument about tort liability. Thus all crimes resulting in injury to a person or property (murder, assault, arson, etc.) are also torts, and the plaintiff may bring a separate lawsuit to recover damages for injuries to his person, family, or property.

Most tort suits do not rely on *intentional* fault. They are based, rather, on negligent conduct that in the circumstances is careless or poses unreasonable risks of causing damage. Most automobile accident and medical malpractice suits are examples of negligence suits.

The fault dimension is a continuum. At one end is the deliberate desire to do injury. The middle ground is occupied by careless conduct. At the other end is conduct that most would consider entirely blameless, in the moral sense. The defendant may have observed all possible precautions and yet still be held liable. This is called strict liability. An example is that incurred by the manufacturer of a defective product that is placed on the market despite all possible precautions, including quality-control inspection. In many states, if the product causes injury, the manufacturer will be held liable.

#### **Dimensions of Tort: Nature of Injury**

Tort liability varies by the type of injury caused. The most obvious type is physical harm to the person (assault, battery, infliction of emotional distress, negligent exposure to toxic pollutants, wrongful death) or property (trespass, nuisance, arson, interference with contract). Mental suffering can be redressed if it is a result of physical injury (e.g., shock and depression following an automobile accident). A few states now permit recovery for mental distress alone (a mother's shock at seeing her son injured by a car while both were crossing the street). Other protected interests include a person's reputation (injured by defamatory statements or writings), privacy (injured by those who divulge secrets of his personal life), and economic interests (misrepresentation to secure an economic advantage, certain forms of unfair competition).

#### **Dimensions of Tort: Excuses**

A third element in the law of torts is the excuse for committing an apparent wrong. The law does not condemn every act that ultimately results in injury.

One common rule of exculpation is assumption of risk. A baseball fan who sits along the third base line close to the infield assumes the risk that a line drive foul ball may fly toward him and strike him. He will not be permitted to complain in court that the batter should have been more careful or that management should have either warned him or put up a protective barrier.

Another excuse is negligence of the plaintiff. If two drivers are careless and hit each other on the highway, some states will refuse to permit either to recover from the other. Still another excuse

is consent: two boxers in the ring consent to being struck with fists (but not to being bitten on the ear).

## Damages

Since the purpose of tort law is to compensate the victim for harm actually done, damages are usually measured by the extent of the injury. Expressed in money terms, these include replacement of property destroyed, compensation for lost wages, reimbursement for medical expenses, and dollars that are supposed to approximate the pain that is suffered. Damages for these injuries are called compensatory damages.

In certain instances, the courts will permit an award of punitive damages. As the word *punitive* implies, the purpose is to punish the defendant's actions. Because a punitive award (sometimes called exemplary damages) is at odds with the general purpose of tort law, it is allowable only in aggravated situations. The law in most states permits recovery of punitive damages only when the defendant has deliberately committed a wrong with malicious intent or has otherwise done something outrageous.

Punitive damages are rarely allowed in negligence cases for that reason. But if someone sets out intentionally and maliciously to hurt another person, punitive damages may well be appropriate. Punitive damages are intended not only to punish the wrongdoer, by exacting an additional and sometimes heavy payment (the exact amount is left to the discretion of jury and judge), but also to deter others from similar conduct. The punitive damage award has been subject to heavy criticism in recent years in cases in which it has been awarded against manufacturers. One fear is that huge damage awards on behalf of a multitude of victims could swiftly bankrupt the defendant. Unlike compensatory damages, punitive damages are taxable.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

There are three kinds of torts, and in two of them (negligent torts and strict liability torts), damages are usually limited to making the victim whole through an enforceable judgment for money damages. These compensatory damages awarded by a court accomplish only approximate justice for the injuries or property damage caused by a tortfeasor. Tort laws go a step further toward deterrence, beyond compensation to the plaintiff, in occasionally

awarding punitive damages against a defendant. These are almost always in cases where an intentional tort has been committed.

## EXERCISES

1. Why is deterrence needed for intentional torts (where punitive damages are awarded) rather than negligent torts?
2. Why are costs imposed on others without their consent problematic for a market economy? What if the law did not try to reimpose the victim's costs onto the tortfeasor? What would a totally nonlitigious society be like?

## 7.2 Intentional Torts

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Distinguish intentional torts from other kinds of torts.
2. Give three examples of an intentional tort—one that causes injury to a person, one that causes injury to property, and one that causes injury to a reputation.

The analysis of most intentional torts is straightforward and parallels the substantive crimes already discussed in [Chapter 6 "Criminal Law"](#). When physical injury or damage to property is caused, there is rarely debate over liability if the plaintiff deliberately undertook to produce the harm. Certain other intentional torts are worth noting for their relevance to business.

### Assault and Battery

One of the most obvious intentional torts is assault and battery. Both criminal law and tort law serve to restrain individuals from using physical force on others. Assault is (1) the threat of immediate harm or offense of contact or (2) any act that would arouse reasonable apprehension of imminent harm. Battery is unauthorized and harmful or offensive physical contact with another person that causes injury.

Often an assault results in battery, but not always. In *Western Union Telegraph Co. v. Hill*, for example, the defendant did not touch the plaintiff's wife, but the case presented an issue of possible assault even without an actual battery; the defendant employee attempted to kiss a customer across the countertop, couldn't quite reach her, but nonetheless created actionable fear (or, as the court put it, "apprehension") on the part of the plaintiff's wife. It is also possible to have a battery without an assault. For example, if someone hits you on the back of the head

with an iron skillet and you didn't see it coming, there is a battery but no assault. Likewise, if Andrea passes out from drinking too much at the fraternity party and a stranger (Andre) kisses her on the lips while she is passed out, she would not be aware of any threat of offensive contact and would have no apprehension of any harm. Thus there has been no tort of assault, but she could allege the tort of battery. (The question of what damages, if any, would be an interesting argument.)

Under the doctrine of transferred intent, if Draco aims his wand at Harry but Harry ducks just in time and the impact is felt by Hermione instead, English law (and American law) would transfer Draco's intent from the target to the actual victim of the act. Thus Hermione could sue Draco for battery for any damages she had suffered.

### **False Imprisonment**

The tort of false imprisonment originally implied a locking up, as in a prison, but today it can occur if a person is restrained in a room or a car or even if his or her movements are restricted while walking down the street. People have a right to be free to go as they please, and anyone who without cause deprives another of personal freedom has committed a tort. Damages are allowed for time lost, discomfort and resulting ill health, mental suffering, humiliation, loss of reputation or business, and expenses such as attorneys' fees incurred as a result of the restraint (such as a false arrest). But as the case of *Lester v. Albers Super Markets, Inc.* ([Section 7.5 "Cases"](#)) shows, the defendant must be shown to have restrained the plaintiff in order for damages to be allowed.

### **Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress**

Until recently, the common-law rule was that there could be no recovery for acts, even though intentionally undertaken, that caused purely mental or emotional distress. For a case to go to the jury, the courts required that the mental distress result from some physical injury. In recent years, many courts have overthrown the older rule and now recognize the so-called new tort. In an employment context, however, it is rare to find a case where a plaintiff is able to recover. The most difficult hurdle is proving that the conduct was "extreme" or "outrageous."

In an early California case, bill collectors came to the debtor's home repeatedly and threatened the debtor's pregnant wife. Among other things, they claimed that the wife would have to deliver



her child in prison. The wife miscarried and had emotional and physical complications. The court found that the behavior of the collection company's two agents was sufficiently outrageous to prove the tort of intentional infliction of emotional distress. In *Roche v. Stern* (New York), the famous cable television talk show host Howard Stern had tastelessly discussed the remains of Deborah Roche, a topless dancer and cable access television host. <sup>[1]</sup> The remains had been brought to Stern's show by a close friend of Roche, Chauncey Hayden, and a number of crude comments by Stern and Hayden about the remains were videotaped and broadcast on a national cable television station. Roche's sister and brother sued Howard Stern and Infinity broadcasting and were able to get past the defendant's motion to dismiss to have a jury consider their claim. A plaintiff's burden in these cases is to show that the mental distress is severe. Many states require that this distress must result in physical symptoms such as nausea, headaches, ulcers, or, as in the case of the pregnant wife, a miscarriage. Other states have not required physical symptoms, finding that shame, embarrassment, fear, and anger constitute severe mental distress.

### **Trespass and Nuisance**

Trespass is intentionally going on land that belongs to someone else or putting something on someone else's property and refusing to remove it. This part of tort law shows how strongly the law values the rights of property owners. The right to enjoy your property without interference from others is also found in common law of nuisance. There are limits to property owners' rights, however. In *Katko v. Briney*, for example, the plaintiff was injured by a spring gun while trespassing on the defendant's property. <sup>[2]</sup> The defendant had set up No Trespassing signs after ten years of trespassing and housebreaking events, with the loss of some household items. Windows had been broken, and there was "messing up of the property in general." The defendants had boarded up the windows and doors in order to stop the intrusions and finally had set up a shotgun trap in the north bedroom of the house. One defendant had cleaned and oiled his 20-gauge shotgun and taken it to the old house where it was secured to an iron bed with the barrel pointed at the bedroom door. "It was rigged with wire from the doorknob to the gun's trigger so would fire when the door was opened." The angle of the shotgun was adjusted to

hit an intruder in the legs. The spring could not be seen from the outside, and no warning of its presence was posted.

The plaintiff, Katko, had been hunting in the area for several years and considered the property abandoned. He knew it had long been uninhabited. He and a friend had been to the house and found several old bottles and fruit jars that they took and added to their collection of antiques. When they made a second trip to the property, they entered by removing a board from a porch window. When the plaintiff opened the north bedroom door, the shotgun went off and struck him in the right leg above the ankle bone. Much of his leg was blown away. While Katko knew he had no right to break and enter the house with intent to steal bottles and fruit jars, the court held that a property owner could not protect an unoccupied boarded-up farmhouse by using a spring gun capable of inflicting death or serious injury.

In *Katko*, there is an intentional tort. But what if someone trespassing is injured by the negligence of the landowner? States have differing rules about trespass and negligence. In some states, a trespasser is only protected against the gross negligence of the landowner. In other states, trespassers may be owed the duty of due care on the part of the landowner. The burglar who falls into a drained swimming pool, for example, may have a case against the homeowner unless the courts or legislature of that state have made it clear that trespassers are owed the limited duty to avoid gross negligence. Or a very small child may wander off his own property and fall into a gravel pit on a nearby property and suffer death or serious injury; if the pit should (in the exercise of due care) have been filled in or some barrier erected around it, then there was negligence. But if the state law holds that the duty to trespassers is only to avoid gross negligence, the child's family would lose, unless the state law makes an exception for very young trespassers. In general, guests, licensees, and invitees are owed a duty of due care; a trespasser may not be owed such a duty, but states have different rules on this.

### **Intentional Interference with Contractual Relations**

Tortious interference with a contract can be established by proving four elements:

1. There was a contract between the plaintiff and a third party.
2. The defendant knew of the contract.

3. The defendant improperly induced the third party to breach the contract or made performance of the contract impossible.
4. There was injury to the plaintiff.

In a famous case of contract interference, Texaco was sued by Pennzoil for interfering with an agreement that Pennzoil had with Getty Oil. After complicated negotiations between Pennzoil and Getty, a takeover share price was struck, a memorandum of understanding was signed, and a press release announced the agreement in principle between Pennzoil and Getty. Texaco's lawyers, however, believed that Getty oil was "still in play," and before the lawyers for Pennzoil and Getty could complete the paperwork for their agreement, Texaco announced it was offering Getty shareholders an additional \$12.50 per share over what Pennzoil had offered.

Texaco later increased its offer to \$228 per share, and the Getty board of directors soon began dealing with Texaco instead of Pennzoil. Pennzoil decided to sue in Texas state court for tortious interference with a contract. After a long trial, the jury returned an enormous verdict against Texaco: \$7.53 billion in actual damages and \$3 billion in punitive damages. The verdict was so large that it would have bankrupted Texaco. Appeals from the verdict centered on an obscure rule of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Rule 10(b)-13, and Texaco's argument was based on that rule and the fact that the contract had not been completed. If there was no contract, Texaco could not have legally interfered with one. After the SEC filed a brief that supported Texaco's interpretation of the law, Texaco agreed to pay \$3 billion to Pennzoil to dismiss its claim of tortious interference with a contract.

### **Malicious Prosecution**

Malicious prosecution is the tort of causing someone to be prosecuted for a criminal act, knowing that there was no probable cause to believe that the plaintiff committed the crime. The plaintiff must show that the defendant acted with malice or with some purpose other than bringing the guilty to justice. A mere complaint to the authorities is insufficient to establish the tort, but any official proceeding will support the claim—for example, a warrant for the plaintiff's arrest. The criminal proceeding must terminate in the plaintiff's favor in order for his suit to be sustained.

A majority of US courts, though by no means all, permit a suit for wrongful civil proceedings. Civil litigation is usually costly and burdensome, and one who forces another to defend himself against baseless accusations should not be permitted to saddle the one he sues with the costs of defense. However, because, as a matter of public policy, litigation is favored as the means by which legal rights can be vindicated—indeed, the Supreme Court has even ruled that individuals have a constitutional right to litigate—the plaintiff must meet a heavy burden in proving his case. The mere dismissal of the original lawsuit against the plaintiff is not sufficient proof that the suit was unwarranted. The plaintiff in a suit for wrongful civil proceedings must show that the defendant (who was the plaintiff in the original suit) filed the action for an improper purpose and had no reasonable belief that his cause was legally or factually well grounded.

## **Defamation**

Defamation is injury to a person's good name or reputation. In general, if the harm is done through the spoken word—one person to another, by telephone, by radio, or on television—it is called slander. If the defamatory statement is published in written form, it is called libel.

The Restatement (Second) of Torts defines a defamatory communication as one that “so tends to harm the reputation of another as to lower him in the estimation of the community or to deter third persons from associating or dealing with him.” <sup>[3]</sup>

A statement is not defamatory unless it is false. Truth is an absolute defense to a charge of libel or slander. Moreover, the statement must be “published”—that is, communicated to a third person. You cannot be libeled by one who sends you a letter full of false accusations and scurrilous statements about you unless a third person opens it first (your roommate, perhaps). Any living person is capable of being defamed, but the dead are not. Corporations, partnerships, and other forms of associations can also be defamed, if the statements tend to injure their ability to do business or to garner contributions.

The statement must have reference to a particular person, but he or she need not be identified by name. A statement that “the company president is a crook” is defamatory, as is a statement that “the major network weathermen are imposters.” The company president and the network weathermen could show that the words were aimed at them. But statements about large groups

will not support an action for defamation (e.g., “all doctors are butchers” is not defamatory of any particular doctor).

The law of defamation is largely built on strict liability. That a person did not intend to defame is ordinarily no excuse; a typographical error that converts a true statement into a false one in a newspaper, magazine, or corporate brochure can be sufficient to make out a case of libel. Even the exercise of due care is usually no excuse if the statement is in fact communicated. Repeating a libel is itself a libel; a libel cannot be justified by showing that you were quoting someone else. Though a plaintiff may be able to prove that a statement was defamatory, he is not necessarily entitled to an award of damages. That is because the law contains a number of privileges that excuse the defamation.

Publishing false information about another business’s product constitutes the tort of slander of quality, or trade libel. In some states, this is known as the tort of product disparagement. It may be difficult to establish damages, however. A plaintiff must prove that actual damages proximately resulted from the slander of quality and must show the extent of the economic harm as well.

### **Absolute Privilege**

Statements made during the course of judicial proceedings are absolutely privileged, meaning that they cannot serve as the basis for a defamation suit. Accurate accounts of judicial or other proceedings are absolutely privileged; a newspaper, for example, may pass on the slanderous comments of a judge in court. “Judicial” is broadly construed to include most proceedings of administrative bodies of the government. The Constitution exempts members of Congress from suits for libel or slander for any statements made in connection with legislative business. The courts have constructed a similar privilege for many executive branch officials.

### **Qualified Privilege**

Absolute privileges pertain to those in the public sector. A narrower privilege exists for private citizens. In general, a statement that would otherwise be actionable is held to be justified if made in a reasonable manner and for a reasonable purpose. Thus you may warn a friend to beware of dealing with a third person, and if you had reason to believe that what you said was true, you are privileged to issue the warning, even though false. Likewise, an employee may warn an employer

about the conduct or character of a fellow or prospective employee, and a parent may complain to a school board about the competence or conduct of a child's teacher. There is a line to be drawn, however, and a defendant with nothing but an idle interest in the matter (an "officious intermeddler") must take the risk that his information is wrong.

In 1964, the Supreme Court handed down its historic decision in *New York Times v. Sullivan*, holding that under the First Amendment a libel judgment brought by a public official against a newspaper cannot stand unless the plaintiff has shown "actual malice," which in turn was defined as "knowledge that [the statement] was false or with a reckless disregard of whether it was false or not."<sup>[4]</sup> In subsequent cases, the court extended the constitutional doctrine further, applying it not merely to government officials but to public figures, people who voluntarily place themselves in the public eye or who involuntarily find themselves the objects of public scrutiny. Whether a private person is or is not a public figure is a difficult question that has so far eluded rigorous definition and has been answered only from case to case. A CEO of a private corporation ordinarily will be considered a private figure unless he puts himself in the public eye—for example, by starring in the company's television commercials.

### **Invasion of Privacy**

The right of privacy—the right "to be let alone"—did not receive judicial recognition until the twentieth century, and its legal formulation is still evolving. In fact there is no single right of privacy. Courts and commentators have discerned at least four different types of interests: (1) the right to control the appropriation of your name and picture for commercial purposes, (2) the right to be free of intrusion on your "personal space" or seclusion, (3) freedom from public disclosure of embarrassing and intimate facts of your personal life, and (4) the right not to be presented in a "false light."

### **Appropriation of Name or Likeness**

The earliest privacy interest recognized by the courts was appropriation of name or likeness: someone else placing your photograph on a billboard or cereal box as a model or using your name as endorsing a product or in the product name. A New York statute makes it a misdemeanor to use the name, portrait, or picture of any person for advertising purposes or for the purposes of trade (business) without first obtaining written consent. The law also permits

the aggrieved person to sue and to recover damages for unauthorized profits and also to have the court enjoin (judicially block) any further unauthorized use of the plaintiff's name, likeness, or image. This is particularly useful to celebrities.

Because the publishing and advertising industries are concentrated heavily in New York, the statute plays an important part in advertising decisions made throughout the country. Deciding what "commercial" or "trade" purposes are is not always easy. Thus a newsmagazine may use a baseball player's picture on its cover without first obtaining written permission, but a chocolate manufacturer could not put the player's picture on a candy wrapper without consent.

### **Personal Space**

One form of intrusion upon a person's solitude—trespass—has long been actionable under common law. Physical invasion of home or other property is not a new tort. But in recent years, the notion of intrusion has been broadened considerably. Now, taking photos of someone else with your cell phone in a locker room could constitute invasion of the right to privacy. Reading someone else's mail or e-mail could also constitute an invasion of the right to privacy.

Photographing someone on a city street is not tortious, but subsequent use of the photograph could be. Whether the invasion is in a public or private space, the amount of damages will depend on how the image or information is disclosed to others.

### **Public Disclosure of Embarrassing Facts**

Circulation of false statements that do injury to a person are actionable under the laws of defamation. What about true statements that might be every bit as damaging—for example, disclosure of someone's income tax return, revealing how much he earned? The general rule is that if the facts are truly private and of no "legitimate" concern to the public, then their disclosure is a violation of the right to privacy. But a person who is in the public eye cannot claim the same protection.

### **False Light**

A final type of privacy invasion is that which paints a false picture in a publication. Though false, it might not be libelous, since the publication need contain nothing injurious to reputation. Indeed, the publication might even glorify the plaintiff, making him seem more heroic than he actually is. Subject to the First Amendment requirement that the plaintiff must show intent or

extreme recklessness, statements that put a person in a false light, like a fictionalized biography, are actionable.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

There are many kinds of intentional torts. Some of them involve harm to the physical person or to his or her property, reputation or feelings, or economic interests. In each case of intentional tort, the plaintiff must show that the defendant intended harm, but the intent to harm does not need to be directed at a particular person and need not be malicious, as long as the resulting harm is a direct consequence of the defendant's actions.

#### EXERCISES

1. Name two kinds of intentional torts that could result in damage to a business firm's bottom line.
2. Name two kinds of intentional torts that are based on protection of a person's property.
3. Why are intentional torts more likely to result in a verdict not only for compensatory damages but also for punitive damages?

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[1] *Roche v. Stern*, 675 N.Y.S.2d 133 (1998).

[2] *Katko v. Briney*, 183 N.W.2d 657 (Iowa 1971).

[3] Restatement (Second) of Torts, Section 559 (1965).

[4] *Times v. Sullivan*, 376 US 254 (1964).

## 7.3 Negligence

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how the duty of due care relates to negligence.
2. Distinguish between actual and proximate cause.
3. Explain the primary defenses to a claim of negligence.

### Elements of Negligence

Physical harm need not be intentionally caused. A pedestrian knocked over by an automobile does not hurt less because the driver intended no wrong but was merely careless. The law



imposes a duty of care on all of us in our everyday lives. Accidents caused by negligence are actionable.

Determining negligence is not always easy. If a driver runs a red light, we can say that he is negligent because a driver must always be careful to ascertain whether the light is red and be able to stop if it is. Suppose that the driver was carrying a badly injured person to a nearby hospital and that after slowing down at an intersection, went through a red light, blowing his horn, whereupon a driver to his right, seeing him, drove into the intersection anyway and crashed into him. Must one always stop at a red light? Is proof that the light was red always proof of negligence? Usually, but not always: negligence is an abstract concept that must always be applied to concrete and often widely varying sets of circumstances. Whether someone was or was not negligent is almost always a question of fact for a jury to decide. Rarely is it a legal question that a judge can settle.

The tort of negligence has four elements: (1) a duty of due care that the defendant had, (2) the breach of the duty of due care, (3) connection between cause and injury, and (4) actual damage or loss. Even if a plaintiff can prove each of these aspects, the defendant may be able to show that the law excuses the conduct that is the basis for the tort claim. We examine each of these factors below.

### **Standard of Care**

Not every unintentional act that causes injury is negligent. If you brake to a stop when you see a child dart out in front of your car, and if the noise from your tires gives someone in a nearby house a heart attack, you have not acted negligently toward the person in the house. The purpose of the negligence standard is to protect others against the risk of injury that foreseeably would ensue from unreasonably dangerous conduct.

Given the infinite variety of human circumstances and conduct, no general statement of a reasonable standard of care is possible. Nevertheless, the law has tried to encapsulate it in the form of the famous standard of “the reasonable man.” This fictitious person “of ordinary prudence” is the model that juries are instructed to compare defendants with in assessing whether those defendants have acted negligently. Analysis of this mythical personage has baffled several generations of commentators. How much knowledge must he have of events in the

community, of technology, of cause and effect? With what physical attributes, courage, or wisdom is this nonexistent person supposedly endowed? If the defendant is a person with specialized knowledge, like a doctor or an automobile designer, must the jury also treat the “reasonable man” as having this knowledge, even though the average person in the community will not? (Answer: in most cases, yes.)

Despite the many difficulties, the concept of the reasonable man is one on which most negligence cases ultimately turn. If a defendant has acted “unreasonably under the circumstances” and his conduct posed an unreasonable risk of injury, then he is liable for injury caused by his conduct. Perhaps in most instances, it is not difficult to divine what the reasonable man would do. The reasonable man stops for traffic lights and always drives at reasonable speeds, does not throw baseballs through windows, performs surgical operations according to the average standards of the medical profession, ensures that the floors of his grocery store are kept free of fluids that would cause a patron to slip and fall, takes proper precautions to avoid spillage of oil from his supertanker, and so on. The “reasonable man” standard imposes hindsight on the decisions and actions of people in society; the circumstances of life are such that courts may sometimes impose a standard of due care that many people might not find reasonable.

### **Duty of Care and Its Breach**

The law does not impose on us a duty to care for every person. If the rule were otherwise, we would all, in this interdependent world, be our brothers’ keepers, constantly unsure whether any action we took might subject us to liability for its effect on someone else. The law copes with this difficulty by limiting the number of people toward whom we owe a duty to be careful.

In general, the law imposes no obligation to act in a situation to which we are strangers. We may pass the drowning child without risking a lawsuit. But if we do act, then the law requires us to act carefully. The law of negligence requires us to behave with due regard for the foreseeable consequences of our actions in order to avoid unreasonable risks of injury.

During the course of the twentieth century, the courts have constantly expanded the notion of “foreseeability,” so that today many more people are held to be within the zone of injury than was once the case. For example, it was once believed that a manufacturer or supplier owed a

duty of care only to immediate purchasers, not to others who might use the product or to whom the product might be resold. This limitation was known as the rule of privity. And users who were not immediate purchasers were said not to be in privity with a supplier or manufacturer. In 1916, Judge Benjamin N. Cardozo, then on the New York Court of Appeals, penned an opinion in a celebrated case that exploded the theory of privity, though it would take half a century before the last state—Mississippi in 1966—would fall in line.

Determining a duty of care can be a vexing problem. Physicians, for example, are bound by principles of medical ethics to respect the confidences of their patients. Suppose a patient tells a psychiatrist that he intends to kill his girlfriend. Does the physician then have a higher legal duty to warn prospective victim? The California Supreme Court has said yes. <sup>[1]</sup>

Establishing a breach of the duty of due care where the defendant has violated a statute or municipal ordinance is eased considerably with the doctrine of negligence per se, a doctrine common to all US state courts. If a legislative body sets a minimum standard of care for particular kinds of acts to protect a certain set of people from harm and a violation of that standard causes harm to someone in that set, the defendant is negligent per se. If Harvey is driving sixty-five miles per hour in a fifty-five-mile-per-hour zone when he crashes into Haley's car and the police accident report establishes that or he otherwise admits to going ten miles per hour over the speed limit, Haley does not have to prove that Harvey has breached a duty of due care. She will only have to prove that the speeding was an actual and proximate cause of the collision and will also have to prove the extent of the resulting damages to her.

### **Causation: Actual Cause and Proximate Cause**

“For want of a nail, the kingdom was lost,” as the old saying has it. Virtually any cause of an injury can be traced to some preceding cause. The problem for the law is to know when to draw the line between causes that are immediate and causes too remote for liability reasonably to be assigned to them. In tort theory, there are two kinds of causes that a plaintiff must prove: actual cause and proximate cause. Actual cause (causation in fact) can be found if the connection between the defendant's act and the plaintiff's injuries passes the “but for” test: if an injury would not have occurred “but for” the defendant's conduct, then the defendant is the cause of the injury. Still, this is not enough causation to create liability. The injuries to the plaintiff must

also be foreseeable, or not “too remote,” for the defendant’s act to create liability. This is proximate cause: a cause that is not too remote or unforeseeable.

Suppose that the person who was injured was not one whom a reasonable person could have expected to be harmed. Such a situation was presented in one of the most famous US tort cases, *Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad* (Section 7.5 "Cases"), which was decided by Judge Benjamin Cardozo. Although Judge Cardozo persuaded four of his seven brethren to side with his position, the closeness of the case demonstrates the difficulty that unforeseeable consequences and unforeseeable plaintiffs present.

## **Damages**

For a plaintiff to win a tort case, she must allege and prove that she was injured. The fear that she might be injured in the future is not a sufficient basis for a suit. This rule has proved troublesome in medical malpractice and industrial disease cases. A doctor’s negligent act or a company’s negligent exposure of a worker to some form of contamination might not become manifest in the body for years. In the meantime, the tort statute of limitations might have run out, barring the victim from suing at all. An increasing number of courts have eased the plaintiff’s predicament by ruling that the statute of limitations does not begin to run until the victim discovers that she has been injured or contracted a disease.

The law allows an exception to the general rule that damages must be shown when the plaintiff stands in danger of immediate injury from a hazardous activity. If you discover your neighbor experimenting with explosives in his basement, you could bring suit to enjoin him from further experimentation, even though he has not yet blown up his house—and yours.

## **Problems of Proof**

The plaintiff in a tort suit, as in any other, has the burden of proving his allegations.

He must show that the defendant took the actions complained of as negligent, demonstrate the circumstances that make the actions negligent, and prove the occurrence and extent of injury. Factual issues are for the jury to resolve. Since it is frequently difficult to make out the requisite proof, the law allows certain presumptions and rules of evidence that ease the plaintiff’s task, on the ground that without them substantial injustice would be done. One important rule goes by the Latin phrase *ipsa loquitur*, meaning “the thing speaks for itself.” The best evidence is

always the most direct evidence: an eyewitness account of the acts in question. But eyewitnesses are often unavailable, and in any event they frequently cannot testify directly to the reasonableness of someone's conduct, which inevitably can only be inferred from the circumstances.

In many cases, therefore, circumstantial evidence (evidence that is indirect) will be the only evidence or will constitute the bulk of the evidence. Circumstantial evidence can often be quite telling: though no one saw anyone leave the building, muddy footprints tracing a path along the sidewalk are fairly conclusive. *Res ipsa loquitur* is a rule of circumstantial evidence that permits the jury to draw an inference of negligence. A common statement of the rule is the following: "There must be reasonable evidence of negligence but where the thing is shown to be under the management of the defendant or his servants, and the accident is such as in the ordinary course of things does not happen if those who have the management use proper care, it affords reasonable evidence, in the absence of explanation by the defendants, that the accident arose from want of care." <sup>[2]</sup>

If a barrel of flour rolls out of a factory window and hits someone, or a soda bottle explodes, or an airplane crashes, courts in every state permit juries to conclude, in the absence of contrary explanations by the defendants, that there was negligence. The plaintiff is not put to the impossible task of explaining precisely how the accident occurred. A defendant can always offer evidence that he acted reasonably—for example, that the flour barrel was securely fastened and that a bolt of lightning, for which he was not responsible, broke its bands, causing it to roll out the window. But testimony by the factory employees that they secured the barrel, in the absence of any further explanation, will not usually serve to rebut the inference. That the defendant was negligent does not conclude the inquiry or automatically entitle the plaintiff to a judgment. Tort law provides the defendant with several excuses, some of which are discussed briefly in the next section.

## Excuses

There are more excuses (defenses) than are listed here, but contributory negligence or comparative negligence, assumption of risk, and act of God are among the principal defenses that will completely or partially excuse the negligence of the defendant.

## **Contributory and Comparative Negligence**

Under an old common-law rule, it was a complete defense to show that the plaintiff in a negligence suit was himself negligent. Even if the plaintiff was only mildly negligent, most of the fault being chargeable to the defendant, the court would dismiss the suit if the plaintiff's conduct contributed to his injury. In a few states today, this rule of contributory negligence is still in effect. Although referred to as negligence, the rule encompasses a narrower form than that with which the defendant is charged, because the plaintiff's only error in such cases is in being less careful of himself than he might have been, whereas the defendant is charged with conduct careless toward others. This rule was so manifestly unjust in many cases that most states, either by statute or judicial decision, have changed to some version of comparative negligence. Under the rule of comparative negligence, damages are apportioned according to the defendant's degree of culpability. For example, if the plaintiff has sustained a \$100,000 injury and is 20 percent responsible, the defendant will be liable for \$80,000 in damages.

## **Assumption of Risk**

Risk of injury pervades the modern world, and plaintiffs should not win a lawsuit simply because they took a risk and lost. The law provides, therefore, that when a person knowingly takes a risk, he or she must suffer the consequences.

The assumption of risk doctrine comes up in three ways. The plaintiff may have formally agreed with the defendant before entering a risky situation that he will relieve the defendant of liability should injury occur. ("You can borrow my car if you agree not to sue me if the brakes fail, because they're worn and I haven't had a chance to replace them.") Or the plaintiff may have entered into a relationship with the defendant knowing that the defendant is not in a position to protect him from known risks (the fan who is hit by a line drive in a ballpark). Or the plaintiff may act in the face of a risky situation known in advance to have been created by the defendant's negligence (failure to leave, while there was an opportunity to do so, such as getting into an automobile when the driver is known to be drunk).

The difficulty in many cases is to determine the dividing line between subjectivity and objectivity. If the plaintiff had no actual knowledge of the risk, he cannot be held to have assumed it. On the other hand, it is easy to claim that you did not appreciate the danger, and the

courts will apply an objective standard of community knowledge (a “but you should have known” test) in many situations. When the plaintiff has no real alternative, however, assumption of risk fails as a defense (e.g., a landlord who negligently fails to light the exit to the street cannot claim that his tenants assumed the risk of using it).

At the turn of the century, courts applied assumption of risk in industrial cases to bar relief to workers injured on the job. They were said to assume the risk of dangerous conditions or equipment. This rule has been abolished by workers’ compensation statutes in most states.

### **Act of God**

Technically, the rule that no one is responsible for an “act of God,” or *force majeure* as it is sometimes called, is not an excuse but a defense premised on a lack of causation. If a force of nature caused the harm, then the defendant was not negligent in the first place. A marina, obligated to look after boats moored at its dock, is not liable if a sudden and fierce storm against which no precaution was possible destroys someone’s vessel. However, if it is foreseeable that harm will flow from a negligent condition triggered by a natural event, then there is liability. For example, a work crew failed to remove residue explosive gas from an oil barge. Lightning hit the barge, exploded the gas, and injured several workmen. The plaintiff recovered damages against the company because the negligence consisted in the failure to guard against any one of a number of chance occurrences that could ignite the gas. <sup>[3]</sup>

### **Vicarious Liability**

Liability for negligent acts does not always end with the one who was negligent. Under certain circumstances, the liability is imputed to others. For example, an employer is responsible for the negligence of his employees if they were acting in the scope of employment. This rule of vicarious liability is often called *respondeat superior*, meaning that the higher authority must respond to claims brought against one of its agents. *Respondeat superior* is not limited to the employment relationship but extends to a number of other agency relationships as well.

Legislatures in many states have enacted laws that make people vicariously liable for acts of certain people with whom they have a relationship, though not necessarily one of agency. It is common, for example, for the owner of an automobile to be liable for the negligence of one to whom the owner lends the car. So-called dram shop statutes place liability on bar and tavern

owners and others who serve too much alcohol to one who, in an intoxicated state, later causes injury to others. In these situations, although the injurious act of the drinker stemmed from negligence, the one whom the law holds vicariously liable (the bartender) is not himself necessarily negligent—the law is holding him *strictly liable*, and to this concept we now turn.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The most common tort claim is based on the negligence of the defendant. In each negligence claim, the plaintiff must establish by a preponderance of the evidence that (1) the defendant had a duty of due care, (2) the defendant breached that duty, (3) that the breach of duty both actually and approximately has caused harm to the plaintiff, and (4) that the harm is measurable in money damages.

It is also possible for the negligence of one person to be imputed to another, as in the case of respondeat superior, or in the case of someone who loans his automobile to another driver who is negligent and causes injury. There are many excuses (defenses) to claims of negligence, including assumption of risk and comparative negligence. In those few jurisdictions where contributory negligence has not been modified to comparative negligence, plaintiffs whose negligence contributes to their own injuries will be barred from any recovery.

#### EXERCISES

1. Explain the difference between comparative negligence and contributory negligence.
2. How is actual cause different from probable cause?
3. What is an example of assumption of risk?
4. How does *res ipsa loquitur* help a plaintiff establish a case of negligence?

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[1] *Tarasoff v. Regents of University of California*, 551 P.2d 334 (Calif. 1976).

[2] *Scott v. London & St. Katherine Docks Co.*, 3 H. & C. 596, 159 Eng.Rep. 665 (Q.B. 1865).

[3] *Johnson v. Kosmos Portland Cement Co.*, 64 F.2d 193 (6th Cir. 1933).

## 7.4 Strict Liability



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how strict liability torts differ from negligent torts.
2. Understand the historical origins of strict liability under common law.
3. Be able to apply strict liability concepts to liability for defective products.
4. Distinguish strict liability from absolute liability, and understand the major defenses to a lawsuit in products-liability cases.

### Historical Basis of Strict Liability: Animals and Ultrahazardous Activities

To this point, we have considered principles of liability that in some sense depend upon the “fault” of the tortfeasor. This fault is not synonymous with moral blame.

Aside from acts intended to harm, the fault lies in a failure to live up to a standard of reasonableness or due care. But this is not the only basis for tort liability. Innocent mistakes can be a sufficient basis. As we have already seen, someone who unknowingly trespasses on another’s property is liable for the damage that he does, even if he has a reasonable belief that the land is his. And it has long been held that someone who engages in ultrahazardous (or sometimes, abnormally dangerous) activities is liable for damage that he causes, even though he has taken every possible precaution to avoid harm to someone else.

Likewise, the owner of animals that escape from their pastures or homes and damage neighboring property may be liable, even if the reason for their escape was beyond the power of the owner to stop (e.g., a fire started by lightning that burns open a barn door). In such cases, the courts invoke the principle of strict liability, or, as it is sometimes called, liability without fault. The reason for the rule is explained in *Klein v. Pyrodyne Corporation* ([Section 7.5 "Cases"](#)).

### Strict Liability for Products

Because of the importance of products liability, this text devotes an entire chapter to it ([Chapter 20 "Products Liability"](#)). Strict liability may also apply as a legal standard for products, even those that are not ultrahazardous. In some national legal systems, strict liability is not available as a cause of action to plaintiffs seeking to recover a judgment of products liability against a manufacturer, wholesaler, distributor, or retailer. (Some states limit liability to the

manufacturer.) But it is available in the United States and initially was created by a California Supreme Court decision in the 1962 case of *Greenman v. Yuba Power Products, Inc.*

In *Greenman*, the plaintiff had used a home power saw and bench, the Shopsmith, designed and manufactured by the defendant. He was experienced in using power tools and was injured while using the approved lathe attachment to the Shopsmith to fashion a wooden chalice. The case was decided on the premise that Greenman had done nothing wrong in using the machine but that the machine had a defect that was “latent” (not easily discoverable by the consumer). Rather than decide the case based on warranties, or requiring that Greenman prove how the defendant had been negligent, Justice Traynor found for the plaintiff based on the overall social utility of strict liability in cases of defective products. According to his decision, the purpose of such liability is to ensure that the “cost of injuries resulting from defective products is borne by the manufacturers...rather than by the injured persons who are powerless to protect themselves.”

Today, the majority of US states recognize strict liability for defective products, although some states limit strict liability actions to damages for personal injuries rather than property damage. Injured plaintiffs have to prove the product caused the harm but do not have to prove exactly how the manufacturer was careless. Purchasers of the product, as well as injured guests, bystanders, and others with no direct relationship with the product, may sue for damages caused by the product.

The Restatement of the Law of Torts, Section 402(a), was originally issued in 1964. It is a widely accepted statement of the liabilities of sellers of goods for defective products. The Restatement specifies six requirements, all of which must be met for a plaintiff to recover using strict liability for a product that the plaintiff claims is defective:

1. The product must be in a defective condition when the defendant sells it.
2. The defendant must normally be engaged in the business of selling or otherwise distributing the product.
3. The product must be unreasonably dangerous to the user or consumer because of its defective condition.
4. The plaintiff must incur physical harm to self or to property by using or consuming the product.

5. The defective condition must be the proximate cause of the injury or damage.
6. The goods must not have been substantially changed from the time the product was sold to the time the injury was sustained.

Section 402(a) also explicitly makes clear that a defendant can be held liable even though the defendant has exercised “all possible care.” Thus in a strict liability case, the plaintiff does not need to show “fault” (or negligence).

For defendants, who can include manufacturers, distributors, processors, assemblers, packagers, bottlers, retailers, and wholesalers, there are a number of defenses that are available, including assumption of risk, product misuse and comparative negligence, commonly known dangers, and the knowledgeable-user defense. We have already seen assumption of risk and comparative negligence in terms of negligence actions; the application of these is similar in products-liability actions.

Under product misuse, a plaintiff who uses a product in an unexpected and unusual way will not recover for injuries caused by such misuse. For example, suppose that someone uses a rotary lawn mower to trim a hedge and that after twenty minutes of such use loses control because of its weight and suffers serious cuts to his abdomen after dropping it. Here, there would be a defense of product misuse, as well as contributory negligence. Consider the urban (or Internet) legend of Mervin Gratz, who supposedly put his Winnebago on autopilot to go back and make coffee in the kitchen, then recovered millions after his Winnebago turned over and he suffered serious injuries. There are multiple defenses to this alleged action; these would include the defenses of contributory negligence, comparative negligence, and product misuse. (There was never any such case, and certainly no such recovery; it is not known who started this legend, or why.)

Another defense against strict liability as a cause of action is the knowledgeable user defense. If the parents of obese teenagers bring a lawsuit against McDonald’s, claiming that its fast-food products are defective and that McDonald’s should have warned customers of the adverse health effects of eating its products, a defense based on the knowledgeable user is available. In one case, the court found that the high levels of cholesterol, fat, salt, and sugar in McDonald’s food is well known to users. The court stated, “If consumers know (or reasonably should know) the

potential ill health effects of eating at McDonald's, they cannot blame McDonald's if they, nonetheless, choose to satiate their appetite with a surfeit of supersized McDonald's products." [1]

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Common-law courts have long held that certain activities are inherently dangerous and that those who cause damage to others by engaging in those activities will be held strictly liable. More recently, courts in the United States have applied strict liability to defective products. Strict liability, however, is not absolute liability, as there are many defenses available to defendants in lawsuits based on strict liability, such as comparative negligence and product abuse.

### EXERCISES

1. Someone says, "Strict liability means that you're liable for whatever you make, no matter what the consumer does with your product. It's a crazy system." Respond to and refute this statement.
2. What is the essential difference between strict liability torts and negligent torts? Should the US legal system even allow strict liability torts? What reasons seem persuasive to you?

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[1] *Pellman v. McDonald's Corp.*, 237 F.2d 512 (S.D.N.Y. 2003).

## 7.5 Cases

### Intentional Torts: False Imprisonment

*Lester v. Albers Super Markets, Inc.*

*94 Ohio App. 313, 114 N.E.2d 529 (Ohio 1952)*

Facts: The plaintiff, carrying a bag of rolls purchased at another store, entered the defendant's grocery store to buy some canned fruit. Seeing her bus outside, she stepped out of line and put the can on the counter. The store manager intercepted her and repeatedly demanded that she submit the bag to be searched. Finally she acquiesced; he looked inside and said she could go. She testified that several people witnessed the scene, which lasted about fifteen minutes, and

that she was humiliated. The jury awarded her \$800. She also testified that no one laid a hand on her or made a move to restrain her from leaving by any one of numerous exits.

\* \* \*

MATTHEWS, JUDGE.

As we view the record, it raises the fundamental question of what is imprisonment. Before any need for a determination of illegality arises there must be proof of imprisonment. In 35 Corpus Juris Secundum (C.J.S.), False Imprisonment, § II, pages 512–13, it is said: “Submission to the mere verbal direction of another, unaccompanied by force or by threats of any character, cannot constitute a false imprisonment, and there is no false imprisonment where an employer interviewing an employee declines to terminate the interview if no force or threat of force is used and false imprisonment may not be predicated on a person’s unfounded belief that he was restrained.”

Many cases are cited in support of the text.

\* \* \*

In *Fenn v. Kroger Grocery & Baking Co.*, Mo. Sup., 209 S.W. 885, 887, the court said:

*A case was not made out for false arrest. The plaintiff said she was intercepted as she started to leave the store; that Mr. Krause stood where she could not pass him in going out. She does not say that he made any attempt to intercept her. She says he escorted her back to the desk, that he asked her to let him see the change.*

*...She does not say that she went unwillingly...Evidence is wholly lacking to show that she was detained by force or threats. It was probably a disagreeable experience, a humiliating one to her, but she came out victorious and was allowed to go when she desired with the assurance of Mr. Krause that it was all right. The demurrer to the evidence on both counts was properly sustained.*

The result of the cases is epitomized in 22 Am.Jur. 368, as follows:

*A customer or patron who apparently has not paid for what he has received may be detained for a reasonable time to investigate the circumstances, but upon payment of the demand, he has the unqualified right to leave the premises without restraint, so far as the proprietor is concerned, and it is false imprisonment for a private*

*individual to detain one for an unreasonable time, or under unreasonable circumstances, for the purpose of investigating a dispute over the payment of a bill alleged to be owed by the person detained for cash services.*

\* \* \*

For these reasons, the judgment is reversed and final judgment entered for the defendant-appellant.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. The court begins by saying what false imprisonment is not. What is the legal definition of false imprisonment?
2. What kinds of detention are permissible for a store to use in accosting those that may have been shoplifting?
3. Jody broke up with Jeremy and refused to talk to him. Jeremy saw Jody get into her car near the business school and parked right behind her so she could not move. He then stood next to the driver's window for fifteen minutes, begging Jody to talk to him. She kept saying, "No, let me leave!" Has Jeremy committed the tort of false imprisonment?

### Negligence: Duty of Due Care

*Whitlock v. University of Denver*

*744 P.2d 54 (Supreme Court of Colorado 1987)*

On June 19, 1978, at approximately 10:00 p.m., plaintiff Oscar Whitlock suffered a paralyzing injury while attempting to complete a one-and-three-quarters front flip on a trampoline. The injury rendered him a quadriplegic. The trampoline was owned by the Beta Theta Pi fraternity (the Beta house) and was situated on the front yard of the fraternity premises, located on the University campus. At the time of his injury, Whitlock was twenty years old, attended the University of Denver, and was a member of the Beta house, where he held the office of acting house manager. The property on which the Beta house was located was leased to the local chapter house association of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity by the defendant University of Denver. Whitlock had extensive experience jumping on trampolines. He began using trampolines in junior high school and continued to do so during his brief tenure as a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where he learned to execute the one-and-three-quarters front

flip. Whitlock testified that he utilized the trampoline at West Point every other day for a period of two months. He began jumping on the trampoline owned by the Beta house in September of 1977. Whitlock recounted that in the fall and spring prior to the date of his injury, he jumped on the trampoline almost daily. He testified further that prior to the date of his injury, he had successfully executed the one-and-three-quarters front flip between seventy-five and one hundred times.

During the evening of June 18 and early morning of June 19, 1978, Whitlock attended a party at the Beta house, where he drank beer, vodka and scotch until 2:00 a.m. Whitlock then retired and did not awaken until 2:00 p.m. on June 19. He testified that he jumped on the trampoline between 2:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m., and again at 7:00 p.m. At 10:00 p.m., the time of the injury, there again was a party in progress at the Beta house, and Whitlock was using the trampoline with only the illumination from the windows of the fraternity house, the outside light above the front door of the house, and two street lights in the area. As Whitlock attempted to perform the one-and-three-quarters front flip, he landed on the back of his head, causing his neck to break. Whitlock brought suit against the manufacturer and seller of the trampoline, the University, the Beta Theta Pi fraternity and its local chapter, and certain individuals in their capacities as representatives of the Beta Theta Pi organizations. Whitlock reached settlements with all of the named defendants except the University, so only the negligence action against the University proceeded to trial. The jury returned a verdict in favor of Whitlock, assessing his total damages at \$ 7,300,000. The jury attributed twenty-eight percent of causal negligence to the conduct of Whitlock and seventy-two percent of causal negligence to the conduct of the University. The trial court accordingly reduced the amount of the award against the University to \$ 5,256,000. The University moved for judgment notwithstanding the verdict, or, in the alternative, a new trial. The trial court granted the motion for judgment notwithstanding the verdict, holding that as a matter of law, no reasonable jury could have found that the University was more negligent than Whitlock, and that the jury's monetary award was the result of sympathy, passion or prejudice.

A panel of the court of appeals reversed...by a divided vote. *Whitlock v. University of Denver*, 712 P.2d 1072 (Colo. App. 1985). The court of appeals held that the University owed

Whitlock a duty of due care to remove the trampoline from the fraternity premises or to supervise its use....The case was remanded to the trial court with orders to reinstate the verdict and damages as determined by the jury. The University then petitioned for certiorari review, and we granted that petition.

## II.

A negligence claim must fail if based on circumstances for which the law imposes no duty of care upon the defendant for the benefit of the plaintiff. [Citations] Therefore, if Whitlock's judgment against the University is to be upheld, it must first be determined that the University owed a duty of care to take reasonable measures to protect him against the injury that he sustained. Whether a particular defendant owes a legal duty to a particular plaintiff is a question of law. [Citations] "The court determines, as a matter of law, the existence and scope of the duty—that is, whether the plaintiff's interest that has been infringed by the conduct of the defendant is entitled to legal protection." [Citations] In *Smith v. City & County of Denver*, 726 P.2d 1125 (Colo. 1986), we set forth several factors to be considered in determining the existence of duty in a particular case:

*Whether the law should impose a duty requires consideration of many factors including, for example, the risk involved, the foreseeability and likelihood of injury as weighed against the social utility of the actor's conduct, the magnitude of the burden of guarding against injury or harm, and the consequences of placing the burden upon the actor.*

...A court's conclusion that a duty does or does not exist is "an expression of the sum total of those considerations of policy which lead the law to say that the plaintiff is [or is not] entitled to protection."

...

We believe that the fact that the University is charged with negligent failure to act rather than negligent affirmative action is a critical factor that strongly militates against imposition of a duty on the University under the facts of this case. In determining whether a defendant owes a duty to a particular plaintiff, the law has long recognized a distinction between action and a failure to act—"that is to say, between active misconduct working positive injury to others [misfeasance]



and passive inaction or a failure to take steps to protect them from harm [nonfeasance].” W. Keeton, § 56, at 373. Liability for nonfeasance was slow to receive recognition in the law. “The reason for the distinction may be said to lie in the fact that by ‘misfeasance’ the defendant has created a new risk of harm to the plaintiff, while by ‘nonfeasance’ he has at least made his situation no worse, and has merely failed to benefit him by interfering in his affairs.” *Id.* The *Restatement (Second) of Torts* § 314 (1965) summarizes the law on this point as follows:

*The fact that an actor realizes or should realize that action on his part is necessary for another’s aid or protection does not of itself impose upon him a duty to take such action.*

Imposition of a duty in all such cases would simply not meet the test of fairness under contemporary standards.

In nonfeasance cases the existence of a duty has been recognized only during the last century in situations involving a limited group of special relationships between parties. Such special relationships are predicated on “some definite relation between the parties, of such a character that social policy justifies the imposition of a duty to act.” W. Keeton, § 56, at 374. Special relationships that have been recognized by various courts for the purpose of imposition of a duty of care include common carrier/passenger, innkeeper/guest, possessor of land/invited entrant, employer/employee, parent/child, and hospital/patient. *See Restatement (Second) of Torts* § 314 A (1965); 3 Harper and James, § 18.6, at 722–23. The authors of the *Restatement (Second) of Torts* § 314 A, comment b (1965), state that “the law appears...to be working slowly toward a recognition of the duty to aid or protect in any relation of dependence or of mutual dependence.”

...

III.

The present case involves the alleged negligent failure to act, rather than negligent action. The plaintiff does not complain of any affirmative action taken by the University, but asserts instead that the University owed to Whitlock the duty to assure that the fraternity’s trampoline was used only under supervised conditions comparable to those in a gymnasium class, or in the alternative to cause the trampoline to be removed from the front lawn of the Beta house....If

such a duty is to be recognized, it must be grounded on a special relationship between the University and Whitlock. According to the evidence, there are only two possible sources of a special relationship out of which such a duty could arise in this case: the status of Whitlock as a student at the University, and the lease between the University and the fraternity of which Whitlock was a member. We first consider the adequacy of the student-university relationship as a possible basis for imposing a duty on the University to control or prohibit the use of the trampoline, and then examine the provisions of the lease for that same purpose.

**A.**

The student-university relationship has been scrutinized in several jurisdictions, and it is generally agreed that a university is not an insurer of its students' safety. [Citations] The relationship between a university and its students has experienced important change over the years. At one time, college administrators and faculties stood in loco parentis to their students, which created a special relationship "that imposed a duty on the college to exercise control over student conduct and, reciprocally, gave the students certain rights of protection by the college." *Bradshaw*, 612 F.2d at 139. However, in modern times there has evolved a gradual reapportionment of responsibilities from the universities to the students, and a corresponding departure from the in loco parentis relationship. *Id.* at 139–40. Today, colleges and universities are regarded as educational institutions rather than custodial ones. *Beach*, 726 P.2d at 419 (contrasting colleges and universities with elementary and high schools).

...

...By imposing a duty on the University in this case, the University would be encouraged to exercise more control over private student recreational choices, thereby effectively taking away much of the responsibility recently recognized in students for making their own decisions with respect to private entertainment and personal safety. Such an allocation of responsibility would "produce a repressive and inhospitable environment, largely inconsistent with the objectives of a modern college education." *Beach*, 726 P.2d at 419.

The evidence demonstrates that only in limited instances has the University attempted to impose regulations or restraints on the private recreational pursuits of its students, and the students have not looked to the University to assure the safety of their recreational choices.

Nothing in the University's student handbook, which contains certain regulations concerning student conduct, reflects an effort by the University to control the risk-taking decisions of its students in their private recreation....Indeed, fraternity and sorority self-governance with minimal supervision appears to have been fostered by the University.

...

Aside from advising the Beta house on one occasion to put the trampoline up when not in use, there is no evidence that the University officials attempted to assert control over trampoline use by the fraternity members. We conclude from this record that the University's very limited actions concerning safety of student recreation did not give Whitlock or the other members of campus fraternities or sororities any reason to depend upon the University for evaluation of the safety of trampoline use....Therefore, we conclude that the student-university relationship is not a special relationship of the type giving rise to a duty of the University to take reasonable measures to protect the members of fraternities and sororities from risks of engaging in extra-curricular trampoline jumping.

The plaintiff asserts, however, that we should recognize a duty of the University to take affirmative action to protect fraternity members because of the foreseeability of the injury, the extent of the risks involved in trampoline use, the seriousness of potential injuries, and the University's superior knowledge concerning these matters. The argument in essence is that a duty should spring from the University's natural interest in the welfare and safety of its students, its superior knowledge of the nature and degree of risk involved in trampoline use, and its knowledge of the use of trampolines on the University campus. The evidence amply supports a conclusion that trampoline use involves risks of serious injuries and that the potential for an injury such as that experienced by Whitlock was foreseeable. It shows further that prior injuries resulting from trampoline accidents had been reported to campus security and to the student clinic, and that University administrators were aware of the number and severity of trampoline injuries nationwide.

The record, however, also establishes through Whitlock's own testimony that he was aware of the risk of an accident and injury of the very nature that he experienced....

We conclude that the relationship between the University and Whitlock was not one of dependence with respect to the activities at issue here, and provides no basis for the recognition of a duty of the University to take measures for protection of Whitlock against the injury that he suffered.

**B.**

We next examine the lease between the University and the fraternity to determine whether a special relationship between the University and Whitlock can be predicated on that document. The lease was executed in 1929, extends for a ninety-nine year term, and gives the fraternity the option to extend the term for another ninety-nine years. The premises are to be occupied and used by the fraternity “as a fraternity house, clubhouse, dormitory and boarding house, and generally for religious, educational, social and fraternal purposes.” Such occupation is to be “*under control of the tenant.*” (emphasis added) The annual rental at all times relevant to this case appears from the record to be one dollar. The University has the obligation to maintain the grounds and make necessary repairs to the building, and the fraternity is to bear the cost of such maintenance and repair.

...

We conclude that the lease, and the University’s actions pursuant to its rights under the lease, provide no basis of dependence by the fraternity members upon which a special relationship can be found to exist between the University and the fraternity members that would give rise to a duty upon the University to take affirmative action to assure that recreational equipment such as a trampoline is not used under unsafe conditions.

**IV.**

Considering all of the factors presented, we are persuaded that under the facts of this case the University of Denver had no duty to Whitlock to eliminate the private use of trampolines on its campus or to supervise that use. There exists no special relationship between the parties that justifies placing a duty upon the University to protect Whitlock from the well-known dangers of using a trampoline. Here, a conclusion that a special relationship existed between Whitlock and the University sufficient to warrant the imposition of liability for nonfeasance would directly

contravene the competing social policy of fostering an educational environment of student autonomy and independence.

We reverse the judgment of the court of appeals and return this case to that court with directions to remand it to the trial court for dismissal of Whitlock's complaint against the University.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. How are comparative negligence numbers calculated by the trial court? How can the jury say that the university is 72 percent negligent and that Whitlock is 28 percent negligent?
2. Why is this not an assumption of risk case?
3. Is there any evidence that Whitlock was contributorily negligent? If not, why would the court engage in comparative negligence calculations?

### Negligence: Proximate Cause

*Palsgraf v. Long Island R.R.*

248 N.Y. 339, 162 N.E. 99 (N.Y. 1928)

CARDOZO, Chief Judge

Plaintiff was standing on a platform of defendant's railroad after buying a ticket to go to Rockaway Beach. A train stopped at the station, bound for another place. Two men ran forward to catch it. One of the men reached the platform of the car without mishap, though the train was already moving. The other man, carrying a package, jumped aboard the car, but seemed unsteady as if about to fall. A guard on the car, who had held the door open, reached forward to help him in, and another guard on the platform pushed him from behind. In this act, the package was dislodged, and fell upon the rails. It was a package of small size, about fifteen inches long, and was covered by a newspaper. In fact it contained fireworks, but there was nothing in its appearance to give notice of its contents. The fireworks when they fell exploded. The shock of the explosion threw down some scales at the other end of the platform many feet away. The scales struck the plaintiff, causing injuries for which she sues.

The conduct of the defendant's guard, if a wrong in its relation to the holder of the package, was not a wrong in its relation to the plaintiff, standing far away. Relatively to her it was not negligence at all. Nothing in the situation gave notice that the falling package had in it the

potency of peril to persons thus removed. Negligence is not actionable unless it involves the invasion of a legally protected interest, the violation of a right. "Proof of negligence in the air, so to speak, will not do....If no hazard was apparent to the eye of ordinary vigilance, an act innocent and harmless, at least to outward seeming, with reference to her, did not take to itself the quality of a tort because it happened to be a wrong, though apparently not one involving the risk of bodily insecurity, with reference to someone else....The plaintiff sues in her own right for a wrong personal to her, and not as the vicarious beneficiary of a breach of duty to another. A different conclusion will involve us, and swiftly too, in a maze of contradictions. A guard stumbles over a package which has been left upon a platform.

It seems to be a bundle of newspapers. It turns out to be a can of dynamite. To the eye of ordinary vigilance, the bundle is abandoned waste, which may be kicked or trod on with impunity. Is a passenger at the other end of the platform protected by the law against the unsuspected hazard concealed beneath the waste? If not, is the result to be any different, so far as the distant passenger is concerned, when the guard stumbles over a valise which a truckman or a porter has left upon the walk?...The orbit of the danger as disclosed to the eye of reasonable vigilance would be the orbit of the duty. One who jostles one's neighbor in a crowd does not invade the rights of others standing at the outer fringe when the unintended contact casts a bomb upon the ground. The wrongdoer as to them is the man who carries the bomb, not the one who explodes it without suspicion of the danger. Life will have to be made over, and human nature transformed, before prevision so extravagant can be accepted as the norm of conduct, the customary standard to which behavior must conform.

The argument for the plaintiff is built upon the shifting meanings of such words as "wrong" and "wrongful" and shares their instability. For what the plaintiff must show is a "wrong" to herself; i.e., a violation of her own right, and not merely a "wrong" to someone else, nor conduct "wrongful" because unsocial, but not a "wrong" to anyone. We are told that one who drives at reckless speed through a crowded city street is guilty of a negligent act and therefore of a wrongful one, irrespective of the consequences.

Negligent the act is, and wrongful in the sense that it is unsocial, but wrongful and unsocial in relation to other travelers, only because the eye of vigilance perceives the risk of damage. If the

same act were to be committed on a speedway or a race course, it would lose its wrongful quality. The risk reasonably to be perceived defines the duty to be obeyed, and risk imports relation; it is risk to another or to others within the range of apprehension. This does not mean, of course, that one who launches a destructive force is always relieved of liability, if the force, though known to be destructive, pursues an unexpected path....Some acts, such as shooting are so imminently dangerous to anyone who may come within reach of the missile however unexpectedly, as to impose a duty of prevision not far from that of an insurer. Even today, and much oftener in earlier stages of the law, one acts sometimes at one's peril....These cases aside, wrong-is defined in terms of the natural or probable, at least when unintentional....Negligence, like risk, is thus a term of relation.

Negligence in the abstract, apart from things related, is surely not a tort, if indeed it is understandable at all....One who seeks redress at law does not make out a cause of action by showing without more that there has been damage to his person. If the harm was not willful, he must show that the act as to him had possibilities of danger so many and apparent as to entitle him to be protected against the doing of it though the harm was unintended.

\* \* \*

The judgment of the Appellate Division and that of the Trial Term should be reversed, and the complaint dismissed, with costs in all courts.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Is there actual cause in this case? How can you tell?
2. Why should Mrs. Palsgraf (or her insurance company) be made to pay for injuries that were caused by the negligence of the Long Island Rail Road?
3. How is this accident *not* foreseeable?

### ***Klein v. Pyrodyne Corporation***

*Klein v. Pyrodyne Corporation*

*810 P.2d 917 (Supreme Court of Washington 1991)*

Pyrodyne Corporation (Pyrodyne) is a licensed fireworks display company that contracted to display fireworks at the Western Washington State Fairgrounds in Puyallup, Washington, on July 4, 1987. During the fireworks display, one of the mortar launchers discharged a rocket on a

horizontal trajectory parallel to the earth. The rocket exploded near a crowd of onlookers, including Danny Klein. Klein's clothing was set on fire, and he suffered facial burns and serious injury to his eyes. Klein sued Pyrodyne for strict liability to recover for his injuries. Pyrodyne asserted that the Chinese manufacturer of the fireworks was negligent in producing the rocket and therefore Pyrodyne should not be held liable. The trial court applied the doctrine of strict liability and held in favor of Klein. Pyrodyne appealed.

Section 519 of the Restatement (Second) of Torts provides that any party carrying on an "abnormally dangerous activity" is strictly liable for ensuing damages. The public display of fireworks fits this definition. The court stated: "Any time a person ignites rockets with the intention of sending them aloft to explode in the presence of large crowds of people, a high risk of serious personal injury or property damage is created. That risk arises because of the possibility that a rocket will malfunction or be misdirected." Pyrodyne argued that its liability was cut off by the Chinese manufacturer's negligence. The court rejected this argument, stating, "Even if negligence may properly be regarded as an intervening cause, it cannot function to relieve Pyrodyne from strict liability."

The Washington Supreme Court held that the public display of fireworks is an abnormally dangerous activity that warrants the imposition of strict liability.

Affirmed.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why would certain activities be deemed ultrahazardous or abnormally dangerous so that strict liability is imposed?
2. If the activities are known to be abnormally dangerous, did Klein assume the risk?
3. Assume that the fireworks were negligently manufactured in China. Should Klein's only remedy be against the Chinese company, as Pyrodyne argues? Why or why not?

## 7.6 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

The principles of tort law pervade modern society because they spell out the duties of care that we owe each other in our private lives. Tort law has had a significant impact on business because



modern technology poses significant dangers and the modern market is so efficient at distributing goods to a wide class of consumers.

Unlike criminal law, tort law does not require the tortfeasor to have a specific intent to commit the act for which he or she will be held liable to pay damages. Negligence—that is, carelessness—is a major factor in tort liability. In some instances, especially in cases involving injuries caused by products, a no-fault standard called strict liability is applied.

What constitutes a legal injury depends very much on the circumstances. A person can assume a risk or consent to the particular action, thus relieving the person doing the injury from tort liability. To be liable, the tortfeasor must be the proximate cause of the injury, not a remote cause. On the other hand, certain people are held to answer for the torts of another—for example, an employer is usually liable for the torts of his employees, and a bartender might be liable for injuries caused by someone to whom he sold too many drinks. Two types of statutes—workers' compensation and no-fault automobile insurance—have eliminated tort liability for certain kinds of accidents and replaced it with an immediate insurance payment plan.

Among the torts of particular importance to the business community are wrongful death and personal injury caused by products or acts of employees, misrepresentation, defamation, and interference with contractual relations.

## EXERCISES

1. What is the difference in objectives between tort law and criminal law?
2. A woman fell ill in a store. An employee put the woman in an infirmary but provided no medical care for six hours, and she died. The woman's family sued the store for wrongful death. What arguments could the store make that it was not liable? What arguments could the family make? Which seem the stronger arguments? Why?
3. The signals on a railroad crossing are defective. Although the railroad company was notified of the problem a month earlier, the railroad inspector has failed to come by and repair them. Seeing the all-clear signal, a car drives up and stalls on the tracks as a train rounds the bend. For the past two weeks the car had been stalling, and the driver kept putting off taking the car to the shop for a tune-up. As the train rounds the bend, the engineer is distracted by a

conductor and does not see the car until it is too late to stop. Who is negligent? Who must bear the liability for the damage to the car and to the train?

4. Suppose in the *Katko v. Briney* case (Section 7.2 "Intentional Torts") that instead of setting such a device, the defendants had simply let the floor immediately inside the front door rot until it was so weak that anybody who came in and took two steps straight ahead would fall through the floor and to the cellar. Will the defendant be liable in this case? What if they invited a realtor to appraise the place and did not warn her of the floor? Does it matter whether the injured person is a trespasser or an invitee?
5. Plaintiff's husband died in an accident, leaving her with several children and no money except a valid insurance policy by which she was entitled to \$5,000. Insurance Company refused to pay, delaying and refusing payment and meanwhile "inviting" Plaintiff to accept less than \$5,000, hinting that it had a defense. Plaintiff was reduced to accepting housing and charity from relatives. She sued the insurance company for bad-faith refusal to settle the claim and for the intentional infliction of emotional distress. The lower court dismissed the case. Should the court of appeals allow the matter to proceed to trial?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Catarina falsely accuses Jeff of stealing from their employer. The statement is defamatory only if

- a. a third party hears it
- b. Nick suffers severe emotional distress as a result
- c. the statement is the actual and proximate cause of his distress
- d. the statement is widely circulated in the local media and on Twitter

Garrett files a suit against Colossal Media Corporation for defamation.

Colossal has said that Garrett is a "sleazy, corrupt public official" (and provided some evidence to back the claim). To win his case, Garrett will have to show that

Colossal acted with

- a. malice
- b. ill will
- c. malice aforethought

d. actual malice

Big Burger begins a rumor, using social media, that the meat in Burger World is partly composed of ground-up worms. The rumor is not true, as Big Burger well knows. Its intent is to get some customers to shift loyalty from Burger World to Big Burger. Burger World's best cause of action would be

a. trespass on the case

b. nuisance

c. product disparagement

d. intentional infliction of emotional distress

Wilfred Phelps, age 65, is driving his Nissan Altima down Main Street when he suffers the first seizure of his life. He loses control of his vehicle and runs into three people on the sidewalk. Which statement is true?

a. He is liable for an intentional tort.

b. He is liable for a negligent tort.

c. He is not liable for a negligent tort.

d. He is liable under strict liability, because driving a car is abnormally dangerous.

Jonathan carelessly bumps into Amanda, knocking her to the ground. He has committed the tort of negligence

a. only if Amanda is injured

b. only if Amanda is not injured

c. whether or not Amanda is injured

## SELF-TEST ANSWERS

1. a

2. d

3. c

4. c

5. a

# Chapter 8

## Introduction to Contract Law

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. Why and how contract law has developed
2. What a contract is
3. What topics will be discussed in the contracts chapter of this book
4. What the sources of contract law are
5. How contracts are classified (basic taxonomy)

## 8.1 General Perspectives on Contracts

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain contract law's cultural roots: how it has evolved as capitalism has evolved.
2. Understand that contracts serve essential economic purposes.
3. Define contract.
4. Understand the basic issues in contract law.

### The Role of Contracts in Modern Society

Contract is probably the most familiar legal concept in our society because it is so central to the essence of our political, economic, and social life. In common parlance, contract is used interchangeably with *agreement*, *bargain*, *undertaking*, or *deal*. Whatever the word, the concept it embodies is our notion of freedom to pursue our own lives together with others.

Contract is central because it is the means by which a free society orders what would otherwise be a jostling, frenetic anarchy.

So commonplace is the concept of contract—and our freedom to make contracts with each other—that it is difficult to imagine a time when contracts were rare, when people's everyday associations with one another were not freely determined. Yet in historical terms, it was not so long ago that contracts were rare, entered into if at all by very few: that affairs should be ordered based on mutual assent was mostly unknown. In primitive societies and in feudal Europe, relationships among people were largely fixed; traditions spelled out duties that each person

owed to family, tribe, or manor. People were born into an ascribed position—a status (not unlike the caste system still existing in India)—and social mobility was limited. Sir Henry Maine, a nineteenth-century British historian, wrote that “the movement of the progressive societies has...been a movement from status to contract.”<sup>[1]</sup> This movement was not accidental—it developed with the emerging industrial order. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, England evolved into a booming mercantile economy, with flourishing trade, growing cities, an expanding monetary system, the commercialization of agriculture, and mushrooming manufacturing. With this evolution, contract law was created of necessity.

Contract law did not develop according to a conscious plan, however. It was a response to changing conditions, and the judges who created it frequently resisted, preferring the imagined quieter pastoral life of their forefathers. Not until the nineteenth century, in both the United States and England, did a full-fledged law of contracts arise together with, and help create, modern capitalism.

Modern capitalism, indeed, would not be possible without contract law. So it is that in planned economies, like those of the former Soviet Union and precapitalistic China, the contract did not determine the nature of an economic transaction. That transaction was first set forth by the state’s planning authorities; only thereafter were the predetermined provisions set down in a written contract. Modern capitalism has demanded new contract regimes in Russia and China; the latter adopted its Revised Contract Law in 1999.

Contract law may be viewed economically as well as culturally. In *An Economic Analysis of Law*, Judge Richard A. Posner (a former University of Chicago law professor) suggests that contract law performs three significant economic functions. First, it helps maintain incentives for individuals to exchange goods and services efficiently. Second, it reduces the costs of economic transactions because its very existence means that the parties need not go to the trouble of negotiating a variety of rules and terms already spelled out. Third, the law of contracts alerts the parties to troubles that have arisen in the past, thus making it easier to plan the transactions more intelligently and avoid potential pitfalls.<sup>[2]</sup>

## **The Definition of *Contract***

As usual in the law, the legal definition of contract is formalistic. The Restatement (Second) of Contracts (Section 1) says, “A contract is a promise or a set of promises for the breach of which the law gives a remedy, or the performance of which the law in some way recognizes as a duty.” Similarly, the Uniform Commercial Code says, “‘Contract’ means the total legal obligation which results from the parties’ agreement as affected by this Act and any other applicable rules of law.”<sup>[3]</sup> As operational definitions, these two are circular; in effect, a contract is defined as an agreement that the law will hold the parties to.

Most simply, a contract is a legally enforceable promise. This implies that not every promise or agreement creates a binding contract; if every promise did, the simple definition set out in the preceding sentence would read, “A contract is a promise.” But—again—a contract is not simply a promise: it is a legally enforceable promise. The law takes into account the way in which contracts are made, by whom they are made, and for what purposes they are made. For example, in many states, a wager is unenforceable, even though both parties “shake” on the bet. We will explore these issues in the chapters to come.

## Overview of the Contracts Chapter

Although contract law has many wrinkles and nuances, it consists of four principal inquiries, each of which will be taken up in subsequent chapters:

1. Did the parties create a valid contract? Four elements are necessary for a valid contract:
  - a. Mutual assent (i.e., offer and acceptance), [Chapter 9 "The Agreement"](#)
  - b. Real assent (no duress, undue influence, misrepresentation, mistake, or incapacity), [Chapter 10 "Real Assent"](#)
  - c. Consideration, [Chapter 11 "Consideration"](#)
  - d. Legality, [Chapter 12 "Legality"](#)

What does the contract mean, and is it in the proper form to carry out this meaning? Sometimes contracts need to be in writing (or evidenced by some writing), or they can't be enforced. Sometimes it isn't clear what the contract means, and a court has to figure that out. These problems are taken up in [Chapter 13 "Form and Meaning"](#).

Do persons other than the contracting parties have rights or duties under the contract? Can the right to receive a benefit from the contract be assigned, and can the duties be delegated so that a new person is responsible? Can persons not a party to the contract sue to enforce its terms? These questions are addressed in [Chapter 14 "Third-Party Rights"](#).

How do contractual duties terminate, and what remedies are available if a party has breached the contract? These issues are taken up in [Chapter 15 "Discharge of Obligations"](#) and [Chapter 16 "Remedies"](#).

Together, the answers to these four basic inquiries determine the rights and obligations of contracting parties.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Contract law developed when the strictures of feudalism dissipated, when a person's position in society came to be determined by personal choice (by mutual agreement) and not by status (by how a person was born). Capitalism and contract law have developed together, because having choices in society means that people decide and agree to do things with and to each other, and those agreements bind the parties; the agreements must be enforceable.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why is contract law necessary in a society where a person's status is not predetermined by birth?
2. Contract law serves some economic functions. What are they?

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[1] Sir Henry Maine, *Ancient Law* (1869), 180–82.

[2] Richard A. Posner, *Economic Analysis of Law* (New York: Aspen, 1973).

[3] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1-201(11).

## 8.2 Sources of Contract Law

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand that contract law comes from two sources: judges (cases) and legislation.
2. Know what the Restatement of Contracts is.
3. Recognize the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods.

The most important sources of contract law are state case law and state statutes (though there are also many federal statutes governing how contracts are made by and with the federal government).

## Case Law

Law made by judges is called case law. Because contract law was made up in the common-law courtroom by individual judges as they applied rules to resolve disputes before them, it grew over time to formidable proportions. By the early twentieth century, tens of thousands of contract disputes had been submitted to the courts for resolution, and the published opinions, if collected in one place, would have filled dozens of bookshelves. Clearly this mass of material was too unwieldy for efficient use. A similar problem also had developed in the other leading branches of the common law.

Disturbed by the profusion of cases and the resulting uncertainty of the law, a group of prominent American judges, lawyers, and law teachers founded the American Law Institute (ALI) in 1923 to attempt to clarify, simplify, and improve the law. One of the ALI's first projects, and ultimately one of its most successful, was the drafting of the Restatement of the Law of Contracts, completed in 1932. A revision—the Restatement (Second) of Contracts—was undertaken in 1964 and completed in 1979. Hereafter, references to “the Restatement” pertain to the Restatement (Second) of Contracts.

The Restatements—others exist in the fields of torts, agency, conflicts of laws, judgments, property, restitution, security, and trusts—are detailed analyses of the decided cases in each field. These analyses are made with an eye to discerning the various principles that have emerged from the courts, and to the maximum extent possible, the Restatements declare the law as the courts have determined it to be. The Restatements, guided by a reporter (the director of the project) and a staff of legal scholars, go through several so-called tentative drafts—sometimes as many as fifteen or twenty—and are screened by various committees within the ALI before they are eventually published as final documents.

The Restatement (Second) of Contracts won prompt respect in the courts and has been cited in innumerable cases. The Restatements are not authoritative, in the sense that they are not actual judicial precedents; but they are nevertheless weighty interpretive texts, and judges frequently



look to them for guidance. They are as close to “black letter” rules of law as exist anywhere in the American common-law legal system.

Common law, case law (the terms are synonymous), governs contracts for the sale of real estate and services. “Services” refer to acts or deeds (like plumbing, drafting documents, driving a car) as opposed to the sale of property.

### **Statutory Law: The Uniform Commercial Code**

Common-law contract principles govern contracts for real estate and services. Because of the historical development of the English legal system, contracts for the sale of goods came to be governed by a different body of legal rules. In its modern American manifestation, that body of rules is an important statute: the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), especially Article 2, which deals with the sale of goods.

#### **History of the UCC**

A bit of history is in order. Before the UCC was written, commercial law varied, sometimes greatly, from state to state. This first proved a nuisance and then a serious impediment to business as the American economy became nationwide during the twentieth century. Although there had been some uniform laws concerned with commercial deals—including the Uniform Sales Act, first published in 1906—few were widely adopted and none nationally. As a result, the law governing sales of goods, negotiable instruments, warehouse receipts, securities, and other matters crucial to doing business in an industrial market economy was a crazy quilt of untidy provisions that did not mesh well from state to state.

The UCC is a model law developed by the ALI and the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws; it has been adopted in one form or another by the legislatures in all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and the American territories. It is a “national” law not enacted by Congress—it is not federal law but uniform state law.

Initial drafting of the UCC began in 1942 and was ten years in the making, involving the efforts of hundreds of practicing lawyers, law teachers, and judges. A final draft, promulgated by the ALI, was endorsed by the American Bar Association and published in 1951. Various revisions followed in different states, threatening the uniformity of the UCC. The ALI responded by creating a permanent editorial board to oversee future revisions. In one or another of its various

revisions, the UCC has been adopted in whole or in part in all American jurisdictions. The UCC is now a basic law of relevance to every business and business lawyer in the United States, even though it is not entirely uniform because different states have adopted it at various stages of its evolution—an evolution that continues still.

### **Organization of the UCC**

The UCC consists of nine major substantive articles; each deals with separate though related subjects. The articles are as follows:

- Article 1: General Provisions
- Article 2: Sales
- Article 2A: Leases
- Article 3: Commercial Paper
- Article 4: Bank Deposits and Collections
- Article 4A: Funds Transfers
- Article 5: Letters of Credit
- Article 6: Bulk Transfers
- Article 7: Warehouse Receipts, Bills of Lading, and Other Documents of Title
- Article 8: Investment Securities
- Article 9: Secured Transactions

Article 2 deals only with the sale of goods, which the UCC defines as “all things...which are movable at the time of identification to the contract for sale other than the money in which the price is to be paid.”<sup>[1]</sup> The only contracts and agreements covered by Article 2 are those relating to the present or future sale of goods.

Article 2 is divided in turn into six major parts: (1) Form, Formation, and Readjustment of Contract; (2) General Obligation and Construction of Contract; (3) Title, Creditors, and Good Faith Purchasers; (4) Performance; (5) Breach, Repudiation, and Excuse; and (6) Remedies. These topics will be discussed in [Chapter 17 "Introduction to Sales and Leases"](#), [Chapter 18 "Title and Risk of Loss"](#), [Chapter 19 "Performance and Remedies"](#), [Chapter 20 "Products Liability"](#), and [Chapter 21 "Bailments and the Storage, Shipment, and Leasing of Goods"](#).

Figure 8.1 Sources of Law

Type of Contract	Source of Law	
	Common Law	UCC
Real Estate	✓	
Services	✓	
Sale of Goods		✓

## International Sales Law

### The Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods

A Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) was approved in 1980 at a diplomatic conference in Vienna. (A convention is a preliminary agreement that serves as the basis for a formal treaty.) The CISG has been adopted by more than forty countries, including the United States.

The CISG is significant for three reasons. First, it is a uniform law governing the sale of goods—in effect, an international Uniform Commercial Code. The major goal of the drafters was to produce a uniform law acceptable to countries with different legal, social, and economic systems. Second, although provisions in the CISG are generally consistent with the UCC, there are significant differences. For instance, under the CISG, consideration (discussed in [Chapter 11 "Consideration"](#)) is not required to form a contract, and there is no Statute of Frauds (a requirement that certain contracts be evidenced by a writing). Third, the CISG represents the first attempt by the US Senate to reform the private law of business through its treaty powers, for the CISG preempts the UCC. The CISG is not mandatory: parties to an international contract for the sale of goods may choose to have their agreement governed by different law, perhaps the UCC, or perhaps, say, Japanese contract law. The CISG does not apply to contracts for the sale of (1) ships or aircraft, (2) electricity, or (3) goods bought for personal, family, or household use,

nor does it apply (4) where the party furnishing the goods does so only incidentally to the labor or services part of the contract.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Judges have made contract law over several centuries by deciding cases that create, extend, or change the developing rules affecting contract formation, performance, and enforcement. The rules from the cases have been abstracted and organized in the Restatements of Contracts. To facilitate interstate commerce, contract law for many commercial transactions—especially the sale of goods—not traditionally within the purview of judges has been developed by legal scholars and presented for the states to adopt as the Uniform Commercial Code. There is an analogous Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods, to which the United States is a party.

#### EXERCISES

1. How do judges make contract law?
2. What is the Restatement of the Law of Contracts, and why was it necessary?
3. Why was the Uniform Commercial Code developed, and by whom?
4. Who adopts the UCC as governing law?
5. What is the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods?

[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-105.

## 8.3 Basic Taxonomy of Contracts

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand that contracts are classified according to the criteria of explicitness, mutuality, enforceability, and degree of completion and that some noncontract promises are nevertheless enforceable under the doctrine of promissory estoppel.
2. Keep your eyes (and ears) alert to the use of suffixes (word endings) in legal terminology that express relationships between parties.

Some contracts are written, some oral; some are explicit, some not. Because contracts can be formed, expressed, and enforced in a variety of ways, a taxonomy of contracts has developed that is useful in grouping together like legal consequences. In general, contracts are classified

along four different dimensions: explicitness, mutuality, enforceability, and degree of completion. Explicitness is the degree to which the agreement is manifest to those not party to it. Mutuality takes into account whether promises are given by two parties or only one. Enforceability is the degree to which a given contract is binding. Completion considers whether the contract is yet to be performed or whether the obligations have been fully discharged by one or both parties. We will examine each of these concepts in turn.

## **Explicitness**

### **Express Contract**

An express contract is one in which the terms are spelled out directly. The parties to an express contract, whether it is written or oral, are conscious that they are making an enforceable agreement. For example, an agreement to purchase your neighbor's car for \$5,500 and to take title next Monday is an express contract.

### **Implied Contract (Implied in Fact)**

An implied contract is one that is inferred from the actions of the parties. When parties have not discussed terms, an implied contract exists if it is clear from the conduct of both parties that they intended there be one. A delicatessen patron who asks for a turkey sandwich to go has made a contract and is obligated to pay when the sandwich is made. By ordering the food, the patron is implicitly agreeing to the price, whether posted or not.

The distinction between express and implied contracts has received a degree of notoriety in the so-called palimony cases, in which one member of an unmarried couple seeks a division of property after a long-standing live-together relationship has broken up. When a married couple divorces, their legal marriage contract is dissolved, and financial rights and obligations are spelled out in a huge body of domestic relations statutes and judicial decisions. No such laws exist for unmarried couples. However, about one-third of the states recognize common-law marriage, under which two people are deemed to be married if they live together with the intent to be married, regardless of their failure to have obtained a license or gone through a ceremony. Although there is no actual contract of marriage (no license), their behavior implies that the parties intended to be treated as if they were married.

### **Quasi-Contract**

A quasi-contract (implied in law) is—unlike both express and implied contracts, which embody an actual agreement of the parties—an obligation said to be “imposed by law” in order to avoid unjust enrichment of one person at the expense of another. A quasi-contract is not a contract at all; it is a fiction that the courts created to prevent injustice. Suppose, for example, that the local lumberyard mistakenly delivers a load of lumber to your house, where you are repairing your deck. It was a neighbor on the next block who ordered the lumber, but you are happy to accept the load for free; since you never talked to the lumberyard, you figure you need not pay the bill. Although it is true there is no contract, the law implies a contract for the value of the material: of course you will have to pay for what you got and took. The existence of this implied contract does not depend on the intention of the parties.

## **Mutuality**

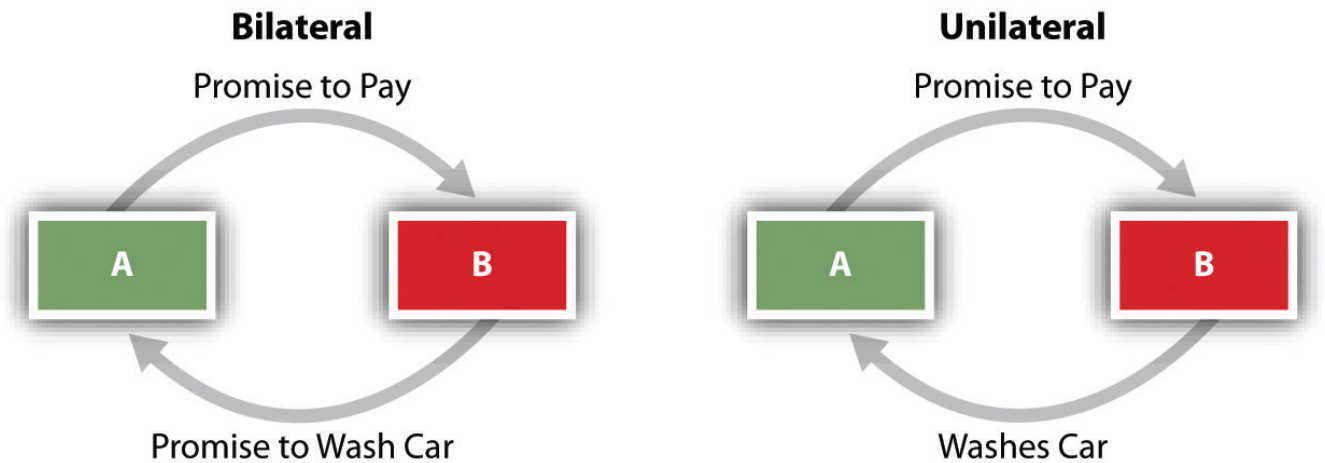
### **Bilateral Contract**

The typical contract is one in which the parties make mutual promises. Each is both promisor and promisee; that is, each pledges to do something, and each is the recipient of such a pledge. This type of contract is called a bilateral contract.

### **Unilateral Contract**

Mutual promises are not necessary to constitute a contract. Unilateral contracts, in which one party performs an act in exchange for the other party’s promise, are equally valid. An offer of a reward—for catching a criminal or for returning a lost cat—is an example of a unilateral contract: there is an offer on one side, and the other side accepts by taking the action requested.

### *Figure 8.2 Bilateral and Unilateral Contracts*



## Enforceability

### Void

Not every agreement between two people is a binding contract. An agreement that is lacking one of the legal elements of a contract is said to be a void contract—that is, not a contract at all. An agreement that is illegal—for example, a promise to commit a crime in return for a money payment—is void. Neither party to a void “contract” may enforce it.

### Voidable

By contrast, a voidable contract is one that may become unenforceable by one party but can be enforced by the other. For example, a minor (any person under eighteen, in most states) may “avoid” a contract with an adult; the adult may not enforce the contract against the minor if the minor refuses to carry out the bargain. But the adult has no choice if the minor wishes the contract to be performed. (A contract may be voidable by both parties if both are minors.)

Ordinarily, the parties to a voidable contract are entitled to be restored to their original condition. Suppose you agree to buy your seventeen-year-old neighbor’s car. He delivers it to you in exchange for your agreement to pay him next week. He has the legal right to terminate the deal and recover the car, in which case you will of course have no obligation to pay him. If you have already paid him, he still may legally demand a return to the status quo ante (previous state of affairs). You must return the car to him; he must return the cash to you.

A voidable contract remains a valid contract until it is voided. Thus a contract with a minor remains in force unless the minor decides he or she does not wish to be bound by it. When the

minor reaches majority, he or she may “ratify” the contract—that is, agree to be bound by it—in which case the contract will no longer be voidable and will thereafter be fully enforceable.

### **Unenforceable**

An unenforceable contract is one that some rule of law bars a court from enforcing. For example, Tom owes Pete money, but Pete has waited too long to collect it and the statute of limitations has run out. The contract for repayment is unenforceable and Pete is out of luck, unless Tom makes a new promise to pay or actually pays part of the debt. (However, if Pete is holding collateral as security for the debt, he is entitled to keep it; not all rights are extinguished because a contract is unenforceable.) A debt becomes unenforceable, too, when the debtor declares bankruptcy.

A bit more on enforceability is in order. A promise or what seems to be a promise is usually enforceable only if it is otherwise embedded in the elements necessary to make that promise a contract. Those elements are mutual assent, real assent, consideration, capacity, and legality. Sometimes, though, people say things that seem like promises, and on which another person relies. In the early twentieth century, courts began, in some circumstances, to recognize that insisting on the existence of the traditional elements of contract to determine whether a promise is enforceable could work an injustice where there has been reliance. Thus developed the equitable doctrine of promissory estoppel, which has become an important adjunct to contract law. The Restatement (Section 90) puts it this way: “A promise which the promisor should reasonably expect to induce action or forbearance on the part of the promisee or a third person and which does induce such action or forbearance is binding if injustice can be avoided only by enforcement of the promise. The remedy granted for breach may be limited as justice requires.” To be “estopped” means to be prohibited from denying now the validity of a promise you made before.

The doctrine has an interesting background. In 1937, High Trees House Ltd. (a British corporation) leased a block of London apartments from Central London Properties. As World War II approached, vacancy rates soared because people left the city. In 1940 the parties agreed to reduce the rent rates by half, but no term was set for how long the reduction would last. By mid-1945, as the war was ending, occupancy was again full, and Central London sued for the full



rental rates from June on. The English court, under Judge Alfred Thompson Denning (1899–1999), had no difficulty finding that High Trees owed the full amount once full occupancy was again achieved, but Judge Denning went on. In an aside (called a dicta—a statement “by the way”—that is, not necessary as part of the decision), he mused about what would have happened if in 1945 Central London had sued for the full-occupancy rate back to 1940. Technically, the 1940 amendment to the 1937 contract was not binding on Central London—it lacked consideration—and Central London could have reached back to demand full-rate payment. But Judge Denning said that High Trees would certainly have relied on Central London’s promise that a reduced-rate rent would be acceptable, and that would have been enough to bind it, to prevent it from acting inconsistently with the promise. He wrote, “The courts have not gone so far as to give a cause of action in damages for the breach of such a promise, but they have refused to allow the party making it to act inconsistently with it.” <sup>[1]</sup>

In the years since, though, courts *have* gone so far as to give a cause of action in damages for various noncontract promises. Contract protects agreements; promissory estoppel protects reliance, and that’s a significant difference. The law of contracts continues to evolve.

## Degree of Completion

An agreement consisting of a set of promises is called an executory contract before any promises are carried out. Most executory contracts are enforceable. If John makes an agreement to deliver wheat to Humphrey and does so, the contract is called a partially executed contract: one side has performed, the other has not. When John pays for the wheat, the contract is fully performed. A contract that has been carried out fully by both parties is called an executed contract.

## Terminology: Suffixes Expressing Relationships

Although not really part of the taxonomy of contracts (i.e., the orderly classification of the subject), an aspect of contractual—indeed, legal—terminology should be highlighted here. *Suffixes* (the end syllables of words) in the English language are used to express relationships between parties in legal terminology. Here are examples:

- **Offeror.** One who makes an offer.
- **Offeree.** One to whom an offer is made.
- **Promisor.** One who makes a promise.

- **Promisee.** One to whom a promise is made.
- **Obligor.** One who makes and has an obligation.
- **Obligee.** One to whom an obligation is made.
- **Transferor.** One who makes a transfer.
- **Transferee.** One to whom a transfer is made.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Contracts are described and thus defined on the basis of four criteria: explicitness (express, implied, or quasi-contracts), mutuality (bilateral or unilateral), enforceability (void, voidable, unenforceable), and degree of completion (executory, partially executed, executed). Legal terminology in English often describes relationships between parties by the use of suffixes, to which the eye and ear must pay attention.

### EXERCISES

1. Able *writes* to Baker: "I will mow your lawn for \$20." If Baker accepts, is this an express or implied contract?
2. Able *telephones* Baker: "I will mow your lawn for \$20." Is this an express or implied contract?
3. What is the difference between a void contract and a voidable one?
4. Carr staples this poster to a utility pole: "\$50 reward for the return of my dog, Argon." Describe this in contractual terms regarding explicitness, mutuality, enforceability, and degree of completion.
5. Is a voidable contract always unenforceable?
6. Contractor bids on a highway construction job, incorporating Guardrail Company's bid into its overall bid to the state. Contractor cannot accept Guardrail's offer until it gets the nod from the state. Contractor gets the nod from the state, but before it can accept Guardrail's offer, the latter revokes it. Usually a person can revoke an offer any time before it is accepted. Can Guardrail revoke its offer in this case?

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[1] *Central London Property Trust Ltd. v. High Trees House Ltd.* (1947) KB 130.

## 8.4 Cases

## Explicitness: Implied Contract

*Roger's Backhoe Service, Inc. v. Nichols*

*681 N.W.2d 647 (Iowa 2004)*

Carter, J.

Defendant, Jeffrey S. Nichols, is a funeral director in Muscatine....In early 1998 Nichols decided to build a crematorium on the tract of land on which his funeral home was located. In working with the Small Business Administration, he was required to provide drawings and specifications and obtain estimates for the project. Nichols hired an architect who prepared plans and submitted them to the City of Muscatine for approval. These plans provided that the surface water from the parking lot would drain onto the adjacent street and alley and ultimately enter city storm sewers. These plans were approved by the city.

Nichols contracted with Roger's [Backhoe Service, Inc.] for the demolition of the foundation of a building that had been razed to provide room for the crematorium and removal of the concrete driveway and sidewalk adjacent to that foundation. Roger's completed that work and was paid in full.

After construction began, city officials came to the jobsite and informed Roger's that the proposed drainage of surface water onto the street and alley was unsatisfactory. The city required that an effort be made to drain the surface water into a subterranean creek, which served as part of the city's storm sewer system. City officials indicated that this subterranean sewer system was about fourteen feet below the surface of the ground....Roger's conveyed the city's mandate to Nichols when he visited the jobsite that same day.

It was Nichols' testimony at trial that, upon receiving this information, he advised...Roger's that he was refusing permission to engage in the exploratory excavation that the city required.

Nevertheless, it appears without dispute that for the next three days Roger's did engage in digging down to the subterranean sewer system, which was located approximately twenty feet below the surface. When the underground creek was located, city officials examined the brick walls in which it was encased and determined that it was not feasible to penetrate those walls in order to connect the surface water drainage with the underground creek. As a result of that

conclusion, the city reversed its position and once again gave permission to drain the surface water onto the adjacent street and alley.

[T]he invoices at issue in this litigation relate to charges that Roger's submitted to Nichols for the three days of excavation necessary to locate the underground sewer system and the cost for labor and materials necessary to refill the excavation with compactable materials and attain compaction by means of a tamping process....The district court found that the charges submitted on the...invoices were fair and reasonable and that they had been performed for Nichols' benefit and with his tacit approval....

The court of appeals...concluded that a necessary element in establishing an implied-in-fact contract is that the services performed be beneficial to the alleged obligor. It concluded that Roger's had failed to show that its services benefited Nichols....

In describing the elements of an action on an implied contract, the court of appeals stated in [Citation], that the party seeking recovery must show:

*(1) the services were carried out under such circumstances as to give the recipient reason to understand:*

*(a) they were performed for him and not some other person, and*

*(b) they were not rendered gratuitously, but with the expectation of compensation from the recipient; and*

*(2) the services were beneficial to the recipient.*

In applying the italicized language in [Citation] to the present controversy, it was the conclusion of the court of appeals that Roger's' services conferred no benefit on Nichols. We disagree. There was substantial evidence in the record to support a finding that, unless and until an effort was made to locate the subterranean sewer system, the city refused to allow the project to proceed. Consequently, it was necessary to the successful completion of the project that the effort be made. The fact that examination of the brick wall surrounding the underground creek indicated that it was unfeasible to use that source of drainage does not alter the fact that the project was stalemated until drainage into the underground creek was fully explored and rejected. The district court properly concluded that Roger's' services conferred a benefit on Nichols....  
Decision of court of appeals vacated; district court judgment affirmed.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. What facts must be established by a plaintiff to show the existence of an implied contract?
2. What argument did Nichols make as to why there was no implied contract here?
3. How would the facts have to be changed to make an express contract?

### Mutuality of Contract: Unilateral Contract

*SouthTrust Bank v. Williams*

*775 So.2d 184 (Ala. 2000)*

Cook, J.

SouthTrust Bank (“SouthTrust”) appeals from an order denying its motion to compel arbitration of an action against it by checking-account customers Mark Williams and Bessie Daniels. We reverse and remand.

Daniels and Williams began their relationship with SouthTrust in 1981 and 1995, respectively, by executing checking-account “signature cards.” The signature card each customer signed contained a “change-in-terms” clause. Specifically, when Daniels signed her signature card, she “agree[d] to be subject to the Rules and Regulations as may now or *hereafter* be adopted by the Bank.” (Emphasis added.)...[Later,] SouthTrust added paragraph 33 to the regulations:...

*ARBITRATION OF DISPUTES. You and we agree that the transactions in your account involve ‘commerce’ under the Federal Arbitration Act (‘FAA’). ANY CONTROVERSY OR CLAIM BETWEEN YOU AND US...WILL BE SETTLED BY BINDING ARBITRATION UNDER THE FAA....*

This action...challenges SouthTrust’s procedures for paying overdrafts, and alleges that SouthTrust engages in a “uniform practice of paying the largest check(s) before paying multiple smaller checks...[in order] to generate increased service charges for [SouthTrust] at the expense of [its customers].”

SouthTrust filed a “motion to stay [the] lawsuit and to compel arbitration.” It based its motion on paragraph 33 of the regulations. [T]he trial court...entered an order denying SouthTrust’s motion to compel arbitration. SouthTrust appeals....

Williams and Daniels contend that SouthTrust’s amendment to the regulations, adding paragraph 33, was ineffective because, they say, they did not *expressly assent* to the

amendment. In other words, they object to submitting their claims to arbitration because, they say, when they opened their accounts, neither the regulations nor any other relevant document contained an arbitration provision. They argue that “mere failure to object to the addition of a material term cannot be construed as an acceptance of it.”...They contend that SouthTrust could not unilaterally insert an arbitration clause in the regulations and make it binding on depositors like them.

SouthTrust, however, referring to its change-of-terms clause insists that it “notified” Daniels and Williams of the amendment in January 1997 by enclosing in each customer’s “account statement” a complete copy of the regulations, as amended. Although it is undisputed that Daniels and Williams never affirmatively assented to these amended regulations, SouthTrust contends that their assent was evidenced by their failure to close their accounts after they received notice of the amendments....Thus, the disposition of this case turns on the legal effect of Williams and Daniels’s continued use of the accounts after the regulations were amended. Williams and Daniels argue that “[i]n the context of contracts between merchants [under the UCC], a written confirmation of an acceptance may modify the contract *unless* it adds a *material* term, and arbitration clauses are material terms.”...

Williams and Daniels concede—as they must—...that Article 2 governs “transactions in goods,” and, consequently, that it is not applicable to the transactions in this case. Nevertheless, they argue:

*It would be astonishing if a Court were to consider the addition of an arbitration clause a material alteration to a contract between merchants, who by definition are sophisticated in the trade to which the contract applies, but not hold that the addition of an arbitration clause is a material alteration pursuant to a change-of-terms clause in a contract between one sophisticated party, a bank, and an entire class of less sophisticated parties, its depositors....*

In response, SouthTrust states that “because of the ‘at-will’ nature of the relationship, banks by necessity must contractually reserve the right to amend their deposit agreements from time to time.” In so stating, SouthTrust has precisely identified the fundamental difference between the transactions here and those transactions governed by [Article 2].

Contracts for the purchase and sale of goods are essentially *bilateral* and executory in nature. See [Citation] “An agreement whereby one party promises to sell and the other promises to buy a thing at a later time...is a bilateral promise of sale or contract to sell” .... “[A] unilateral contract results from an exchange of a promise for an act; a bilateral contract results from an exchange of promises.” ...Thus, “in a unilateral contract, there is no bargaining process or exchange of promises by parties as in a bilateral contract.” [Citation] “[O]nly one party makes an offer (or promise) which invites performance by another, and performance constitutes both acceptance of that offer and consideration.” Because “a ‘unilateral contract’ is one in which no promisor receives promise as consideration for his promise,” only one party is bound....The difference is not one of semantics but of substance; it determines the rights and responsibilities of the parties, including the time and the conditions under which a cause of action accrues for a breach of the contract.

This case involves at-will, commercial relationships, based upon a series of unilateral transactions. Thus, it is more analogous to cases involving insurance policies, such as [Citations]. The common thread running through those cases was the *amendment* by one of the parties to a business relationship of a document underlying that relationship—without the express assent of the other party—to require the arbitration of disputes arising after the amendment....

The parties in [the cited cases], like Williams and Daniels in this case, took no action that could be considered inconsistent with an assent to the arbitration provision. In each case, they continued the business relationship after the interposition of the arbitration provision. In doing so, they implicitly assented to the addition of the arbitration provision....

Reversed and remanded.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the plaintiffs think they should not be bound by the arbitration clause?
2. The court said this case involved a unilateral contract. What makes it that, as opposed to a bilateral contract?
3. What should the plaintiffs have done if they didn't like the arbitration requirement?

## Unilateral Contract and At-Will Employment

*Woolley v. Hoffmann-La Roche, Inc.*

491 A.2d 1257 (N.J. 1985)

Wilntz, C. J.

Plaintiff, Richard Woolley, was hired by defendant, Hoffmann-La Roche, Inc., in October 1969, as an Engineering Section Head in defendant's Central Engineering Department at Nutley.

There was no written employment contract between plaintiff and defendant. Plaintiff began work in mid-November 1969. Sometime in December, plaintiff received and read the personnel manual on which his claims are based.

[The company's personnel manual had eight pages;] five of the eight pages are devoted to "termination." In addition to setting forth the purpose and policy of the termination section, it defines "the types of termination" as "layoff," "discharge due to performance," "discharge, disciplinary," "retirement" and "resignation." As one might expect, layoff is a termination caused by lack of work, retirement a termination caused by age, resignation a termination on the initiative of the employee, and discharge due to performance and discharge, disciplinary, are both terminations for cause. There is no category set forth for discharge without cause. The termination section includes "Guidelines for discharge due to performance," consisting of a fairly detailed procedure to be used before an employee may be fired for cause. Preceding these definitions of the five categories of termination is a section on "Policy," the first sentence of which provides: "It is the policy of Hoffmann-La Roche to retain to the extent consistent with company requirements, the services of all employees who perform their duties efficiently and effectively."

In 1976, plaintiff was promoted, and in January 1977 he was promoted again, this latter time to Group Leader for the Civil Engineering, the Piping Design, the Plant Layout, and the Standards and Systems Sections. In March 1978, plaintiff was directed to write a report to his supervisors about piping problems in one of defendant's buildings in Nutley. This report was written and submitted to plaintiff's immediate supervisor on April 5, 1978. On May 3, 1978, stating that the General Manager of defendant's Corporate Engineering Department had lost confidence in him, plaintiff's supervisors requested his resignation. Following this, by letter dated May 22, 1978, plaintiff was formally asked for his resignation, to be effective July 15, 1978.



Plaintiff refused to resign. Two weeks later defendant again requested plaintiff's resignation, and told him he would be fired if he did not resign. Plaintiff again declined, and he was fired in July.

Plaintiff filed a complaint alleging breach of contract....The gist of plaintiff's breach of contract claim is that the express and implied promises in defendant's employment manual created a contract under which he could not be fired at will, but rather only for cause, and then only after the procedures outlined in the manual were followed. Plaintiff contends that he was not dismissed for good cause, and that his firing was a breach of contract.

Defendant's motion for summary judgment was granted by the trial court, which held that the employment manual was not contractually binding on defendant, thus allowing defendant to terminate plaintiff's employment at will. The Appellate Division affirmed. We granted certification.

The employer's contention here is that the distribution of the manual was simply an expression of the company's "philosophy" and therefore free of any possible contractual consequences. The former employee claims it could reasonably be read as an explicit statement of company policies intended to be followed by the company in the same manner as if they were expressed in an agreement signed by both employer and employees....

This Court has long recognized the capacity of the common law to develop and adapt to current needs....The interests of employees, employers, and the public lead to the conclusion that the common law of New Jersey should limit the right of an employer to fire an employee at will.

In order for an offer in the form of a promise to become enforceable, it must be accepted.

Acceptance will depend on what the promisor bargained for: he may have bargained for a return promise that, if given, would result in a bilateral contract, both promises becoming enforceable.

Or he may have bargained for some action or nonaction that, if given or withheld, would render his promise enforceable as a unilateral contract. In most of the cases involving an employer's personnel policy manual, the document is prepared without any negotiations and is voluntarily distributed to the workforce by the employer. It seeks no return promise from the employees. It is reasonable to interpret it as seeking continued work from the employees, who, in most cases, are free to quit since they are almost always employees at will, not simply in the sense that the

employer can fire them without cause, but in the sense that they can quit without breaching any obligation. Thus analyzed, the manual is an offer that seeks the formation of a unilateral contract—the employees’ bargained-for action needed to make the offer binding being their continued work when they have no obligation to continue.

The unilateral contract analysis is perfectly adequate for that employee who was aware of the manual and who continued to work intending that continuation to be the action in exchange for the employer’s promise; it is even more helpful in support of that conclusion if, but for the employer’s policy manual, the employee would have quit. See generally M. Petit, “Modern Unilateral Contracts,” 63 Boston Univ. Law Rev. 551 (1983) (judicial use of unilateral contract analysis in employment cases is widespread).

...All that this opinion requires of an employer is that it be fair. It would be unfair to allow an employer to distribute a policy manual that makes the workforce believe that certain promises have been made and then to allow the employer to renege on those promises. What is sought here is basic honesty: if the employer, for whatever reason, does not want the manual to be capable of being construed by the court as a binding contract, there are simple ways to attain that goal. All that need be done is the inclusion in a very prominent position of an appropriate statement that there is no promise of any kind by the employer contained in the manual; that regardless of what the manual says or provides, the employer promises nothing and remains free to change wages and all other working conditions without having to consult anyone and without anyone’s agreement; and that the employer continues to have the absolute power to fire anyone with or without good cause.

Reversed and remanded for trial.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. What did Woolley do to show his acceptance of the terms of employment offered to him?
2. In part of the case not included here, the court notes that Mr. Woolley died “before oral arguments on this case.” How can there be any damages if the plaintiff has died? Who now has any case to pursue?
3. The court here is changing the law of employment in New Jersey. It is making case law, and the rule here articulated governs similar future cases in New Jersey. Why did the court make

this change? Why is it relevant that the court says it would be easy for an employer to avoid this problem?

## 8.5 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Contract law developed as the status-centered organization of feudal society faded and people began to make choices about how they might order their lives. In the capitalistic system, people make choices about how to interact with others, and—necessarily—those choices expressed as promises must be binding and enforceable.

The two fundamental sources of contract law are (1) the common law as developed in the state courts and as summarized in the Restatement (Second) of Contracts and (2) the Uniform Commercial Code for the sale of goods. In general, the UCC is more liberal than the common law in upholding the existence of a contract.

Types of contracts can be distinguished by four criteria: (1) express and implied, including quasi-contracts implied by law; (2) bilateral and unilateral; (3) enforceable and unenforceable; and (4) completed (executed) and uncompleted (executory). To understand contract law, it is necessary to master these distinctions and their nuances.

### EXERCISES

1.

- a. Mr. and Mrs. Smith, an elderly couple, had no relatives. When Mrs. Smith became ill, the Smiths asked a friend, Henrietta, to help with various housekeeping chores, including cleaning and cooking. Although the Smiths never promised to pay her, Henrietta performed the chores for eighteen months. Henrietta now claims that she is entitled to the reasonable value of the services performed. Is she correct? Explain.
- b. Assume instead that the Smiths asked Mrs. Smith's sister, Caroline, who lived nearby, to help with the housekeeping. After eighteen months, Caroline claims she is entitled to the reasonable value of the services performed. Is she correct? Explain.

A letter from Bridge Builders Inc. to the Allied Steel Company stated, “We offer to purchase 10,000 tons of No. 4 steel pipe at today’s quoted price for delivery two months from today. Your acceptance must be received in five days.” Does Bridge Builders intend to create a bilateral or a unilateral contract? Why?

Roscoe’s barber persuaded him to try a new hair cream called Sansfree, which the barber applied to Roscoe’s hair and scalp. The next morning Roscoe had a very unpleasant rash along his hairline. Upon investigation he discovered that the rash was due to an improper chemical compound in Sansfree. If Roscoe filed a breach of contract action against the barber, would the case be governed by the Uniform Commercial Code or common law? Explain.

Rachel entered into a contract to purchase a 2004 Dodge from Hanna, who lived in the neighboring apartment. When a dispute arose over the terms of the contract, Hanna argued that, because neither she nor Rachel was a merchant, the dispute should be decided under general principles of common law. Rachel, on the other hand, argued that Hanna was legally considered to be a merchant because she sold the car for profit and that, consequently, the sale was governed by the Uniform Commercial Code. Who is correct? Explain.

Lee and Michelle decided to cohabit. When they set up house, Michelle gave up her career, and Lee promised to share his earnings with her on a fifty-fifty basis. Several years later they ended their relationship, and when Lee failed to turn over half of his earnings, Michelle filed suit on the basis of Lee’s promise. What kind of contract would Michelle allege that Lee had breached? Explain.

Harry and Wilma were divorced in 2008, and Harry was ordered in the divorce decree to pay his ex-wife \$10,000. In 2009 and 2010 Harry was hospitalized, incurring \$3,000 in bills. He and Wilma discussed the matter, and Wilma agreed to pay the bill with her own money, even though Harry still owed her \$5,000 from the divorce decree. When Harry died in late 2010, Wilma made a claim against his estate for \$8,000 (the \$3,000 in medical bills and the \$5,000 from the decree), but the estate was only willing to pay the \$5,000 from the decree, claiming she had paid the hospital bill voluntarily and had no contract for repayment. Is the estate correct? Explain.

Louie, an adult, entered into a contract to sell a case of scotch whiskey to Leroy, a minor. Is the contract void or voidable? Explain.

James Mann owned a manufacturing plant that assembled cell phones. A CPA audit determined that several phones were missing. Theft by one or more of the workers was suspected. Accordingly, under Mann’s instructions, the following sign was placed in the employees’ cafeteria:

*Reward. We are missing phones. I want all employees to watch for thievery. A reward of \$500 will be paid for information given by any employee that leads to the apprehension of employee thieves.*

—James Mann

Waldo, a plant employee, read the notice and immediately called Mann, stating, “I accept your offer. I promise to watch other employees and provide you with the requested information.” Has a contract been formed? Explain.

Almost every day Sally took a break at lunch and went to the International News Stand—a magazine store—to browse the newspapers and magazines and chat with the owner, Conrad. Often she bought a magazine. One day she went there, browsed a bit, and took a magazine off the rack. Conrad was busy with three customers. Sally waved the magazine at Conrad and left the store with it. What kind of a contract, if any, was created?

Joan called Devon Sand & Gravel and ordered two “boxes” (dump-truck loads) of gravel to be spread on her rural driveway by the “shoot and run” method: the tailgate is partially opened, the dump-truck bed is lifted, and the truck moves down the driveway spreading gravel as it goes. The driver mistakenly graveled the driveway of Joan’s neighbor, Watson, instead of Joan’s. Is Devon entitled to payment by Watson? Explain.

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. An implied contract
  - a. must be in writing
  - b. is one in which the terms are spelled out
  - c. is one inferred from the actions of the parties
  - d. is imposed by law to avoid an unjust result

e. may be avoided by one party

The Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods is

- a. an annual meeting of international commercial purchasing agents.
- b. contract law used in overseas US federal territories
- c. a customary format or template for drafting contracts
- d. a kind of treaty setting out international contract law, to which the United States is a party
- e. the organization that develops uniform international law

An unenforceable contract is

- a. void, not a contract at all
- b. one that a court will not enforce for either side because of a rule of law
- c. unenforceable by one party but enforceable by the other
- d. one that has been performed by one party but not the other
- e. too indefinite to be valid

Betty Baker found a bicycle apparently abandoned near her house. She took it home and spent \$150 repairing and painting it, after which Carl appeared and proved his ownership of it. Under what theory is Betty able to get reimbursed for her expenditures?

- a. express contract
- b. implied contract
- c. apparent or quasi-contract
- d. executory contract
- e. none: she will not get reimbursed

Alice discusses with her neighbor Bob her plan to hire Woodsman to cut three trees on her side of their property line, mentioning that she can get a good deal because Woodsman is now between jobs. Bob says, "Oh, don't do that. My brother is going to cut some trees on my side, and he can do yours too for free." Alice agrees. But Bob's brother is preoccupied and never does the job. Three

weeks later Alice discovers Woodsman's rates have risen prohibitively. Under what theory does Alice have a cause of action against Bob?

- a. express contract
- b. promissory estoppel
- c. quasi-contract
- d. implied contract
- e. none: she has no cause of action against Bob

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. c
- 2. d
- 3. c
- 4. c
- 5. b

# Chapter 9

## The Agreement

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. What a contract offer is, and what proposals are not offers
2. How an offer is communicated
3. How definite the offer needs to be
4. How long an offer is good for
5. How an offer is accepted, who can accept it, and when acceptance is effective

In this chapter, we begin the first of the four broad inquiries of contract law mentioned in [Chapter 8 "Introduction to Contract Law"](#): Did the parties create a valid contract? The answer is not always obvious; the range of factors that must be taken into account can be large, and their relationships subtle. Since businesspeople frequently conduct contract negotiations without the assistance of a lawyer, it is important to attend to the nuances in order to avoid legal trouble at the outset. Whether a contract has been formed depends in turn on whether

1. the parties reached an agreement (the focus of this chapter);
2. consideration was present;
3. the agreement was legal; and
4. the parties entered into the contract of their own free will, with knowledge of the facts, and with the capacity to make a contract.

Factors 2, 3, and 4 are the subjects of subsequent chapters.

## 9.1 The Agreement in General

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize that not all agreements or promises are contracts.
2. Understand that whether a contract exists is based on an objective analysis of the parties' interaction, not on a subjective one.

### The Significance of Agreement



The core of a legal contract is the agreement between the parties. This is not a necessary ingredient; in Communist nations, contracts were (or are, in the few remaining Communist countries) routinely negotiated between parties who had the terms imposed on them. But in the West, and especially in the United States, agreement is of the essence. That is not merely a matter of convenience; it is at the heart of our philosophical and psychological beliefs. As the great student of contract law Samuel Williston put it, “It was a consequence of the emphasis laid on the ego and the individual will that the formation of a contract should seem impossible unless the wills of the parties concurred. Accordingly we find at the end of the eighteenth century, and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the prevalent idea that there must be a “meeting of the minds” (a new phrase) in order to form a contract.” <sup>[1]</sup>

Although agreements may take any form, including unspoken conduct between the parties, they are usually structured in terms of an offer and an acceptance. <sup>[2]</sup> These two components will be the focus of our discussion. Note, however, that not every agreement, in the broadest sense of the word, need consist of an offer and an acceptance, and that it is entirely possible, therefore, for two persons to reach agreement without forming a contract. For example, people may agree that the weather is pleasant or that it would be preferable to go out for Chinese food rather than to see a foreign film; in neither case has a contract been formed. One of the major functions of the law of contracts is to sort out those agreements that are legally binding—those that are contracts—from those that are not.

## The Objective Test

In interpreting agreements, courts generally apply an objective standard (outwardly, as an observer would interpret; not subjectively). The Restatement (Second) of Contracts defines *agreement* as a “manifestation of mutual assent by two or more persons to one another.” <sup>[3]</sup> The Uniform Commercial Code defines *agreement* as “the bargain of the parties in fact as found in their language or by implication from other circumstances including course of dealing or usage of trade or course of performance.” <sup>[4]</sup> The critical question is what the parties said or did, not what they thought they said or did, or not what impression they thought they were making.

The distinction between objective and subjective standards crops up occasionally when one person claims he spoke in jest. The vice president of a company that manufactured punchboards, used in gambling, testified to the Washington State Game Commission that he would pay \$100,000 to anyone who found a “crooked board.” Barnes, a bartender, who had purchased two boards that were crooked some time before, brought one to the company office and demanded payment. The company refused, claiming that the statement was made in jest (the audience at the commission hearing had laughed when the offer was made). The court disagreed, holding that it was reasonable to interpret the pledge of \$100,000 as a means of promoting punchboards:

*[I]f the jest is not apparent and a reasonable hearer would believe that an offer was being made, then the speaker risks the formation of a contract which was not intended. It is the objective manifestations of the offeror that count and not secret, unexpressed intentions. If a party's words or acts, judged by a reasonable standard, manifest an intention to agree in regard to the matter in question, that agreement is established, and it is immaterial what may be the real but unexpressed state of the party's mind on the subject. <sup>[5]</sup>*

*Lucy v. Zehmer* (Section 9.4.1 "Objective Intention" at the end of the chapter) illustrates that a party's real state of mind must be expressed to the other party, rather than in an aside to one's spouse.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Fundamentally, a contract is a legally binding “meeting of the minds” between the parties. It is not the unexpressed intention in the minds of the parties that determines whether there was “a meeting.” The test is objective: how would a reasonable person interpret the interaction?

#### EXERCISES

1. For the purposes of determining whether a party had a contractual intention, why do courts employ an objective rather than a subjective test?
2. What is the relationship between “the emphasis laid on the ego and the individual will” in modern times (Williston) and the concept of the contractual agreement?

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[1] Samuel Williston, "Freedom of Contract," *Cornell Law Quarterly* 6 (1921), 365.

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-204(1).

[3] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 3.

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1-201(3).

[5] *Barnes v. Treece*, 549 P.2d 1152 (Wash. App. 1976).

## 9.2 The Offer

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know the definition of *offer*.
2. Recognize that some proposals are not offers.
3. Understand the three essentials of an offer: intent, communication, and definiteness.
4. Know when an offer expires and can no longer be accepted.

Offer and acceptance may seem to be straightforward concepts, as they are when two people meet face-to-face. But in a commercial society, the ways of making offers and accepting them are nearly infinite. A retail store advertises its merchandise in the newspaper. A seller makes his offer by mail or over the Internet. A telephone caller states that his offer will stand for ten days. An offer leaves open a crucial term. An auctioneer seeks bids. An offeror gives the offeree a choice. All these situations can raise tricky questions, as can corresponding situations involving acceptances.

### The Definition of *Offer*

The Restatement defines offer as "the manifestation of willingness to enter into a bargain, so made as to justify another person in understanding that his assent to that bargain is invited and will conclude it." <sup>[1]</sup> Two key elements are implicit in that definition: the offer must be communicated, and it must be definite. Before considering these requirements, we examine the threshold question of whether an offer was intended. Let us look at proposals that may look like, but are not, offers.

### Proposals That Are Not Offers

#### Advertisements

Most advertisements, price quotations, and invitations to bid are not construed as offers. A notice in the newspaper that a bicycle is on sale for \$800 is normally intended only as an invitation to the public to come to the store to make a purchase. Similarly, a statement that a seller can “quote” a unit price to a prospective purchaser is not, by itself, of sufficient definiteness to constitute an offer; quantity, time of delivery, and other important factors are missing from such a statement. Frequently, in order to avoid construction of a statement about price and quantity as an offer, a seller or buyer may say, “Make me an offer.” Such a statement obviously suggests that no offer has yet been made. This principle usually applies to invitations for bids (e.g., from contractors on a building project). Many forms used by sales representatives as contracts indicate that by signing, the customer is making an offer to be accepted by the home office and is not accepting an offer made by the sales representative.

Although advertisements, price quotations, and the like are generally not offers, the facts in each case are important. Under the proper circumstances, an advertised statement can be construed as an offer, as shown in the well-known *Lefkowitz* case ([Section 9.4.2 "Advertisements as Offers"](#) at the end of the chapter), in which the offended customer acted as his own lawyer and pursued an appeal to the Minnesota Supreme Court against a Minneapolis department store that took back its advertised offer.

Despite the common-law rule that advertisements are normally to be considered invitations rather than offers, legislation and government regulations may offer redress. For many years, retail food stores have been subject to a rule, promulgated by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), that goods advertised as “specials” must be available and must be sold at the price advertised. It is unlawful for a retail chain not to have an advertised item in each of its stores and in sufficient quantity, unless the advertisement specifically states how much is stocked and which branch stores do not carry it. Many states have enacted consumer protection statutes that parallel the FTC rule.

### **Invitations to Bid**

Invitations to bid are also not generally construed as offers. An auctioneer does not make offers but solicits offers from the crowd: “May I have an offer?—\$500? \$450? \$450! I have an offer for \$450. Do I hear \$475? May I have an offer?”

## Communication

A contract is an agreement in which each party assents to the terms of the other party. Without mutual assent there cannot be a contract, and this implies that the assent each person gives must be with reference to that of the other. If Toni places several alternative offers on the table, only one of which can be accepted, and invites Sandy to choose, no contract is formed if Sandy says merely, "I accept your terms." Sandy must specify which offer she is assenting to.

From this general proposition, it follows that no contract can be legally binding unless an offer is in fact communicated to the offeree. If you write an e-mail to a friend with an offer to sell your car for a certain sum and then get distracted and forget to send it, no offer has been made. If your friend coincidentally e-mails you the following day and says that she wants to buy your car and names the same sum, no contract has been made. Her e-mail to you is not an acceptance, since she did not know of your offer; it is, instead, an offer or an invitation to make an offer. Nor would there have been a contract if you had sent your communication and the two e-mails crossed in cyberspace. Both e-mails would be offers, and for a valid contract to be formed, it would still be necessary for one of you to accept the other's offer. An offer is not effective until it is received by the offeree (and that's also true of a revocation of the offer, and a rejection of the offer by the offeree).

The requirement that an offer be communicated does not mean that every term must be communicated. You call up your friend and offer to sell him your car. You tell him the price and start to tell him that you will throw in the snow tires but will not pay for a new inspection, and that you expect to keep the car another three weeks. Impatiently, he cuts you off and says, "Never mind about all that; I'll accept your offer on whatever terms you want." You and he have a contract.

These principles apply to unknown offers of reward. An offer of a reward constitutes a unilateral contract that can be made binding only by performing the task for which the reward is offered. Suppose that Bonnie posts on a tree a sign offering a reward for returning her missing dog. If you saw the sign, found the dog, and returned it, you would have fulfilled the essentials of the offer. But if you chanced upon the dog, read the tag around its neck, and returned it without ever

having been aware that a reward was offered, then you have not responded to the offer, even if you acted in the hope that the owner would reward you. There is no contractual obligation. In many states, a different result follows from an offer of a reward by a governmental entity. Commonly, local ordinances provide that a standing reward of, say, \$1,000 will be paid to anyone providing information that leads to the arrest and conviction of arsonists. To collect the reward, it is not necessary for a person who does furnish local authorities with such information to know that a reward ordinance exists. In contract terms, the standing reward is viewed as a means of setting a climate in which people will be encouraged to act in certain ways in the expectation that they will earn unknown rewards. It is also possible to view the claim to a reward as noncontractual; the right to receive it is guaranteed, instead, by the local ordinance. Although a completed act called for by an unknown private offer does not give rise to a contract, partial performance usually does. Suppose Apex Bakery posts a notice offering a one-week bonus to all bakers who work at least six months in the kitchen. Charlene works two months before discovering the notice on the bulletin board. Her original ignorance of the offer will not defeat her claim to the bonus if she continues working, for the offer serves as an inducement to complete the performance called for.

## **Definiteness**

The common law reasonably requires that an offer spell out the essential proposed terms with sufficient definiteness—certainty of terms that enables a court to order enforcement or measure damages in the event of a breach. As it has often been put, “The law does not make contracts for the parties; it merely enforces the duties which they have undertaken” (Simpson, 1965, p. 19). Thus a supposed promise to sell “such coal as the promisor may wish to sell” is not an enforceable term because the seller, the coal company, undertakes no duty to sell anything unless it wishes to do so. Essential terms certainly include price and the work to be done. But not every omission is fatal; for example, as long as a missing term can be fixed by referring to some external standard—such as “no later than the first frost”—the offer is sufficiently definite. In major business transactions involving extensive negotiations, the parties often sign a preliminary “agreement in principle” before a detailed contract is drafted. These preliminary agreements may be definite enough to create contract liability even though they lack many of the

terms found in a typical contract. For example, in a famous 1985 case, a Texas jury concluded that an agreement made “in principle” between the Pennzoil Company and the Getty Oil Company and not entirely finished was binding and that Texaco had unlawfully interfered with their contract. As a result, Texaco was held liable for over \$10 billion, which was settled for \$3 billion after Texaco went into bankruptcy.

Offers that state alternatives are definitive if each alternative is definite. David offers Sheila the opportunity to buy one of two automobiles at a fixed price, with delivery in two months and the choice of vehicle left to David. Sheila accepts. The contract is valid. If one of the cars is destroyed in the interval before delivery, David is obligated to deliver the other car. Sometimes, however, what appears to be an offer in the alternative may be something else. Charles makes a deal to sell his business to Bernie. As part of the bargain, Charles agrees not to compete with Bernie for the next two years, and if he does, to pay \$25,000. Whether this is an alternative contract depends on the circumstances and intentions of the parties. If it is, then Charles is free to compete as long as he pays Bernie \$25,000. On the other hand, the intention might have been to prevent Charles from competing in any event; hence a court could order payment of the \$25,000 as damages for a breach and still order Charles to refrain from competition until the expiration of the two-year period.

### **The UCC Approach**

The Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) is generally more liberal in its approach to definiteness than is the common law—at least as the common law was interpreted in the heyday of classical contract doctrine. Section 2-204(3) states the rule: “Even though one or more terms are left open, a contract for sale does not fail for indefiniteness if the parties have intended to make a contract and there is a reasonably certain basis for giving an appropriate remedy.”

The drafters of the UCC sought to give validity to as many contracts as possible and grounded that validity on the intention of the parties rather than on formalistic requirements. As the official comment to Section 2-204(3) notes, “If the parties intend to enter into a binding agreement, this subsection recognizes that agreement as valid in law, despite missing terms, if there is any reasonably certain basis for granting a remedy....Commercial standards on the point

of ‘indefiniteness’ are intended to be applied.” Other sections of the UCC spell out rules for filling in such open provisions as price, performance, and remedies. <sup>[2]</sup>

One of these sections, Section 2-306(1), provides that a contract term under which a buyer agrees to purchase the seller’s entire output of goods (an “outputs contract”) or a seller agrees to meet all the buyer’s requirements (a “requirements” or “needs” contract) means output or requirements that occur in good faith. A party to such a contract cannot offer or demand a quantity that is “unreasonably disproportionate” to a stated estimate or past quantities.

### **Duration of Offer**

An offer need not be accepted on the spot. Because there are numerous ways of conveying an offer and numerous contingencies that may be part of the offer’s subject matter, the offeror might find it necessary to give the offeree considerable time to accept or reject the offer. By the same token, an offer cannot remain open forever, so that once given, it never lapses and cannot be terminated. The law recognizes seven ways by which the offer can expire (besides acceptance, of course): revocation, rejection by the offeree, counteroffer, acceptance with counteroffer, lapse of time, death or insanity of a person or destruction of an essential term, and illegality. We will examine each of these in turn.

### **Revocation**

People are free to make contracts and, in general, to revoke them.

### **Revocability**

The general rule, both in common law and under the UCC, is that the offeror may revoke his or her offer at any time before acceptance, even if the offer states that it will remain open for a specified period of time. Neil offers Arlene his car for \$5,000 and promises to keep the offer open for ten days. Two days later, Neil calls Arlene to revoke the offer. The offer is terminated, and Arlene’s acceptance thereafter, though within the ten days, is ineffective. But if Neil had sent his revocation (the taking back of an offer before it is accepted) by mail, and if Arlene, before she received it, had telephoned her acceptance, there would be a contract, since revocation is effective only when the offeree actually receives it. There is an exception to this rule for offers made to the public through newspaper or like advertisements. The offeror may revoke a public offering by notifying the public by the same means used to communicate the offer. If no better



means of notification is reasonably available, the offer is terminated even if a particular offeree had no actual notice.

Revocation may be communicated indirectly. If Arlene had learned from a friend that Neil had sold his car to someone else during the ten-day period, she would have had sufficient notice. Any attempt to accept Neil's offer would have been futile.

### **Irrevocable Offers**

Not every type of offer is revocable. One type of offer that cannot be revoked is the option contract (the promisor explicitly agrees for consideration to limit his right to revoke). Arlene tells Neil that she cannot make up her mind in ten days but that she will pay him \$25 to hold the offer open for thirty days. Neil agrees. Arlene has an option to buy the car for \$5,000; if Neil should sell it to someone else during the thirty days, he will have breached the contract with Arlene. Note that the transactions involving Neil and Arlene consist of two different contracts. One is the promise of a thirty-day option for the promise of \$25. It is this contract that makes the option binding and is independent of the original offer to sell the car for \$5,000. The offer can be accepted and made part of an independent contract during the option period.

Partial performance of a unilateral contract creates an option. Although the option is not stated explicitly, it is recognized by law in the interests of justice. Otherwise, an offeror could induce the offeree to go to expense and trouble without ever being liable to fulfill his or her part of the bargain. Before the offeree begins to carry out the contract, the offeror is free to revoke the offer. But once performance begins, the law implies an option, allowing the offeree to complete performance according to the terms of the offer. If, after a reasonable time, the offeree does not fulfill the terms of the offer, then it may be revoked.

### **Revocability under the UCC**

The UCC changes the common-law rule for offers by merchants. Under Section 2-205, a firm offer (a written and signed promise by a merchant to hold an offer to buy or sell goods for some period of time) is irrevocable. That is, an option is created, but no consideration is required. The offer must remain open for the time period stated or, if no time period is given, for a reasonable period of time, which may not exceed three months.

### **Irrevocability by Law**

By law, certain types of offers may not be revoked (statutory irrevocability), despite the absence of language to that effect in the offer itself. One major category of such offers is that of the contractor submitting a bid to a public agency. The general rule is that once the period of bidding opens, a bidder on a public contract may not withdraw his or her bid unless the contracting authority consents. The contractor who purports to withdraw is awarded the contract based on the original bid and may be sued for damages for nonperformance.

### **Rejection by the Offeree**

Rejection (a manifestation of refusal to agree to the terms of an offer) of the offer is effective when the offeror receives it. A subsequent change of mind by the offeree cannot revive the offer. Donna calls Chuck to reject Chuck's offer to sell his lawn mower. Chuck is then free to sell it to someone else. If Donna changes her mind and calls Chuck back to accept after all, there still is no contract, even if Chuck has made no further effort to sell the lawn mower. Having rejected the original offer, Donna, by her second call, is not accepting but making an offer to buy. Suppose Donna had written Chuck to reject, but on changing her mind, decided to call to accept before the rejection letter arrived. In that case, the offer would have been accepted.

### **Counteroffer**

A counteroffer, a response that varies the terms of an offer, is a rejection. Jones offers Smith a small parcel of land for \$10,000 and says the offer will remain open for one month. Smith responds ten days later, saying he will pay \$5,000. Jones's original offer has thereby been rejected. If Jones now declines Smith's counteroffer, may Smith bind Jones to his original offer by agreeing to pay the full \$10,000? He may not, because once an original offer is rejected, all the terms lapse. However, an inquiry by Smith as to whether Jones would consider taking less is not a counteroffer and would not terminate the offer.

### **Acceptance with Counteroffer**

This is not really an acceptance at all but is a counteroffer: an acceptance that changes the terms of the offer is a counteroffer and terminates the offer. The common law imposes a mirror image rule: the acceptance must match the offer in all its particulars or the offer is rejected. However, if an acceptance that requests a change or an addition to the offer does not require the offeror's assent, then the acceptance is valid. The broker at Friendly Real Estate

offers you a house for \$320,000. You accept but include in your acceptance “the vacant lot next door.” Your acceptance is a counteroffer, which serves to terminate the original offer. If, instead, you had said, “It’s a deal, but I’d prefer it with the vacant lot next door,” then there is a contract because you are not demanding that the broker abide by your request. If you had said, “It’s a deal, and I’d also like the vacant lot next door,” you have a contract, because the request for the lot is a separate offer, not a counteroffer rejecting the original proposal.

### **The UCC and Counteroffers**

The UCC is more liberal than the common law in allowing contracts to be formed despite counteroffers and in incorporating the counteroffers into the contracts. This UCC provision is necessary because the use of routine forms for contracts is very common, and if the rule were otherwise, much valuable time would be wasted by drafting clauses tailored to the precise wording of the routine printed forms. A buyer and a seller send out documents accompanying or incorporating their offers and acceptances, and the provisions in each document rarely correspond precisely. Indeed, it is often the case that one side’s form contains terms favorable to it but inconsistent with terms on the other side’s form. Section 2-207 of the UCC attempts to resolve this “battle of the forms” by providing that additional terms or conditions in an acceptance operate as such unless the acceptance is conditioned on the offeror’s consent to the new or different terms. The new terms are construed as offers but are automatically incorporated in any contract between merchants for the sale of goods unless “(a) the offer expressly limits acceptance to the terms of the offer; (b) [the terms] materially alter it; or (c) notification of objection to them has already been given or is given within a reasonable time after notice of them is received.”

An example of terms that become part of the contract without being expressly agreed to are clauses providing for interest payments on overdue bills. Examples of terms that would materially alter the contract and hence need express approval are clauses that negate the standard warranties that sellers give buyers on their merchandise.

Frequently, parties use contract provisions to prevent the automatic introduction of new terms.

A typical seller’s provision is as follows:

#### *Amendments*

*Any modification of this document by the Buyer, and all additional or different terms included in Buyer's purchase order or any other document responding to this offer, are hereby objected to. BY ORDERING THE GOODS HERE FOR SHIPMENT, BUYER AGREES TO ALL THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS CONTAINED ON BOTH SIDES OF THIS DOCUMENT.*

Section 2-207 of the UCC, liberalizing the mirror image rule, is pervasive, covering all sorts of contracts, from those between industrial manufacturers to those between friends.

### **Lapse of Time**

Offers are not open-ended; they lapse after some period of time. An offer may contain its own specific time limitation—for example, “until close of business today.”

In the absence of an expressly stated time limit, the common-law rule is that the offer expires at the end of a “reasonable” time. Such a period is a factual question in each case and depends on the particular circumstances, including the nature of the service or property being contracted for, the manner in which the offer is made, and the means by which the acceptance is expected to be made. Whenever the contract involves a speculative transaction—the sale of securities or land, for instance—the time period will depend on the nature of the security and the risk involved. In general, the greater the risk to the seller, the shorter the period of time. Karen offers to sell Gary a block of oil stocks that are fluctuating rapidly hour by hour. Gary receives the offer an hour before the market closes; he accepts by fax two hours after the market has opened the next morning and after learning that the stock has jumped up significantly. The time period has lapsed if Gary was accepting a fixed price that Karen set, but it may still be open if the price is market price at time of delivery. (Under Section 41 of the Restatement, an offer made by mail is “seasonably accepted if an acceptance is mailed at any time before midnight on the day on which the offer is received.”)

For unilateral contracts, both the common law and the UCC require the offeree to notify the offeror that he has begun to perform the terms of the contract. Without notification, the offeror may, after a reasonable time, treat the offer as having lapsed.

### **Death or Insanity of the Offeror**

The death or insanity of the offeror prior to acceptance terminates the offer; the offer is said to die with the offeror. (Notice, however, that the death of a party to a *contract* does not necessarily terminate the contract: the estate of a deceased person may be liable on a contract made by the person before death.)

### **Destruction of Subject Matter Essential to the Offer**

Destruction of something essential to the contract also terminates the offer. You offer to sell your car, but the car is destroyed in an accident before your offer is accepted; the offer is terminated.

### **Postoffer Illegality**

A statute making unlawful the object of the contract will terminate the offer if the statute takes effect after the offer was made. Thus an offer to sell a quantity of herbal weight-loss supplements will terminate if the Food and Drug Administration outlaws the sale of such supplements.

## **KEY TAKEAWAY**

An offer is a manifestation of willingness to enter into a contract, effective when received. It must be communicated to the offeree, be made intentionally (according to an objective standard), and be definite enough to determine a remedy in case of breach. An offer terminates in one of seven ways: revocation before acceptance (except for option contracts, firm offers under the UCC, statutory irrevocability, and unilateral offers where an offeree has commenced performance); rejection; counteroffer; acceptance with counteroffer; lapse of time (as stipulated or after a reasonable time); death or insanity of the offeror before acceptance or destruction of subject matter essential to the offer; and postoffer illegality.

## **EXERCISES**

1. Why is it said an offer is a “manifestation” of willingness to enter into a contract? How could willingness be “manifested”?
2. Which kind of standard is used to determine whether a person has made an offer—subjective or objective?
3. If Sandra posts a written notice offering “to the kitchen staff at Coldwater Bay (Alaska) transportation to Seattle at the end of the fishing season,” and if David, one of the maintenance workers, says to her, “I accept your offer of transportation to Seattle,” is there a contract?

4. What are the seven ways an offer can terminate?

[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 24.

[2] Chiefly, Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-305 through 2-310.

## 9.3 The Acceptance

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define *acceptance*.
2. Understand who may accept an offer.
3. Know when the acceptance is effective.
4. Recognize when silence is acceptance.

### General Definition of *Acceptance*

To result in a legally binding contract, an offer must be accepted by the offeree. Just as the law helps define and shape an offer and its duration, so the law governs the nature and manner of acceptance. The Restatement defines acceptance of an offer as “a manifestation of assent to the terms thereof made by the offeree in a manner invited or required by the offer.”<sup>[1]</sup> The assent may be either by the making of a mutual promise or by performance or partial performance. If there is doubt about whether the offer requests a return promise or a return act, the Restatement, Section 32, provides that the offeree may accept with either a promise or performance. The Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) also adopts this view; under Section 2-206(1)(a), “an offer to make a contract shall be construed as inviting acceptance in any manner and by any medium reasonable in the circumstances” unless the offer unambiguously requires a certain mode of acceptance.

### Who May Accept?

The identity of the offeree is usually clear, even if the name is unknown. The person to whom a promise is made is ordinarily the person whom the offeror contemplates will make a return promise or perform the act requested. But this is not invariably so. A promise can be made to one person who is not expected to do anything in return. The consideration necessary to weld

the offer and acceptance into a legal contract can be given by a third party. Under the common law, whoever is invited to furnish consideration to the offeror is the offeree, and only an offeree may accept an offer. A common example is sale to a minor. George promises to sell his automobile to Bartley, age seventeen, if Bartley's father will promise to pay \$3,500 to George. Bartley is the promisee (the person to whom the promise is made) but not the offeree; Bartley cannot legally accept George's offer. Only Bartley's father, who is called on to pay for the car, can accept, by making the promise requested. And notice what might seem obvious: *a promise to perform as requested in the offer is itself a binding acceptance.*

### **When Is Acceptance Effective?**

As noted previously, an offer, a revocation of the offer, and a rejection of the offer are not effective until received. The same rule does not always apply to the acceptance.

#### **Instantaneous Communication**

Of course, in many instances the moment of acceptance is not in question: in face-to-face deals or transactions negotiated by telephone, the parties extend an offer and accept it instantaneously during the course of the conversation. But problems can arise in contracts negotiated through correspondence.

#### **Stipulations as to Acceptance**

One common situation arises when the offeror stipulates the mode of acceptance (e.g., return mail, fax, or carrier pigeon). If the offeree uses the stipulated mode, then the acceptance is deemed effective when sent. Even though the offeror has no knowledge of the acceptance at that moment, the contract has been formed. Moreover, according to the Restatement, Section 60, if the offeror says that the offer can be accepted only by the specified mode, that mode must be used. (It is said that "the offeror is the master of the offer.")

If the offeror specifies no particular mode, then acceptance is effective when transmitted, as long as the offeree uses a reasonable method of acceptance. It is implied that the offeree can use the same means used by the offeror or a means of communication customary to the industry.

#### **The "Mailbox Rule"**

The use of the postal service is customary, so acceptances are considered effective when mailed, regardless of the method used to transmit the offer. Indeed, the so-called mailbox rule has a lineage tracing back more than one hundred years to the English courts. <sup>[2]</sup>

The mailbox rule may seem to create particular difficulties for people in business, since the acceptance is effective even though the offeror is unaware of the acceptance, and even if the letter is lost and never arrives. But the solution is the same as the rationale for the rule. In contracts negotiated through correspondence, there will always be a burden on one of the parties. If the rule were that the acceptance is not effective until received by the offeror, then the offeree would be on tenterhooks, rather than the other way around, as is the case with the present rule. As between the two, it seems fairer to place the burden on the offeror, since he or she alone has the power to fix the moment of effectiveness. All the offeror need do is specify in the offer that acceptance is not effective until received.

In all other cases—that is, when the offeror fails to specify the mode of acceptance and the offeree uses a mode that is not reasonable—acceptance is deemed effective only when received.

### **Acceptance “Outruns” Rejection**

When the offeree sends a rejection first and then later transmits a superseding acceptance, the “effective when received” rule also applies. Suppose a seller offers a buyer two cords of firewood and says the offer will remain open for a week. On the third day, the buyer writes the seller, rejecting the offer. The following evening, the buyer rethinks his firewood needs, and on the morning of the fifth day, he sends an e-mail accepting the seller’s terms. The previously mailed letter arrives the following day. Since the letter had not yet been received, the offer had not been rejected. For there to be a valid contract, the e-mailed acceptance must arrive before the mailed rejection. If the e-mail were hung up in cyberspace, although through no fault of the buyer, so that the letter arrived first, the seller would be correct in assuming the offer was terminated—even if the e-mail arrived a minute later. In short, where “the acceptance outruns the rejection” the acceptance is effective. See [Figure 9.1](#).



Figure 9.1

	When Sent	When Received
1. Offer		✓
2. Revocation of Offer		✓
3. Rejection		✓
4. Acceptance	If reasonable or by specified mode	If unreasonable or mode not specified or after rejection sent

*When Is Communication Effective?*

**Electronic Communications**

Electronic communications have, of course, become increasingly common. Many contracts are negotiated by e-mail, accepted and “signed” electronically. Generally speaking, this does not change the rules. The Uniform Electronic Transactions Act (UETA) was promulgated (i.e., disseminated for states to adopt) in 1999. It is one of a number of uniform acts, like the Uniform Commercial Code. As of June 2010, forty-seven states and the US Virgin Islands had adopted the statute. The introduction to the act provides that “the purpose of the UETA is to remove barriers to electronic commerce by validating and effectuating electronic records and signatures.” [3] In general, the UETA provides the following:

- a. A record or signature may not be denied legal effect or enforceability solely because it is in electronic form.
- b. A contract may not be denied legal effect or enforceability solely because an electronic record was used in its formation.
- c. If a law requires a record to be in writing, an electronic record satisfies the law.
- d. If a law requires a signature, an electronic signature satisfies the law.

The UETA, though, doesn’t address all the problems with electronic contracting. Clicking on a computer screen may constitute a valid acceptance of a contractual offer, but only if the offer is clearly communicated. In *Specht v. Netscape Communications Corp.*, customers who had



downloaded a free online computer program complained that it effectively invaded their privacy by inserting into their machines “cookies”; they wanted to sue, but the defendant said they were bound to arbitration. <sup>[4]</sup> They had clicked on the Download button, but hidden below it were the licensing terms, including the arbitration clause. The federal court of appeals held that there was no valid acceptance. The court said, “We agree with the district court that a reasonably prudent Internet user in circumstances such as these would not have known or learned of the existence of the license terms before responding to defendants’ invitation to download the free software, and that defendants therefore did not provide reasonable notice of the license terms. In consequence, the plaintiffs’ bare act of downloading the software did not unambiguously manifest assent to the arbitration provision contained in the license terms.”

If a faxed document is sent but for some reason not received or not noticed, the emerging law is that the mailbox rule does not apply. A court would examine the circumstances with care to determine the reason for the nonreceipt or for the offeror’s failure to notice its receipt. A person has to have fair notice that his or her offer has been accepted, and modern communication makes the old-fashioned mailbox rule—that acceptance is effective upon dispatch—problematic. <sup>[5]</sup>

## **Silence as Acceptance**

### **General Rule: Silence Is Not Acceptance**

Ordinarily, for there to be a contract, the offeree must make some positive manifestation of assent to the offeror’s terms. The offeror cannot usually word his offer in such a way that the offeree’s failure to respond can be construed as an acceptance.

### **Exceptions**

The Restatement, Section 69, gives three situations, however, in which silence can operate as an acceptance. The first occurs when the offeree avails himself of services proffered by the offeror, even though he could have rejected them and had reason to know that the offeror offered them expecting compensation. The second situation occurs when the offer states that the offeree may accept without responding and the offeree, remaining silent, intends to accept. The third situation is that of previous dealings, in which only if the offeree intends not to accept is it reasonable to expect him to say so.

As an example of the first type of acceptance by silence, assume that a carpenter happens by your house and sees a collapsing porch. He spots you in the front yard and points out the deterioration. "I'm a professional carpenter," he says, "and between jobs. I can fix that porch for you. Somebody ought to." You say nothing. He goes to work. There is an implied contract, with the work to be done for the carpenter's usual fee.

To illustrate the second situation, suppose that a friend has left her car in your garage. The friend sends you a letter in which she offers you the car for \$4,000 and adds, "If I don't hear from you, I will assume that you have accepted my offer." If you make no reply, with the intention of accepting the offer, a contract has been formed.

The third situation is illustrated by [Section 9.4.3 "Silence as Acceptance"](#), a well-known decision made by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. when he was sitting on the Supreme Court of Massachusetts.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Without an acceptance of an offer, no contract exists, and once an acceptance is made, a contract is formed. If the offeror stipulates how the offer should be accepted, so be it. If there is no stipulation, any reasonable means of communication is good. Offers and revocations are usually effective upon receipt, while an acceptance is effective on dispatch. The advent of electronic contracting has caused some modification of the rules: courts are likely to investigate the facts surrounding the exchange of offer and acceptance more carefully than previously. But the nuances arising because of the mailbox rule and acceptance by silence still require close attention to the facts.

#### EXERCISES

1. Rudy puts this poster, with a photo of his dog, on utility poles around his neighborhood: "\$50 reward for the return of my lost dog." Carlene doesn't see the poster, but she finds the dog and, after looking at the tag on its collar, returns the dog to Rudy. As she leaves his house, her eye falls on one of the posters, but Rudy declines to pay her anything. Why is Rudy correct that Carlene has no legal right to the reward?
2. How has the UCC changed the common law's mirror image rule, and why?
3. When is an offer generally said to be effective? A rejection of an offer? A counteroffer?
4. How have modern electronic communications affected the law of offer and acceptance?

## 5. When is silence considered an acceptance?

[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 24.

[2] *Adams v. Lindsell*, 1 Barnewall & Alderson 681 (K.B. 1818).

[3] The National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, *Uniform Electronic Transactions Act (1999)* (Denver: National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, 1999), accessed March 29, 2011, <http://www.law.upenn.edu/bll/archives/ulc/fnact99/1990s/ueta99.pdf>.

[4] *Specht v. Netscape Communications Corp.*, 306 F.3d 17 (2d Cir. 2002).

[5] See, for example, *Clow Water Systems Co. v. National Labor Relations Board*, 92 F.3d 441 (6th Cir. 1996).

## 9.4 Cases

### Objective Intention

*Lucy v. Zehmer*

*84 S.E.2d 516 (Va. 1954)*

Buchanan, J.

This suit was instituted by W. O. Lucy and J. C. Lucy, complainants, against A. H. Zehmer and Ida S. Zehmer, his wife, defendants, to have specific performance of a contract by which it was alleged the Zehmers had sold to W. O. Lucy a tract of land owned by A. H. Zehmer in Dinwiddie county containing 471.6 acres, more or less, known as the Ferguson farm, for \$50,000. J. C. Lucy, the other complainant, is a brother of W. O. Lucy, to whom W. O. Lucy transferred a half interest in his alleged purchase.

The instrument sought to be enforced was written by A. H. Zehmer on December 20, 1952, in these words: "We hereby agree to sell to W. O. Lucy the Ferguson farm complete for \$50,000.00, title satisfactory to buyer," and signed by the defendants, A. H. Zehmer and Ida S. Zehmer.

The answer of A. H. Zehmer admitted that at the time mentioned W. O. Lucy offered him \$50,000 cash for the farm, but that he, Zehmer, considered that the offer was made in jest; that so thinking, and both he and Lucy having had several drinks, he wrote out “the memorandum” quoted above and induced his wife to sign it; that he did not deliver the memorandum to Lucy, but that Lucy picked it up, read it, put it in his pocket, attempted to offer Zehmer \$5 to bind the bargain, which Zehmer refused to accept, and realizing for the first time that Lucy was serious, Zehmer assured him that he had no intention of selling the farm and that the whole matter was a joke. Lucy left the premises insisting that he had purchased the farm....

In his testimony Zehmer claimed that he “was high as a Georgia pine,” and that the transaction “was just a bunch of two doggoned drunks bluffing to see who could talk the biggest and say the most.” That claim is inconsistent with his attempt to testify in great detail as to what was said and what was done....

If it be assumed, contrary to what we think the evidence shows, that Zehmer was jesting about selling his farm to Lucy and that the transaction was intended by him to be a joke, nevertheless the evidence shows that Lucy did not so understand it but considered it to be a serious business transaction and the contract to be binding on the Zehmers as well as on himself. The very next day he arranged with his brother to put up half the money and take a half interest in the land. The day after that he employed an attorney to examine the title. The next night, Tuesday, he was back at Zehmer’s place and there Zehmer told him for the first time, Lucy said, that he wasn’t going to sell and he told Zehmer, “You know you sold that place fair and square.” After receiving the report from his attorney that the title was good he wrote to Zehmer that he was ready to close the deal.

Not only did Lucy actually believe, but the evidence shows he was warranted in believing, that the contract represented a serious business transaction and a good faith sale and purchase of the farm.

In the field of contracts, as generally elsewhere, “We must look to the outward expression of a person as manifesting his intention rather than to his secret and unexpressed intention. The law imputes to a person an intention corresponding to the reasonable meaning of his words and acts.”

At no time prior to the execution of the contract had Zehmer indicated to Lucy by word or act that he was not in earnest about selling the farm. They had argued about it and discussed its terms, as Zehmer admitted, for a long time. Lucy testified that if there was any jesting it was about paying \$50,000 that night. The contract and the evidence show that he was not expected to pay the money that night. Zehmer said that after the writing was signed he laid it down on the counter in front of Lucy. Lucy said Zehmer handed it to him. In any event there had been what appeared to be a good faith offer and a good faith acceptance, followed by the execution and apparent delivery of a written contract. Both said that Lucy put the writing in his pocket and then offered Zehmer \$5 to seal the bargain. Not until then, even under the defendants' evidence, was anything said or done to indicate that the matter was a joke. Both of the Zehmers testified that when Zehmer asked his wife to sign he whispered that it was a joke so Lucy wouldn't hear and that it was not intended that he should hear.

The mental assent of the parties is not requisite for the formation of a contract. If the words or other acts of one of the parties have but one reasonable meaning, his undisclosed intention is immaterial except when an unreasonable meaning which he attaches to his manifestations is known to the other party.

“\* \* \* The law, therefore, judges of an agreement between two persons exclusively from those expressions of their intentions which are communicated between them. \* \* \*.” [Citation]

An agreement or mutual assent is of course essential to a valid contract but the law imputes to a person an intention corresponding to the reasonable meaning of his words and acts. If his words and acts, judged by a reasonable standard, manifest an intention to agree, it is immaterial what may be the real but unexpressed state of his mind.

So a person cannot set up that he was merely jesting when his conduct and words would warrant a reasonable person in believing that he intended a real agreement.

Whether the writing signed by the defendants and now sought to be enforced by the complainants was the result of a serious offer by Lucy and a serious acceptance by the defendants, or was a serious offer by Lucy and an acceptance in secret jest by the defendants, in either event it constituted a binding contract of sale between the parties....

Reversed and remanded.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. What objective evidence was there to support the defendants' contention that they were just kidding when they agreed to sell the farm?
2. Suppose the defendants really did think the whole thing was a kind of joke. Would that make any difference?
3. As a matter of public policy, why does the law use an objective standard to determine the seriousness of intention, instead of a subjective standard?
4. It's 85 degrees in July and 5:00 p.m., quitting time. The battery in Mary's car is out of juice, again. Mary says, "Arrgh! I will sell this stupid car for \$50!" Jason, walking to his car nearby, whips out his checkbook and says, "It's a deal. Leave your car here. I'll give you a ride home and pick up your car after you give me the title." Do the parties have a contract?

### Advertisements as Offers

*Lefkowitz v. Great Minneapolis Surplus Store*

*86 N.W.2d 689 (Minn. 1957)*

Murphy, Justice.

This is an appeal from an order of the Municipal Court of Minneapolis denying the motion of the defendant for amended findings of fact, or, in the alternative, for a new trial. The order for judgment awarded the plaintiff the sum of \$138.50 as damages for breach of contract.

This case grows out of the alleged refusal of the defendant to sell to the plaintiff a certain fur piece which it had offered for sale in a newspaper advertisement. It appears from the record that on April 6, 1956, the defendant published the following advertisement in a Minneapolis newspaper:

*Saturday 9 A.M. Sharp*

*3 Brand New Fur Coats Worth to \$100.00*

*First Come*

*First Served*

*\$1 Each*

[The \$100 coat would be worth about \$800 in 2010 dollars.] On April 13, the defendant again published an advertisement in the same newspaper as follows:

*Saturday 9 A.M.*

*2 Brand New Pastel Mink 3-Skin Scarfs*

*Selling for. \$89.50*

*Out they go Saturday. Each...\$1.00*

*1 Black Lapin Stole Beautiful, worth \$139.50...\$1.00*

*First Come First Served*

The record supports the findings of the court that on each of the Saturdays following the publication of the above-described ads the plaintiff was the first to present himself at the appropriate counter in the defendant's store and on each occasion demanded the coat and the stole so advertised and indicated his readiness to pay the sale price of \$1. On both occasions, the defendant refused to sell the merchandise to the plaintiff, stating on the first occasion that by a "house rule" the offer was intended for women only and sales would not be made to men, and on the second visit that plaintiff knew defendant's house rules.

The trial court properly disallowed plaintiff's claim for the value of the fur coats since the value of these articles was speculative and uncertain. The only evidence of value was the advertisement itself to the effect that the coats were "Worth to \$100.00," how much less being speculative especially in view of the price for which they were offered for sale. With reference to the offer of the defendant on April 13, 1956, to sell the "1 Black Lapin Stole \* \* \* worth \$139.50 \* \* \*" the trial court held that the value of this article was established and granted judgment in favor of the plaintiff for that amount less the \$1 quoted purchase price.

1. The defendant contends that a newspaper advertisement offering items of merchandise for sale at a named price is a "unilateral offer" which may be withdrawn without notice. He relies upon authorities which hold that, where an advertiser publishes in a newspaper that he has a certain quantity or quality of goods which he wants to dispose of at certain prices and on certain terms, such advertisements are not offers which become contracts as soon as any person to whose notice they may come signifies his acceptance by notifying the other that he will take a certain quantity of them. Such advertisements have been construed as an invitation for an offer of sale on the terms stated, which offer, when received, may be accepted or rejected and which



therefore does not become a contract of sale until accepted by the seller; and until a contract has been so made, the seller may modify or revoke such prices or terms. [Citations]

...On the facts before us we are concerned with whether the advertisement constituted an offer, and, if so, whether the plaintiff's conduct constituted an acceptance.

There are numerous authorities which hold that a particular advertisement in a newspaper or circular letter relating to a sale of articles may be construed by the court as constituting an offer, acceptance of which would complete a contract. [Citations]

The test of whether a binding obligation may originate in advertisements addressed to the general public is "whether the facts show that some performance was promised in positive terms in return for something requested." 1 Williston, Contracts (Rev. ed.) s 27.

The authorities above cited emphasize that, where the offer is clear, definite, and explicit, and leaves nothing open for negotiation, it constitutes an offer, acceptance of which will complete the contract....

Whether in any individual instance a newspaper advertisement is an offer rather than an invitation to make an offer depends on the legal intention of the parties and the surrounding circumstances. [Citations] We are of the view on the facts before us that the offer by the defendant of the sale of the Lapin fur was clear, definite, and explicit, and left nothing open for negotiation. The plaintiff having successfully managed to be the first one to appear at the seller's place of business to be served, as requested by the advertisement, and having offered the stated purchase price of the article, he was entitled to performance on the part of the defendant. We think the trial court was correct in holding that there was in the conduct of the parties a sufficient mutuality of obligation to constitute a contract of sale.

2. The defendant contends that the offer was modified by a "house rule" to the effect that only women were qualified to receive the bargains advertised. The advertisement contained no such restriction. This objection may be disposed of briefly by stating that, while an advertiser has the right at any time before acceptance to modify his offer, he does not have the right, after acceptance, to impose new or arbitrary conditions not contained in the published offer.

[Citations]

Affirmed.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. If the normal rule is that display advertisements in newspapers and the like are not offers, but rather invitations to make an offer, why was this different? Why did the court hold that this was an offer?
2. What is the rationale for the rule that a display ad is usually not an offer?
3. If a newspaper display advertisement reads, "This offer is good for two weeks," is it still only an invitation to make an offer, or is it an offer?
4. Is a listing by a private seller for the sale of a trailer on Craigslist or in the weekly classified advertisements an offer or an invitation to make an offer?

### Silence as Acceptance

*Hobbs v. Massasoit Whip Co.*

*33 N.E. 495 (Mass. 1893)*

Holmes, J.

This is an action for the price of eel skins sent by the plaintiff to the defendant, and kept by the defendant some months, until they were destroyed. It must be taken that the plaintiff received no notice that the defendant declined to accept the skins. The case comes before us on exceptions to an instruction to the jury that, whether there was any prior contract or not, if skins are sent to the defendant, and it sees fit, whether it has agreed to take them or not, to lie back, and to say nothing, having reason to suppose that the man who has sent them believes that it is taking them, since it says nothing about it, then, if it fails to notify, the jury would be warranted in finding for the plaintiff.

Standing alone, and unexplained, this proposition might seem to imply that one stranger may impose a duty upon another, and make him a purchaser, in spite of himself, by sending goods to him, unless he will take the trouble, and bear the expense, of notifying the sender that he will not buy. The case was argued for the defendant on that interpretation. But, in view of the evidence, we do not understand that to have been the meaning of the judge and we do not think that the jury can have understood that to have been his meaning. The plaintiff was not a stranger to the defendant, even if there was no contract between them. He had sent eel skins in the same way four or five times before, and they had been accepted and paid for. On the

defendant's testimony, it was fair to assume that if it had admitted the eel skins to be over 22 inches in length, and fit for its business, as the plaintiff testified and the jury found that they were, it would have accepted them; that this was understood by the plaintiff; and, indeed, that there was a standing offer to him for such skins.

In such a condition of things, the plaintiff was warranted in sending the defendant skins conforming to the requirements, and even if the offer was not such that the contract was made as soon as skins corresponding to its terms were sent, sending them did impose on the defendant a duty to act about them; and silence on its part, coupled with a retention of the skins for an unreasonable time, might be found by the jury to warrant the plaintiff in assuming that they were accepted, and thus to amount to an acceptance. [Citations] The proposition stands on the general principle that conduct which imports acceptance or assent is acceptance or assent, in the view of the law, whatever may have been the actual state of mind of the party—a principle sometimes lost sight of in the cases. [Citations]

Exceptions overruled.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What is an eel, and why would anybody make a whip out of its skin?
2. Why did the court here deny the defendant's assertion that it never accepted the plaintiff's offer?
3. If it reasonably seems that silence is acceptance, does it make any difference what the offeree really intended?

## 9.5 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Whether a legally valid contract was formed depends on a number of factors, including whether the parties reached agreement, whether consideration was present, and whether the agreement was legal. Agreement may seem like an intuitive concept, but intuition is not a sufficient guide to the existence of agreement in legal terms. The most common way of examining an agreement for legal sufficiency is by determining whether a valid offer and acceptance were made.

An offer is a manifestation of willingness to enter into a bargain such that it would be reasonable for another individual to conclude that assent to the offer would complete the bargain. Offers

must be communicated and must be definite; that is, they must spell out terms to which the offeree can assent.

An important aspect of the offer is its duration. An offer can expire in any one of several ways: (1) rejection, (2) counteroffer, (3) acceptance with counteroffer, (4) lapse of time, (5) death or insanity of the offeror or destruction of an essential term, (6) illegality, and (7) revocation. No understanding of agreement is complete without a mastery of these conditions.

To constitute an agreement, an offer must be accepted.

The offeree must manifest his assent to the terms of the offer in a manner invited or required by the offer. Complications arise when an offer is accepted indirectly through correspondence.

Although offers and revocations of offers are not effective until received, an acceptance is deemed accepted when sent if the offeree accepts in the manner specified by the offeror. But the nuances that arise because of the mailbox rule and acceptance by silence require close attention to the circumstances of each agreement.

## EXERCISES

1. Sarah's student apartment was unfurnished. She perused Doug's List, an online classified ad service (for nonmerchants), and saw this advertisement: "Moving. For sale: a very nice brown leather couch, almost new, \$600." There was an accompanying photo and contact information. Sarah e-mailed the contact, saying she wanted to buy the couch. Does Sarah have a contract with the seller? Explain.
2. Seller called Buyer on the telephone and offered to sell his used stereo. Buyer agreed to buy it without asking the price. The next day Buyer changed her mind and attempted to back out of the agreement. Do the parties have a contract? Explain.
3. On August 1, Ernie wrote to Elsie offering to sell Elsie his car for \$7,600, and he promised to hold the offer open for ten days. On August 4 Ernie changed his mind; he sent Elsie a letter revoking the offer. On August 5 Elsie e-mailed Ernie, accepting the offer. Ernie's letter of revocation arrived on August 6. Is there a contract? Explain.
4. On August 1 Grover visited a local electronics shop to purchase a new television. He saw one he liked but wasn't sure if he could afford the \$750. The store owner agreed to write up and sign an offer stating that it would be held open for ten days, which he did. On August 2 the

owner changed his mind and sent Grover an e-mail revoking the offer, which Grover received immediately. On August 3 Grover sent a reply e-mail accepting the original offer. Is there a contract? Explain.

5. Acme Corporation sent the following letter, here set out in its entirety:

*January 2, 2012*

*Acme Corporation*

*We hereby offer you 100 Acme golden widgets, size 6. This offer will be good for 10 days.*

*[Signed] Roberta Acme*

*Owner, Acme Corporation*

Is this offer irrevocable for the time stated? Explain.

6. On November 26, Joe wrote to Kate offering to purchase a farm that she owned. Upon receiving the letter on November 28, Kate immediately sent Joe a letter of acceptance. However, shortly after mailing the letter, Kate had second thoughts and called Joe to advise him that she was rejecting his offer. The call was made before Joe received the letter of acceptance. Has a contract been formed? Why?
7. On a busy day just before April 15, Albert Accountant received a call from a local car dealer. The dealer said, "Hi, Mr. Accountant. Now, while you have income from doing clients' taxes, I have an excellent offer for you. You can buy a new Buick Century automobile completely loaded for \$36,000. Al, I know you're busy. If I don't hear from you by the end of the day, I'll assume you want the car." Albert, distracted, did not respond immediately, and the dealer hung up. Then followed an exhausting day of working with anxiety-ridden tax clients. Albert forgot about the conversation. Two days later a statement arrived from the dealer, with instructions on how Albert should pick up the car at the dealership. Is there a contract? Explain.
8. Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, the owners of a small secondhand store, attended an auction where they bought a used safe for \$50. The safe, part of the Sumstad estate, had a locked compartment inside, a fact the auctioneer mentioned. After they bought the safe, the Mitchells had a locksmith open the interior compartment; it contained \$32,000 in cash. The

locksmith called the police, who impounded the safe, and a lawsuit ensued between the Mitchells and the Sumstad estate to determine the ownership of the cash. Who should get it, and why?

9. Ivan Mestrovic, an internationally renowned artist, and his wife lived for years in a house in Indiana. Ivan died in 1982. His widow remained in the house for some years; upon her death the contents of the house were willed to her children. When the Wilkens bought the house from the estate, it was very cluttered. A bank representative (the executor of the estate) said, "You can clean it yourself and keep whatever items you want, or we—as executor of Mrs. Mestrovic's estate—will hire a rubbish removal service to dispose of it." The Wilkens opted to clean it up themselves, and amid the mess, behind sofas and in odd closets, were six apparently valuable paintings by Mestrovic. The estate claimed them; the Wilkens claimed them. Who gets the paintings, and why?
10. David Kidd's dog bit Mikaila Sherrod. On June 14, 2010, the Kidds offered to settle for \$32,000. On July 12 the Sherrods sued the Kidds. On July 20 the Kidds bumped their offer up to \$34,000. The suit was subject to mandatory arbitration, which proceeded on April 28, 2011. On May 5 the arbitrator awarded the Sherrods \$25,000. On May 9 the Sherrods wrote to the Kidds and purported to accept their last offer of \$34,000, made the year before. The Sherrods' attorney moved to enforce that purported \$34,000 "settlement agreement." The court concluded that the offer was properly accepted because it had not been withdrawn and entered judgment against the Kidds for \$34,000. The Kidds appealed. What result should obtain on appeal, and why? <sup>[1]</sup>

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. In interpreting agreements for the purpose of establishing whether a valid contract exists, courts generally apply
- subjective standards
  - objective standards
  - either a subjective or an objective standard
  - none of the above

A valid offer must be

- a. written
- b. written and intended
- c. communicated by letter
- d. communicated and definite

An offer

- a. must specify time, place, and manner of acceptance
- b. must be accepted immediately to be valid
- c. need not be accepted immediately
- d. can only be accepted by the same means it was made

An offer generally

- a. is rejected by a counteroffer
- b. can be revoked if the offeror changes his or her mind
- c. can lapse after a reasonable period of time
- d. involves all of the above

An acceptance is generally considered effective

- a. when a letter is received by the offeror
- b. when a letter is mailed
- c. when the offeree is silent
- d. only when the acceptance is transmitted in writing

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. b
- 2. d
- 3. c
- 4. d
- 5. b

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[1] *Sherrod ex rel. Cantone v. Kidd*, 155 P.3d 976 (Wash. Ct. App., 2007).

# Chapter 10

## Real Assent

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. Contracts require “a meeting of the minds” between competent parties, and if there is no such “meeting,” the agreement is usually voidable.
2. Parties must enter the contract voluntarily, without duress or undue influence.
3. Misrepresentation or fraud, when proven, vitiates a contract.
4. A mistake may make a contract voidable.
5. Parties to a contract must have capacity—that is, not labor under infancy, intoxication, or insanity.

We turn to the second of the four requirements for a valid contract. In addition to manifestation of assent, a party’s assent must be real; he or she must consent to the contract freely, with adequate knowledge, and must have capacity. The requirement of real assent raises the following major questions:

1. Did the parties enter into the contract of their own free will, or was one forced to agree under duress or undue influence?
2. Did the parties enter into the contract with full knowledge of the facts, or was one or both led to the agreement through fraud or mistake?
3. Did both parties have the capacity to make a contract?

## 10.1 Duress and Undue Influence

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize that if a person makes an agreement under duress (being forced to enter a contract against his or her will), the agreement is void.
2. Understand what undue influence is and what the typical circumstances are when it arises to make a contract voidable.



## Duress

When a person is forced to do something against his or her will, that person is said to have been the victim of duress—compulsion. There are two types of duress: physical duress and duress by improper threat. A contract induced by physical violence is void.

### Physical Duress

If a person is forced into entering a contract on threat of physical bodily harm, he or she is the victim of physical duress. It is defined by the Restatement (Second) of Contracts in Section 174: “If conduct that appears to be a manifestation of assent by a party who does not intend to engage in that conduct is physically compelled by duress, the conduct is not effective as a manifestation of assent.”

Comment (a) to Section 174 provides in part, “This Section involves an application of that principle to those *relatively rare situations in which actual physical force* has been used to compel a party to appear to assent to a contract....The essence of this type of duress is that a party is compelled by physical force to do an act that he has no intention of doing. He is, it is sometimes said, ‘a mere mechanical instrument.’ The result is that there is no contract at all, or a ‘void contract’ as distinguished from a voidable one” (emphasis added).

The Restatement is undoubtedly correct that there are “relatively rare situations in which actual physical force” is used to compel assent to a contract. Extortion is a crime.

### Duress by Threat

The second kind of duress is *duress by threat*; it is more common than physical duress. Here the perpetrator threatens the victim, who feels there is no reasonable alternative but to assent to the contract. It renders the contract voidable. This rule contains a number of elements.

First, the threat must be improper. Second, there must be no reasonable alternative. If, for example, a supplier threatens to hold up shipment of necessary goods unless the buyer agrees to pay more than the contract price, this would not be duress if the buyer could purchase identical supplies from someone else. Third, the test for inducement is subjective. It does not matter that the person threatened is unusually timid or that a reasonable person would not have felt threatened. The question is whether the threat in fact induced assent by the victim. Such facts as the victim’s belief that the threatener had the ability to carry out the threat and the length of

time between the threat and assent are relevant in determining whether the threat did prompt the assent.

There are many types of improper threats that might induce a party to enter into a contract: threats to commit a crime or a tort (e.g., bodily harm or taking of property), to instigate criminal prosecution, to instigate civil proceedings when a threat is made in bad faith, to breach a “duty of good faith and fair dealing under a contract with the recipient,” or to disclose embarrassing details about a person’s private life.

Jack buys a car from a local used-car salesman, Mr. Olson, and the next day realizes he bought a lemon. He threatens to break windows in Olson’s showroom if Olson does not buy the car back for \$2,150, the purchase price. Mr. Olson agrees. The agreement is voidable, even though the underlying deal is fair, if Olson feels he has no reasonable alternative and is frightened into agreeing. Suppose Jack knows that Olson has been tampering with his cars’ odometers, a federal offense, and threatens to have Olson prosecuted if he will not repurchase the car. Even though Olson may be guilty, this threat makes the repurchase contract voidable, because it is a misuse for personal ends of a power (to go to the police) given each of us for other purposes. If these threats failed, suppose Jack then tells Olson, “I’m going to haul you into court and sue your pants off.” If Jack means he will sue for his purchase price, this is not an improper threat, because everyone has the right to use the courts to gain what they think is rightfully theirs. But if Jack meant that he would fabricate damages done him by a (falsely) claimed odometer manipulation, that would be an improper threat. Although Olson could defend against the suit, his reputation would suffer in the meantime from his being accused of odometer tampering. A threat to breach a contract that induces the victim to sign a new contract could be improper. Suppose that as part of the original purchase price, Olson agrees to make all necessary repairs and replace all failed parts for the first ninety days. At the end of one month, the transmission dies, and Jack demands a replacement. Olson refuses to repair the car unless Jack signs a contract agreeing to buy his next car from Olson. Whether this threat is improper depends on whether Jack has a reasonable alternative; if a replacement transmission is readily available and Jack has the funds to pay for it, he might have an alternative in suing Olson in small claims court for the cost. But if Jack needs the car immediately and he is impecunious, then the threat

would be improper and the contract voidable. A threat to breach a contract is not necessarily improper, however. It depends on whether the new contract is fair and equitable because of unanticipated circumstances. If, for example, Olson discovers that he must purchase a replacement transmission at three times the anticipated cost, his threat to hold up work unless Jack agrees to pay for it might be reasonable.

## Undue Influence

The Restatement of Contracts (Second) characterizes undue influence as “unfair persuasion.”<sup>[1]</sup> It is a milder form of duress than physical harm or threats. The unfairness does not lie in any misrepresentation; rather, it occurs when the victim is under the domination of the persuader or is one who, in view of the relationship between them, is warranted in believing that the persuader will act in a manner detrimental to the victim’s welfare if the victim fails to assent. It is the improper use of trust or power to deprive a person of free will and substitute instead another’s objective. Usually the fact pattern involves the victim being isolated from receiving advice except from the persuader. Falling within this rule are situations where, for example, a child takes advantage of an infirm parent, a doctor takes advantage of an ill patient, or a lawyer takes advantage of an unknowledgeable client. If there has been undue influence, the contract is voidable by the party who has been unfairly persuaded. Whether the relationship is one of domination and the persuasion is unfair is a factual question. The answer hinges on a host of variables, including “the unfairness of the resulting bargain, the unavailability of independent advice, and the susceptibility of the person persuaded.”<sup>[2]</sup> See [Section 10.5.1 "Undue Influence"](#), *Hodge v. Shea*.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

A contract induced by physical duress—threat of bodily harm—is void; a contract induced by improper threats—another type of duress—is voidable. Voidable also are contracts induced by undue influence, where a weak will is overborne by a stronger one.

### EXERCISES

1. What are the two types of duress?
2. What are the elements necessary to support a claim of undue influence?

[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 177.

[2] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 177(b).

## 10.2 Misrepresentation

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the two types of misrepresentation: fraudulent and nonfraudulent.
2. Distinguish between fraudulent misrepresentation in the execution and fraudulent misrepresentation in the inducement.
3. Know the elements necessary to prove fraudulent and nonfraudulent misrepresentation.
4. Recognize the remedies for misrepresentation.

### General Description

The two types of misrepresentation are fraudulent and nonfraudulent. Within the former are fraud in the execution and fraud in the inducement. Within the latter are negligent misrepresentation and innocent misrepresentation.

Misrepresentation is a statement of fact that is not consistent with the truth. If misrepresentation is intentional, it is fraudulent misrepresentation; if it is not intentional, it is nonfraudulent misrepresentation, which can be either negligent or innocent.

In further taxonomy, courts distinguish between fraud in the execution and fraud in the inducement. Fraud in the execution is defined by the Restatement as follows: “If a misrepresentation as to the character or essential terms of a proposed contract induces conduct that appears to be a manifestation of assent by one who neither knows nor has reasonable opportunity to know of the character or essential terms of the proposed contract, his conduct is not effective as a manifestation of assent.” [1] For example, Alphonse and Gaston decide to sign a written contract incorporating terms to which they have agreed. It is properly drawn up, and Gaston reads it and approves it. Before he can sign it, however, Alphonse shrewdly substitutes a different version to which Gaston has not agreed. Gaston signs the substitute version. There is no contract. There has been fraud in the execution.

Fraud in the inducement is more common. It involves some misrepresentation about the subject of the contract that induces assent. Alphonse tells Gaston that the car Gaston is buying from

Alphonse has just been overhauled—which pleases Gaston—but it has not been. This renders the contract voidable.

## **Fraudulent Misrepresentation**

Necessary to proving fraudulent misrepresentation (usually just “fraud,” though technically “fraud” is the crime and “fraudulent misrepresentation” is the civil wrong) is a misstatement of fact that is intentionally made and justifiably relied upon.

### **Misstatement of Fact**

Again, generally, any statement not in accord with the facts (a fact is something amenable to testing as true) is a misrepresentation. Falsity does not depend on intent. A typist’s unnoticed error in a letter (inadvertently omitting the word “not,” for example, or transposing numbers) can amount to a misrepresentation on which the recipient may rely (it is not fraudulent misrepresentation). A half-truth can amount to a misrepresentation, as, for example, when the seller of a hotel says that the income is from both permanent and transient guests but fails to disclose that the bulk of the income is from single-night stopovers by seamen using the hotel as a brothel. <sup>[2]</sup>

### **Concealment**

Another type of misrepresentation is concealment. It is an act that is equivalent to a statement that the facts are to the contrary and that serves to prevent the other party from learning the true statement of affairs; it is hiding the truth. A common example is painting over defects in a building—by concealing the defects, the owner is misrepresenting the condition of the property. The act of concealment need not be direct; it may consist of sidetracking the other party from gaining necessary knowledge by, for example, convincing a third person who has knowledge of the defect not to speak. Concealment is always a misrepresentation.

### **Nondisclosure**

A more passive type of concealment is nondisclosure. Although generally the law imposes no obligation on anyone to speak out, nondisclosure of a fact can operate as a misrepresentation under certain circumstances. This occurs, for example, whenever the other party has erroneous information, or, as *Reed v. King* (Section 10.5.2 "Misrepresentation by Concealment") shows, where the nondisclosure amounts to a failure to act in good faith, or where the party who

conceals knows or should know that the other side cannot, with reasonable diligence, discover the truth.

In a remarkable 1991 case out of New York, a New York City stockbroker bought an old house upstate (basically anyplace north of New York City) in the village of Nyack, north of New York City, and then wanted out of the deal when he discovered—the defendant seller had not told him—that it was “haunted.” The court summarized the facts: “Plaintiff, to his horror, discovered that the house he had recently contracted to purchase was widely reputed to be possessed by poltergeists [ghosts], reportedly seen by defendant seller and members of her family on numerous occasions over the last nine years. Plaintiff promptly commenced this action seeking rescission of the contract of sale. Supreme Court reluctantly dismissed the complaint, holding that plaintiff has no remedy at law in this jurisdiction.”

The high court of New York ruled he could rescind the contract because the house was “haunted as a matter of law”: the defendant had promoted it as such on village tours and in *Reader’s Digest*. She had concealed it, and no reasonable buyer’s inspection would have revealed the “fact.” The dissent basically hooted, saying, “The existence of a poltergeist is no more binding upon the defendants than it is upon this court.” <sup>[3]</sup>

### **Statement Made False by Subsequent Events**

If a statement of fact is made false by later events, it must be disclosed as false. For example, in idle chatter one day, Alphonse tells Gaston that he owns thirty acres of land. In fact, Alphonse owns only twenty-seven, but he decided to exaggerate a little. He meant no harm by it, since the conversation had no import. A year later, Gaston offers to buy the “thirty acres” from Alphonse, who does not correct the impression that Gaston has. The failure to speak is a nondisclosure—presumably intentional, in this situation—that would allow Gaston to rescind a contract induced by his belief that he was purchasing thirty acres.

### **Statements of Opinion**

An opinion, of course, is not a fact; neither is sales puffery. For example, the statements “In my opinion this apple is very tasty” and “These apples are the best in the county” are not facts; they are not expected to be taken as true. Reliance on opinion is hazardous and generally not considered justifiable.

If Jack asks what condition the car is in that he wishes to buy, Mr. Olson's response of "Great!" is not ordinarily a misrepresentation. As the Restatement puts it: "The propensity of sellers and buyers to exaggerate the advantages to the other party of the bargains they promise is well recognized, and to some extent their assertions must be discounted." <sup>[4]</sup> Vague statements of quality, such as that a product is "good," ought to suggest nothing other than that such is the personal judgment of the opinion holder.

Despite this general rule, there are certain exceptions that justify reliance on opinions and effectively make them into facts. Merely because someone is less astute than the one with whom she is bargaining does not give rise to a claim of justifiable reliance on an unwarranted opinion. But if the person is inexperienced and susceptible or gullible to blandishments, the contract can be voided, as illustrated in *Vokes v. Arthur Murray, Inc.* in [Section 10.5.3 "Misrepresentation by Assertions of Opinion"](#).

### **Misstatement of Law**

Incorrect assertions of law usually do not give rise to any relief, but sometimes they do. An assertion that "the city has repealed the sales tax" or that a court has cleared title to a parcel of land is a statement of fact; if such assertions are false, they are governed by the same rules that govern misrepresentations of fact generally. An assertion of the legal consequences of a given set of facts is generally an opinion on which the recipient relies at his or her peril, especially if both parties know or assume the same facts. Thus, if there is a lien on a house, the seller's statement that "the courts will throw it out, you won't be bothered by it" is an opinion. A statement that "you can build a five-unit apartment on this property" is not actionable because, at common law, people are supposed to know what the local and state laws are, and nobody should rely on a layperson's statement about the law. However, if the statement of law is made by a lawyer or real estate broker, or some other person on whom a layperson may justifiably rely, then it may be taken as a fact and, if untrue, as the basis for a claim of misrepresentation. (Assertions about foreign laws are generally held to be statements of fact, not opinion.)

### **Assertions of Intention**

Usually, assertions of intention are not considered facts. The law allows considerable leeway in the honesty of assertions of intention. The Restatement talks in terms of "a misrepresentation of

intention...consistent with reasonable standards of fair dealing.”<sup>[5]</sup> The right to misstate intentions is useful chiefly in the acquisition of land; the cases permit buyers to misrepresent the purpose of the acquisition so as not to arouse the suspicion of the seller that the land is worth considerably more than his asking price. To be a misrepresentation that will permit rescission, an assertion of intention must be false at the time made; that is, the person asserting an intention must not then have intended it. That later he or she does not carry out the stated intention is not proof that there was no intention at the time asserted. Moreover, to render a contract voidable, the false assertion of intention must be harmful in some way to other interests of the recipient. Thus, in the common example, the buyer of land tells the seller that he intends to build a residence on the lot, but he actually intends to put up a factory and has lied because he knows that otherwise the seller will not part with it because her own home is on an adjacent lot. The contract is voidable by the seller. So a developer says, as regards the picturesque old barn on the property, “I’ll sure try to save it,” but after he buys the land he realizes it would be very expensive (and in the way), so he does not try to save it. No misrepresentation.

### **Intentionally Made Misrepresentation**

The second element necessary to prove fraud is that the misrepresentation was intentionally made. A misrepresentation is intentionally made “if the maker intends his assertion to induce a party to manifest his assent and the maker (a) knows or believes that the assertion is not in accord with the facts, or (b) does not have the confidence that he states or implies in the truth of the assertion, or (c) knows that he does not have the basis that he states or implies for the assertion.” <sup>[6]</sup>

The question of intent often has practical consequences in terms of the remedy available to the plaintiff. If the misrepresentation is fraudulent, the plaintiff may, as an alternative to avoiding the contract, recover damages. Some of this is discussed in [Section 10.2.4 "Remedies"](#) and more fully in [Chapter 16 "Remedies"](#), where we see that some states would force the plaintiff to elect one of these two remedies, whereas other states would allow the plaintiff to pursue both remedies (although only one type of recovery would eventually be allowed). If the misrepresentation is not intentional, then the common law allowed the plaintiff only the remedy of rescission. But the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), Section 2-721, allows both remedies in



contracts for the sale of goods, whether the misrepresentation is fraudulent or not, and does not require election of remedies.

### **Reliance**

The final element necessary to prove fraud is reliance by the victim. He or she must show that the misrepresentation induced assent—that is, he or she relied on it. The reliance need not be solely on the false assertion; the defendant cannot win the case by demonstrating that the plaintiff would have assented to the contract even without the misrepresentation. It is sufficient to avoid the contract if the plaintiff weighed the assertion as one of the important factors leading him to make the contract, and he believed it to be true. The person who asserts reliance to avoid a contract must have acted in good faith and reasonably in relying on the false assertion. Thus if the victim failed to read documents given him that truly stated the facts, he cannot later complain that he relied on a contrary statement, as, for example, when the purchaser of a car dealership was told the inventory consisted of new cars, but the supporting papers, receipt of which he acknowledged, clearly stated how many miles each car had been driven. If Mr. Olson tells Jack that the car Jack is interested in is “a recognized classic,” and if Jack doesn’t care a whit about that but buys the car because he likes its tail fins, he will have no case against Mr. Olson when he finds out the car is not a classic: it didn’t matter to him, and he didn’t rely on it. Ordinarily, the person relying on a statement need not verify it independently. However, if verification is relatively easy, or if the statement is one that concerns matters peculiarly within the person’s purview, he or she may not be held to have justifiably relied on the other party’s false assertion. Moreover, usually the rule of reliance applies to statements about past events or existing facts, not about the occurrence of events in the future.

### **Nonfraudulent Misrepresentation**

Nonfraudulent misrepresentation may also be grounds for some relief. There are two types: negligent misrepresentation and innocent misrepresentation.

#### **Negligent Misrepresentation**

Where representation is caused by carelessness, it is negligent misrepresentation. To prove it, a plaintiff must show a negligent misstatement of fact that is material and justifiably relied upon.

#### **Negligent**

As an element of misrepresentation, “negligent” here means the party who makes the representation was careless. A potential buyer of rural real estate asks the broker if the neighborhood is quiet. The broker assures her it is. In fact, the neighbors down the road have a whole kennel of hunting hounds that bark a lot. The broker didn’t know that; she just assumed the neighborhood was quiet. That is negligence: failure to use appropriate care.

### **Misstatement of Fact**

Whether a thing is a fact may be subject to the same general analysis used in discussing fraudulent misrepresentation. (A person could negligently conceal a fact, or negligently give an opinion, as in legal malpractice.)

### **Materiality**

A material misrepresentation is one that “would be likely to induce a reasonable person to manifest his assent” or that “the maker knows...would be likely to induce the recipient to do so.”<sup>[7]</sup> An honestly mistaken statement that the house for sale was built in 1922 rather than 1923 would not be the basis for avoiding the contract because it is not material unless the seller knew that the buyer had sentimental or other reasons for purchasing a house built in 1922.

We did not mention materiality as an element of fraud; if the misrepresentation is fraudulent, the victim can avoid the contract, no matter the significance of the misrepresentation. So although materiality is not technically required for fraudulent misrepresentation, it is usually a crucial factor in determining whether the plaintiff did rely. Obviously, the more immaterial the false assertion, the less likely it is that the victim relied on it to his detriment. This is especially the case when the defendant knows that he does not have the basis that he states for an assertion but believes that the particular point is unimportant and therefore immaterial. And of course it is usually not worth the plaintiff’s while to sue over an immaterial fraudulent misrepresentation. Consequently, for practical purposes, materiality is an important consideration in most cases. *Reed v. King* (Section 10.5.2 “Misrepresentation by Concealment”) discusses materiality (as well as nondisclosure).

### **Justifiable Reliance**

The issues here for negligent misrepresentation are the same as those set out for fraudulent misrepresentation.

Negligent misrepresentation implies culpability and is usually treated the same as fraudulent misrepresentation; if the representation is not fraudulent, however, it cannot be the basis for rescission unless it is also material.

### **Innocent Misrepresentation**

The elements necessary to prove innocent misrepresentation are, reasonably enough, based on what we've looked at so far, as follows: an innocent misstatement of fact that is material and justifiably relied upon.

It is not necessary here to go over the elements in detail. The issues are the same as previously discussed, except now the misrepresentation is innocent. The plaintiffs purchased the defendants' eighteen-acre parcel on the defendants' representation that the land came with certain water rights for irrigation, which they believed was true. It was not true. The plaintiffs were entitled to rescission on the basis of innocent misrepresentation. <sup>[8]</sup>

### **Remedies**

Remedies will be taken up in [Chapter 16 "Remedies"](#), but it is worth noting the difference between remedies for fraudulent misrepresentation and remedies for nonfraudulent misrepresentation.

Fraudulent misrepresentation has traditionally given the victim the right to rescind the contract promptly (return the parties to the before-contract status) *or* affirm it and bring an action for damages caused by the fraud, but not both. <sup>[9]</sup> The UCC (Section 2-721) has rejected the "election of remedies" doctrine; it allows cumulative damages, such that the victim can both return the goods and sue for damages. And this is the modern trend for fraudulent misrepresentation: victims may first seek damages, and if that does not make them whole, they may seek rescission. <sup>[10]</sup> In egregious cases of fraud where the defendant has undertaken a pattern of such deceit, the rare civil remedy of punitive damages may be awarded against the defendant.

One further note: the burden of proof for fraudulent misrepresentation is that it must be proved not just "by a preponderance of the evidence," as in the typical civil case, but rather "by clear, cogent, and convincing evidence"; the fact finder must believe the claim of fraud is very probably true. <sup>[11]</sup>

## **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Misrepresentation may be of two types: fraudulent (in the execution or in the inducement) and nonfraudulent (negligent or innocent). Each type has different elements that must be proved, but in general there must be a misstatement of fact by some means that is intentionally made (for fraud), material (for nonfraudulent), and justifiably relied upon.

## EXERCISES

1. Distinguish between fraudulent misrepresentation and nonfraudulent misrepresentation, between fraud in the execution and fraud in the inducement, and between negligent and innocent misrepresentation.
2. List the elements that must be shown to prove the four different types of misrepresentation noted in Exercise 1.
3. What is the difference between the traditional common-law approach to remedies for fraud and the UCC's approach?

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- [1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 163.
- [2] *Ikeda v. Curtis*, 261 P.2d 684 (Wash. 1951).
- [3] *Stambovsky v. Ackley*, 169 A.D.2d 254 (N.Y. 1991).
- [4] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 168(d).
- [5] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 171(1).
- [6] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 162(1).
- [7] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 162(2).
- [8] *Leshner v. Strid*, 996 P.2d 988 (Or. Ct. App. 2000).
- [9] *Merritt v. Craig*, 753 A.2d 2 (Md. Ct. App. 2000).
- [10] *Ehrman v. Mann*, 979 So.2d 1011 (Fla. Ct. App. 2008).
- [11] *Kirkham v. Smith*, 23 P.3d 10 (Wash. Ct. App. 2001).

## 10.3 Mistake

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize under what circumstances a person may be relieved of a unilateral mistake.

2. Recognize when a mutual mistake will be grounds for relief, and the types of mutual mistakes.

In discussing fraud, we have considered the ways in which trickery by the other party makes a contract void or voidable. We now examine the ways in which the parties might “trick” themselves by making assumptions that lead them mistakenly to believe that they have agreed to something they have not. A mistake is “a belief about a fact that is not in accord with the truth.” <sup>[1]</sup>

## Mistake by One Party

### Unilateral Mistake

Where one party makes a mistake, it is a unilateral mistake. The rule: ordinarily, a contract is not voidable because one party has made a mistake about the subject matter (e.g., the truck is not powerful enough to haul the trailer; the dress doesn’t fit).

### Exceptions

If one side *knows or should know* that the other has made a mistake, he or she may not take advantage of it. A person who makes the mistake of not reading a written document will usually get no relief, nor will relief be afforded to one whose mistake is caused by negligence (a contractor forgets to add in the cost of insulation) unless the negligent party would suffer unconscionable hardship if the mistake were not corrected. Courts will allow the correction of drafting errors in a contract (“reformation”) in order to make the contract reflect the parties’ intention. <sup>[2]</sup>

### Mutual Mistake

In the case of mutual mistake—both parties are wrong about the subject of the contract—relief may be granted.

The Restatement sets out three requirements for successfully arguing mutual mistake. <sup>[3]</sup> The party seeking to avoid the contract must prove that

1. the mistake relates to a “basic assumption on which the contract was made,”
2. the mistake has a material effect on the agreed exchange of performances,
3. the party seeking relief does not bear the risk of the mistake.

*Basic assumption* is probably clear enough. In the famous “cow case,” the defendant sold the plaintiff a cow—Rose of Abalone—believed by both to be barren and thus of less value than a fertile cow (a promising young dairy cow in 2010 might sell for \$1,800).<sup>[4]</sup> Just before the plaintiff was to take Rose from the defendant’s barn, the defendant discovered she was “large with calf”; he refused to go on with the contract. The court held this was a mutual mistake of fact—“a barren cow is substantially a different creature than a breeding one”—and ruled for the defendant. That she was infertile was “a basic assumption,” but—for example—that hay would be readily available to feed her inexpensively was not, and had hay been expensive, that would not have vitiated the contract.

### **Material Effect on the Agreed-to Exchange of Performance**

“Material effect on the agreed-to exchange of performance” means that because of the mutual mistake, there is a significant difference between the value the parties thought they were exchanging compared with what they would exchange if the contract were performed, given the standing facts. Again, in the cow case, had the seller been required to go through with the deal, he would have given up a great deal more than he anticipated, and the buyer would have received an unagreed-to windfall.

### **Party Seeking Relief Does Not Bear the Risk of the Mistake**

Assume a weekend browser sees a painting sitting on the floor of an antique shop. The owner says, “That old thing? You can have it for \$100.” The browser takes it home, dusts it off, and hangs it on the wall. A year later a visitor, an expert in art history, recognizes the hanging as a famous lost El Greco worth \$1 million. The story is headlined; the antique dealer is chagrined and claims the contract for sale should be voided because both parties mistakenly thought they were dickering over an “old, worthless” painting. The contract is valid. The owner is said to bear the risk of mistake because he contracted with conscious awareness of his ignorance: he knew he didn’t know what the painting’s possible value might be, but he didn’t feel it worthwhile to have it appraised. He gambled it wasn’t worth much, and lost.

## **KEY TAKEAWAY**

A mistake may be unilateral, in which case no relief will be granted unless the other side knows of the mistake and takes advantage of it. A mistake may be mutual, in which case

relief may be granted if it is about a basic assumption on which the contract was made, if the mistake has a material effect on the agreed-to exchange, and if the person adversely affected did not bear the risk of the mistake.

## EXERCISES

1. Why is relief usually not granted for unilateral mistakes? When is relief granted for them?
2. If there is a mutual mistake, what does the party seeking relief have to show to avoid the contract?

[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 151.

[2] *Sikora v. Vanderploeg*, 212 S.W.3d 277 (Tenn. Ct. App. 2006).

[3] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 152.

[4] *Sherwood v. Walker*, 33 N.W. 919 (1887).

## 10.4 Capacity

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand that infants may avoid their contracts, with limitations.
2. Understand that insane or intoxicated people may avoid their contracts, with limitations.
3. Understand the extent to which contracts made by mentally ill persons are voidable, void, or effectively enforceable.
4. Recognize that contracts made by intoxicated persons may be voidable.

A contract is a meeting of minds. If someone lacks mental capacity to understand what he is assenting to—or that he is assenting to anything—it is unreasonable to hold him to the consequences of his act. At common law there are various classes of people who are presumed to lack the requisite capacity. These include infants (minors), the mentally ill, and the intoxicated.

### Minors (or “Infants”)

#### The General Rule

The general rule is this: minors (or more legalistically “infants”) are in most states persons younger than seventeen years old; they can avoid their contracts, up to and within a reasonable

time after reaching majority, subject to some exceptions and limitations. The rationale here is that infants do not stand on an equal footing with adults, and it is unfair to require them to abide by contracts made when they have immature judgment.

The words *minor* and *infant* are mostly synonymous, but not exactly, necessarily. In a state where the legal age to drink alcohol is twenty-one, a twenty-year-old would be a minor, but not an infant, because infancy is under eighteen. A seventeen-year-old may avoid contracts (usually), but an eighteen-year-old, while legally bound to his contracts, cannot legally drink alcohol. Strictly speaking, the better term for one who may avoid his contracts is *infant*, even though, of course, in normal speaking we think of an infant as a baby.

The age of majority (when a person is no longer an infant or a minor) was lowered in all states except Mississippi during the 1970s (to correspond to the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, ratified in 1971, guaranteeing the right to vote at eighteen) from twenty-one to either eighteen or nineteen. Legal rights for those under twenty-one remain ambiguous, however. Although eighteen-year-olds may assent to binding contracts, not all creditors and landlords believe it, and they may require parents to cosign. For those under twenty-one, there are also legal impediments to holding certain kinds of jobs, signing certain kinds of contracts, marrying, leaving home, and drinking alcohol. There is as yet no uniform set of rules.

The exact day on which the disability of minority vanishes also varies. The old common-law rule put it on the day before the twenty-first birthday. Many states have changed this rule so that majority commences on the day of the eighteenth birthday.

An infant's contract is voidable, not void. An infant wishing to avoid the contract need do nothing positive to disaffirm. The defense of infancy to a lawsuit is sufficient; although the adult cannot enforce the contract, the infant can (which is why it is said to be voidable, not void).

### **Exceptions and Complications**

There are exceptions and complications here. We call out six of them.

#### **Necessities**

First, as an exception to the general rule, infants are generally liable for the reasonable cost of necessities (for the reason that denying them the right to contract for necessities would harm them, not protect them). At common law, a necessity was defined as food, medicine, clothing, or



shelter. In recent years, however, the courts have expanded the concept, so that in many states today, necessities include property and services that will enable the infant to earn a living and to provide for those dependent on him. If the contract is executory, the infant can simply disaffirm. If the contract has been executed, however, the infant must face more onerous consequences. Although he will not be required to perform under the contract, he will be liable under a theory of “quasi-contract” for the reasonable value of the necessity. In *Gastonia Personnel Corp. v. Rogers*, an emancipated infant, nineteen years old (before the age of minority was reduced), needed employment; he contracted with a personnel company to find him a job, for which it would charge him a fee. <sup>[4]</sup> The company did find him a job, and when he attempted to disaffirm his liability for payment on the grounds of infancy, the North Carolina court ruled against him, holding that the concepts of necessities “should be enlarged to include such...services as are reasonable and necessary to enable the infant to earn the money required to provide the necessities of life for himself” and his dependents.

### **Nonvoidable Contracts**

Second, state statutes variously prohibit disaffirmation for such contracts as insurance, education or medical care, bonding agreements, stocks, or bank accounts. In addition, an infant will lose her power to avoid the contract if the rights of third parties intervene. Roberta, an infant, sells a car to Oswald; Oswald, in turn, shortly thereafter sells it to Byers, who knows nothing of Roberta. May Roberta—still an infant—recover it from Byers? No: the rights of the third party have intervened. To allow the infant seller recovery in this situation would undermine faith in commercial transactions.

### **Misrepresentation of Age**

A third exception involves misrepresentation of age. Certainly, that the adult reasonably believed the infant was an adult is of no consequence in a contract suit. In many states, an infant may misrepresent his age and disaffirm in accordance with the general rule. But it depends. If an infant affirmatively lies about his age, the trend is to deny disaffirmation. A Michigan statute, for instance, prohibits an infant from disaffirming if he has signed a “separate instrument containing only the statement of age, date of signing and the signature.” And some states estop him from claiming to be an infant even if he less expressly falsely represented himself as an

adult. Estoppel is a refusal by the courts on equitable grounds to allow a person to escape liability on an otherwise valid defense; unless the infant can return the consideration, the contract will be enforced. It is a question of fact how far a nonexpress (an implied) misrepresentation will be allowed to go before it is considered so clearly misleading as to range into the prohibited area. Some states hold the infant liable for damages for the tort of misrepresentation, but others do not. As William Prosser, the noted torts scholar, said of cases paying no attention to an infant's lying about his age, "The effect of the decisions refusing to recognize tort liability for misrepresentation is to create a privileged class of liars who are a great trouble to the business world."<sup>[2]</sup>

### **Ratification**

Fourth, when the infant becomes an adult, she has two choices: she may ratify the contract or disaffirm it. She may ratify explicitly; no further consideration is necessary. She may also do so by implication—for instance, by continuing to make payments or retaining goods for an unreasonable period of time. If the child has not disaffirmed the contract while still an infant, she may do so within a reasonable time after reaching majority; what is a "reasonable time" depends on the circumstances.

### **Duty to Return Consideration Received**

Fifth, in most cases of disavowal, the infant's only obligation is to return the goods (if he still has them) or repay the consideration (unless it has been dissipated); he does not have to account for what he wasted, consumed, or damaged during the contract. But since the age of majority has been lowered to eighteen or nineteen, when most young people have graduated from high school, some courts require, if appropriate to avoid injustice to the adult, that the infant account for what he got. (In *Dodson v. Shrader*, the supreme court of Tennessee held that an infant would—if the contract was fair—have to pay for the pickup truck he bought and wrecked.)<sup>[3]</sup>

### **Tort Connected with a Contract**

Sixth, the general rule is that infants are liable for their torts (e.g., assault, trespass, nuisance, negligence) unless the tort suit is only an indirect method of enforcing a contract. Henry, age seventeen, holds himself out to be a competent mechanic. He is paid \$500 to overhaul Baker's engine, but he does a careless job and the engine is seriously damaged. He offers to return the

\$500 but disaffirms any further contractual liability. Can Baker sue him for his negligence, a tort? No, because such a suit would be to enforce the contract.

## **Persons Who Are Mentally Ill or Intoxicated**

### **Mentally Ill Persons**

The general rule is that a contract made by person who is mentally ill is voidable by the person when she regains her sanity, or, as appropriate, by a guardian. If, though, a guardian has been legally appointed for a person who is mentally ill, any contract made by the mentally ill person is void, but may nevertheless be ratified by the ward (the incompetent person who is under a guardianship) upon regaining sanity or by the guardian. <sup>[4]</sup>

However, if the contract was for a necessity, the other party may have a valid claim against the estate of the one who is mentally ill in order to prevent unjust enrichment. In other cases, whether a court will enforce a contract made with a person who is mentally ill depends on the circumstances. Only if the mental illness impairs the competence of the person in the particular transaction can the contract be avoided; the test is whether the person understood the nature of the business at hand. Upon avoidance, the mentally ill person must return any property in her possession. And if the contract was fair and the other party had no knowledge of the mental illness, the court has the power to order other relief.

### **Intoxicated Persons**

If a person is so drunk that he has no awareness of his acts, and if the other person knows this, there is no contract. The intoxicated person is obligated to refund the consideration to the other party unless he dissipated it during his drunkenness. If the other person is unaware of his intoxicated state, however, an offer or acceptance of fair terms manifesting assent is binding. If a person is only partially inebriated and has some understanding of his actions, “avoidance depends on a showing that the other party induced the drunkenness or that the consideration was inadequate or that the transaction departed from the normal pattern of similar transactions; if the particular transaction is one which a reasonably competent person might have made, it cannot be avoided even though entirely executory.” <sup>[5]</sup> A person who was intoxicated at the time he made the contract may nevertheless subsequently ratify it. Thus where Mervin Hyland, several times involuntarily committed for alcoholism, executed a promissory

note in an alcoholic stupor but later, while sober, paid the interest on the past-due note, he was denied the defense of intoxication; the court said he had ratified his contract. <sup>[6]</sup> In any event, intoxicated is a disfavored defense on public policy grounds.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Infants may generally disaffirm their contracts up to majority and within a reasonable time afterward, but the rule is subject to some exceptions and complications: necessities, contracts made nonvoidable by statute, misrepresentation of age, extent of duty to return consideration, ratification, and a tort connected with the contract are among these exceptions.

Contracts made by insane or intoxicated people are voidable when the person regains competency. A contract made by a person under guardianship is void, but the estate will be liable for necessities. A contract made while insane or intoxicated may be ratified.

### EXERCISES

1. Ivar, an infant, bought a used car—not a necessity—for \$9,500. Seller took advantage of Ivar’s infancy: the car was really worth only \$5,500. Can Ivar keep the car but disclaim liability for the \$4,000 difference?
2. If Ivar bought the car and it was a necessity, could he disclaim liability for the \$4,000?
3. Alice Ace found her adult son’s Christmas stocking; Mrs. Ace herself had made it fifty years before. It was considerably deteriorated. Isabel, sixteen, handy with knitting, agreed to reknit it for \$100, which Mrs. Ace paid in advance. Isabel, regrettably, lost the stocking. She returned the \$100 to Mrs. Ace, who was very upset. May Mrs. Ace now sue Isabel for the loss of the stocking (conversion) and emotional distress?
4. Why is voluntary intoxication a disfavored defense?

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[1] *Gastonia Personnel Corp. v. Rogers*, 172 S.E.2d 19 (N.C. 1970).

[2] William L. Prosser, *Handbook of the Law of Torts*, 4th ed. (St. Paul, MN: West, 1971), 999.

[3] *Dodson v. Shrader*, 824 S.W.2d 545 (Tenn. 1992).

[4] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 13.

[5] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 16(b).

[6] *First State Bank of Sinai v. Hyland*, 399 N.W.2d 894 (S.D. 1987).

## 10.5 Cases

### Undue Influence

*Hodge v. Shea*

*168 S.E.2d 82 (S.C. 1969)*

Brailsford, J.

In this equitable action the circuit court decreed specific performance of a contract for the sale of land, and the defendant has appealed. The plaintiff is a physician, and the contract was prepared and executed in his medical office on August 19, 1965. The defendant had been plaintiff's patient for a number of years. On the contract date, he was seventy-five years of age, was an inebriate of long standing, and was afflicted by grievous chronic illnesses, including arteriosclerosis, cirrhosis of the liver, neuritises, arthritis of the spine and hip and varicose veins of the legs. These afflictions and others required constant medication and frequent medical attention, and rendered him infirm of body and mind, although not to the point of incompetency to contract.

During the period immediately before and after August 19, 1965, George A. Shea, the defendant, was suffering a great deal of pain in his back and hip and was having difficulty in voiding. He was attended professionally by the plaintiff, Dr. Joseph Hodge, either at the Shea home, at the doctor's office or in the hospital at least once each day from August 9 through August 26, 1965, except for August 17. The contract was signed during the morning of August 19. One of Dr. Hodge's frequent house calls was made on the afternoon of that day, and Mr. Shea was admitted to the hospital on August 21, where he remained until August 25.

Mr. Shea was separated from his wife and lived alone. He was dependent upon Dr. Hodge for house calls, which were needed from time to time. His relationship with his physician, who sometimes visited him as a friend and occasionally performed non-professional services for him, was closer than ordinarily arises from that of patient and physician....

“Where a physician regularly treats a chronically ill person over a period of two years, a confidential relationship is established, raising a presumption that financial dealings between them are fraudulent.” [Citation]

A 125 acre tract of land near Mr. Shea’s home, adjacent to land which was being developed as residential property, was one of his most valuable and readily salable assets. In 1962, the developer of this contiguous land had expressed to Mr. Shea an interest in it at \$1000.00 per acre. A firm offer of this amount was made in November, 1964, and was refused by Mr. Shea on the advice of his son-in-law that the property was worth at least \$1500.00 per acre. Negotiations between the developer and Mr. Ransdell commenced at that time and were in progress when Mr. Shea, at the instance of Dr. Hodge and without consulting Mr. Ransdell or anyone else, signed the contract of August 19, 1965. Under this contract Dr. Hodge claims the right to purchase twenty choice acres of the 125 acre tract for a consideration calculated by the circuit court to be the equivalent of \$361.72 per acre. The market value of the land on the contract date has been fixed by an unappealed finding of the master at \$1200.00 per acre....

The consideration was expressed in the contract between Dr. Hodge and Mr. Shea as follows:

*The purchase price being (Cadillac Coupe DeVille 6600) & \$4000.00 Dollars, on the following terms: Dr. Joseph Hodge to give to Mr. George Shea a new \$6600 coupe DeVille Cadillac which is to be registered in name of Mr. George A. Shea at absolutely no cost to him. In return, Mr. Shea will give to Dr. Joe Hodge his 1964 Cadillac coupe DeVille and shall transfer title of this vehicle to Dr. Hodge. Further, Dr. Joseph Hodge will pay to Mr. George A. Shea the balance of \$4000.00 for the 20 acres of land described above subject to survey, title check, less taxes on purchase of vehicle.*

Dr. Hodge was fully aware of Mr. Shea’s financial troubles, the liens on his property and his son-in-law’s efforts in his behalf. He was also aware of his patient’s predilection for new Cadillacs. Although he was not obligated to do so until the property was cleared of liens, which was not accomplished until the following June, Dr. Hodge hastened to purchase a 1965 Cadillac Coupe DeVille and delivered it to Mr. Shea on the day after his discharge from the hospital on August 25, 1965. If he acted in haste in an effort to fortify what he must have realized was a dubious contract, he has so far succeeded....

The case at hand is attended by gross inadequacy of consideration, serious impairment of the grantor's mentality from age, intemperance and disease, and a confidential relationship between the grantee and grantor. Has the strong presumption of vitiating unfairness arising from this combination of circumstances been overcome by the evidence? We must conclude that it has not. The record is devoid of any evidence suggesting a reason, compatible with fairness, for Mr. Shea's assent to so disadvantageous a bargain. Disadvantageous not only because of the gross disparity between consideration and value, but because of the possibility that the sale would impede the important negotiations in which Mr. Ransdell was engaged. Unless his memory failed him, Mr. Shea knew that his son-in-law expected to sell the 125 acre tract for about \$1500.00 per acre as an important step toward raising sufficient funds to satisfy the tax and judgment liens against the Shea property. These circumstances furnish strong evidence that Mr. Shea's assent to the contract, without so much as notice to Mr. Ransdell, was not the product of a deliberate Exercise of an informed judgment....

Finally, on this phase of the case, it would be naive not to recognize that the 1965 Cadillac was used to entice a highly susceptible old man into a hard trade. Mr. Shea was fatuously fond of new Cadillacs, but was apparently incapable of taking care of one. His own 1964 model (he had also had a 1963 model) had been badly abused. According to Dr. Hodge, it 'smelled like a toilet. \* \* \* had several fenders bumped, bullet holes in the top and the car was just filthy \* \* \*. It was a rather foul car.'...Knowing the condition of Mr. Shea's car, his financial predicament and the activities of his son-in-law in his behalf, Dr. Hodge used the new automobile as a means of influencing Mr. Shea to agree to sell. The means was calculated to becloud Mr. Shea's judgment, and, under the circumstances, its use was unfair....

Reversed and remanded.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why is it relevant that Mr. Shea was separated from his wife and lived alone?
2. Why is it relevant that it was his doctor who convinced him to sell the real estate?
3. Why did the doctor offer the old man a Cadillac as part of the deal?
4. Generally speaking, if you agree to sell your real estate for less than its real value, that's just a unilateral mistake and the courts will grant no relief. What's different here?

## Misrepresentation by Concealment

*Reed v. King*

*193 Cal. Rptr. 130 (Calif. Ct. App. 1983)*

Blease, J.

In the sale of a house, must the seller disclose it was the site of a multiple murder? Dorris Reed purchased a house from Robert King. Neither King nor his real estate agents (the other named defendants) told Reed that a woman and her four children were murdered there ten years earlier. However, it seems “truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long.” (Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice, Act II, Scene II.) Reed learned of the gruesome episode from a neighbor after the sale. She sues seeking rescission and damages. King and the real estate agent defendants successfully demurred to her first amended complaint for failure to state a cause of action. Reed appeals the ensuing judgment of dismissal. We will reverse the judgment.

### Facts

We take all issuable facts pled in Reed’s complaint as true. King and his real estate agent knew about the murders and knew the event materially affected the market value of the house when they listed it for sale. They represented to Reed the premises were in good condition and fit for an “elderly lady” living alone. They did not disclose the fact of the murders. At some point King asked a neighbor not to inform Reed of that event. Nonetheless, after Reed moved in neighbors informed her no one was interested in purchasing the house because of the stigma. Reed paid \$76,000, but the house is only worth \$65,000 because of its past....

### Discussion

Does Reed’s pleading state a cause of action? Concealed within this question is the nettlesome problem of the duty of disclosure of blemishes on real property which are not physical defects or legal impairments to use.

Numerous cases have found non-disclosure of physical defects and legal impediments to use of real property are material. [Citation] However, to our knowledge, no prior real estate sale case has faced an issue of non-disclosure of the kind presented here. Should this variety of ill-repute be required to be disclosed? Is this a circumstance where “non-disclosure of the fact amounts to



a failure to act in good faith and in accordance with reasonable standards of fair dealing [?]" (Rest.2d Contracts, § 161, subd. (b).)

The paramount argument against an affirmative conclusion is it permits the camel's nose of unrestrained irrationality admission to the tent. If such an "irrational" consideration is permitted as a basis of rescission the stability of all conveyances will be seriously undermined. Any fact that might disquiet the enjoyment of some segment of the buying public may be seized upon by a disgruntled purchaser to void a bargain. In our view, keeping this genie in the bottle is not as difficult a task as these arguments assume. We do not view a decision allowing Reed to survive a demurrer in these unusual circumstances as endorsing the materiality of facts predicating peripheral, insubstantial, or fancied harms.

The murder of innocents is highly unusual in its potential for so disturbing buyers they may be unable to reside in a home where it has occurred. This fact may foreseeably deprive a buyer of the intended use of the purchase. Murder is not such a common occurrence that *buyers* should be charged with anticipating and discovering this disquieting possibility. Accordingly, the fact is not one for which a duty of inquiry and discovery can sensibly be imposed upon the buyer.

Reed alleges the fact of the murders has a quantifiable effect on the market value of the premises. We cannot say this allegation is inherently wrong and, in the pleading posture of the case, we assume it to be true. If information known or accessible only to the seller has a significant and measureable effect on market value and, as is alleged here, the seller is aware of this effect, we see no principled basis for making the duty to disclose turn upon the character of the information. Physical usefulness is not and never has been the sole criterion of valuation. Stamp collections and gold speculation would be insane activities if utilitarian considerations were the sole measure of value.

Reputation and history can have a significant effect on the value of realty. "George Washington slept here" is worth something, however physically inconsequential that consideration may be. Ill-repute or "bad will" conversely may depress the value of property. Failure to disclose such a negative fact where it will have a foreseeably depressing effect on income expected to be generated by a business is tortuous. [Citation] Some cases have held that *unreasonable* fears of

the potential buying public that a gas or oil pipeline may rupture may depress the market value of land and entitle the owner to incremental compensation in eminent domain.

Whether Reed will be able to prove her allegation the decade-old multiple murder has a significant effect on market value we cannot determine. If she is able to do so by competent evidence she is entitled to a favorable ruling on the issues of materiality and duty to disclose.

Her demonstration of objective tangible harm would still the concern that permitting her to go forward will open the floodgates to rescission on subjective and idiosyncratic grounds....

The judgment is reversed.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why is it relevant that the plaintiff was “an elderly lady living alone”?
2. How did Mrs. Reed find out about the gruesome fact here?
3. Why did the defendants conceal the facts?
4. What is the concern about opening “floodgates to rescission on subjective and idiosyncratic grounds”?
5. Why *did* George Washington sleep in so many places during the Revolutionary War?
6. Did Mrs. Reed get to rescind her contract and get out of the house as a result of this case?

### Misrepresentation by Assertions of Opinion

*Vokes v. Arthur Murray, Inc.*

212 S.2d. 906 (Fla. 1968)

Pierce, J.

This is an appeal by Audrey E. Vokes, plaintiff below, from a final order dismissing with prejudice, for failure to state a cause of action, her fourth amended complaint, hereinafter referred to as plaintiff’s complaint.

Defendant Arthur Murray, Inc., a corporation, authorizes the operation throughout the nation of dancing schools under the name of “Arthur Murray School of Dancing” through local franchised operators, one of whom was defendant J. P. Davenport whose dancing establishment was in Clearwater.

Plaintiff Mrs. Audrey E. Vokes, a widow of 51 years and without family, had a yen to be “an accomplished dancer” with the hopes of finding “new interest in life.” So, on February 10, 1961, a

dubious fate, with the assist of a motivated acquaintance, procured her to attend a “dance party” at Davenport’s “School of Dancing” where she whiled away the pleasant hours, sometimes in a private room, absorbing his accomplished sales technique, during which her grace and poise were elaborated upon and her rosy future as “an excellent dancer” was painted for her in vivid and glowing colors. As an incident to this interlude, he sold her eight 1/2-hour dance lessons to be utilized within one calendar month therefrom, for the sum of \$14.50 cash in hand paid, obviously a baited “come-on.”

Thus she embarked upon an almost endless pursuit of the terpsichorean art during which, over a period of less than sixteen months, she was sold fourteen “dance courses” totaling in the aggregate 2302 hours of dancing lessons for a total cash outlay of \$31,090.45 [about \$220,000 in 2010 dollars] all at Davenport’s dance emporium. All of these fourteen courses were evidenced by execution of a written “Enrollment Agreement-Arthur Murray’s School of Dancing” with the addendum in heavy black print, “No one will be informed that you are taking dancing lessons. Your relations with us are held in strict confidence”, setting forth the number of “dancing lessons” and the “lessons in rhythm sessions” currently sold to her from time to time, and always of course accompanied by payment of cash of the realm.

These dance lesson contracts and the monetary consideration therefore of over \$31,000 were procured from her by means and methods of Davenport and his associates which went beyond the unsavory, yet legally permissible, perimeter of “sales puffing” and intruded well into the forbidden area of undue influence, the suggestion of falsehood, the suppression of truth, and the free Exercise of rational judgment, if what plaintiff alleged in her complaint was true. From the time of her first contact with the dancing school in February, 1961, she was influenced unwittingly by a constant and continuous barrage of flattery, false praise, excessive compliments, and panegyric encomiums, to such extent that it would be not only inequitable, but unconscionable, for a Court exercising inherent chancery power to allow such contracts to stand.

She was incessantly subjected to overreaching blandishment and cajolery. She was assured she had “grace and poise”; that she was “rapidly improving and developing in her dancing skill”; that the additional lessons would “make her a beautiful dancer, capable of dancing with the most

accomplished dancers”; that she was “rapidly progressing in the development of her dancing skill and gracefulness”, etc., etc. She was given “dance aptitude tests” for the ostensible purpose of “determining” the number of remaining hours of instructions needed by her from time to time.

At one point she was sold 545 additional hours of dancing lessons to be entitled to an award of the “Bronze Medal” signifying that she had reached “the Bronze Standard”, a supposed designation of dance achievement by students of Arthur Murray, Inc....At another point, while she still had over 1,000 unused hours of instruction she was induced to buy 151 additional hours at a cost of \$2,049.00 to be eligible for a “Student Trip to Trinidad”, at her own expense as she later learned....

Finally, sandwiched in between other lesser sales promotions, she was influenced to buy an additional 481 hours of instruction at a cost of \$6,523.81 in order to “be classified as a Gold Bar Member, the ultimate achievement of the dancing studio.”

All the foregoing sales promotions, illustrative of the entire fourteen separate contracts, were procured by defendant Davenport and Arthur Murray, Inc., by false representations to her that she was improving in her dancing ability, that she had excellent potential, that she was responding to instructions in dancing grace, and that they were developing her into a beautiful dancer, whereas in truth and in fact she did not develop in her dancing ability, she had no “dance aptitude,” and in fact had difficulty in “hearing that musical beat.” The complaint alleged that such representations to her “were in fact false and known by the defendant to be false and contrary to the plaintiff’s true ability, the truth of plaintiff’s ability being fully known to the defendants, but withheld from the plaintiff for the sole and specific intent to deceive and defraud the plaintiff and to induce her in the purchasing of additional hours of dance lessons.” It was averred that the lessons were sold to her “in total disregard to the true physical, rhythm, and mental ability of the plaintiff.” In other words, while she first exulted that she was entering the “spring of her life”, she finally was awakened to the fact there was “spring” neither in her life nor in her feet.

The complaint prayed that the Court decree the dance contracts to be null and void and to be cancelled, that an accounting be had, and judgment entered against, the defendants “for that

portion of the \$31,090.45 not charged against specific hours of instruction given to the plaintiff.” The Court held the complaint not to state a cause of action and dismissed it with prejudice. We disagree and reverse.

It is true that “generally a misrepresentation, to be actionable, must be one of fact rather than of opinion.” [Citations] But this rule has significant qualifications, applicable here. It does not apply where there is a fiduciary relationship between the parties, or where there has been some artifice or trick employed by the representor, or where the parties do not in general deal at “arm’s length” as we understand the phrase, or where the representee does not have equal opportunity to become apprised of the truth or falsity of the fact represented. [Citation] As stated by Judge Allen of this Court in [Citation]:

“\* \* \* A statement of a party having \* \* \* superior knowledge may be regarded as a statement of fact although it would be considered as opinion if the parties were dealing on equal terms.”...

In [Citation] it was said that “\* \* \* what is plainly injurious to good faith ought to be considered as a fraud sufficient to impeach a contract.”... [Reversed.]

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What was the motivation of the “motivated acquaintance” in this case?
2. Why is it relevant that Mrs. Vokes was a “widow of 51 years and without family”?
3. How did the defendant J. P. Davenport entice her into spending a lot of money on dance lessons?
4. What was the defendants’ defense as to why they should not be liable for misrepresentation, and why was that defense not good?
5. Would you say the court here is rather condescending to Mrs. Vokes, all things considered?

### Mutual Mistake

*Konic International Corporation v. Spokane Computer Services, Inc.,*  
708 P.2d 932 (Idaho 1985)

The magistrate found the following facts. David Young, an employee of Spokane Computer, was instructed by his employer to investigate the possibility of purchasing a surge protector, a device which protects computers from damaging surges of electrical current. Young’s investigation turned up several units priced from \$50 to \$200, none of which, however, were appropriate for

his employer's needs. Young then contacted Konic. After discussing Spokane Computer's needs with a Konic engineer, Young was referred to one of Konic's salesmen. Later, after deciding on a certain unit, Young inquired as to the price of the selected item. The salesman responded, "fifty-six twenty." The salesman meant \$5,620. Young in turn thought \$56.20.

The salesman for Konic asked about Young's authority to order the equipment and was told that Young would have to get approval from one of his superiors. Young in turn prepared a purchase order for \$56.20 and had it approved by the appropriate authority. Young telephoned the order and purchase order number to Konic who then shipped the equipment to Spokane Computer. However, because of internal processing procedures of both parties the discrepancy in prices was not discovered immediately. Spokane Computer received the surge protector and installed it in its office. The receipt and installation of the equipment occurred while the president of Spokane Computer was on vacation. Although the president's father, who was also chairman of the board of Spokane Computer, knew of the installation, he only inquired as to what the item was and who had ordered it. The president came back from vacation the day after the surge protector had been installed and placed in operation and was told of the purchase. He immediately ordered that power to the equipment be turned off because he realized that the equipment contained parts which alone were worth more than \$56 in value. Although the president then told Young to verify the price of the surge protector, Young failed to do so. Two weeks later, when Spokane Computer was processing its purchase order and Konic's invoice, the discrepancy between the amount on the invoice and the amount on the purchase order was discovered. The president of Spokane Computer then contacted Konic, told Konic that Young had no authority to order such equipment, that Spokane Computer did not want the equipment, and that Konic should remove it. Konic responded that Spokane Computer now owned the equipment and if the equipment was not paid for, Konic would sue for the price. Spokane Computer refused to pay and this litigation ensued.

Basically what is involved here is a failure of communication between the parties. A similar failure to communicate arose over 100 years ago in the celebrated case of *Raffles v. Wichelhaus*, [Citation] which has become better known as the case of the good ship "Peerless." In *Peerless*, the parties agreed on a sale of cotton which was to be delivered from Bombay by the ship

“Peerless.” In fact, there were two ships named “Peerless” and each party, in agreeing to the sale, was referring to a different ship. Because the sailing time of the two ships was materially different, neither party was willing to agree to shipment by the “other” Peerless. The court ruled that, because each party had a different ship in mind at the time of the contract, there was in fact no binding contract. The *Peerless* rule later was incorporated into section 71 of the Restatement of Contracts and has now evolved into section 20 of Restatement (Second) of Contracts (1981).

Section 20 states in part:

*(1) There is no manifestation of mutual assent to an exchange if the parties attach materially different meanings to their manifestations and*

*(a) neither knows or has reason to know the meaning attached by the other.*

Comment (c) to Section 20 further explains that “even though the parties manifest mutual assent to the same words of agreement, there may be no contract because of a material difference of understanding as to the terms of the exchange.” Another authority, Williston, discussing situations where a mistake will prevent formation of a contract, agrees that “where a phrase of contract...is reasonably capable of different interpretations...there is no contract.”

[Citation]

In the present case, both parties attributed different meanings to the same term, “fifty-six twenty.” Thus, there was no meeting of the minds of the parties. With a hundred fold difference in the two prices, obviously price was a material term. Because the “fifty-six twenty” designation was a material term expressed in an ambiguous form to which two meanings were obviously applied, we conclude that no contract between the parties was ever formed. Accordingly, we do not reach the issue of whether Young had authority to order the equipment.

[Affirmed.]

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why is it reasonable to say that no contract was made in this case?
2. A discrepancy in price of one hundred times is, of course, enormous. How could such an egregious mistake have occurred by both parties? In terms of running a sensible business, how could this kind of mistake be avoided before it resulted in expensive litigation?

## 10.6 Summary and Exercises

## Summary

No agreement is enforceable if the parties did not enter into it (1) of their own free will, (2) with adequate knowledge of the terms, and (3) with the mental capacity to appreciate the relationship.

Contracts coerced through duress will void a contract if actually induced through physical harm and will make the contract voidable if entered under the compulsion of many types of threats.

The threat must be improper and leave no reasonable alternative, but the test is subjective—that is, what did the person threatened actually fear, not what a more reasonable person might have feared.

Misrepresentations may render an agreement void or voidable. Among the factors to be considered are whether the misrepresentation was deliberate and material; whether the promisee relied on the misrepresentation in good faith; whether the representation was of fact, opinion, or intention; and whether the parties had a special relationship.

Similarly, mistaken beliefs, not induced by misrepresentations, may suffice to avoid the bargain. Some mistakes on one side only make a contract voidable. More often, mutual mistakes of facts will show that there was no meeting of the minds.

Those who lack capacity are often entitled to avoid contract liability. Although it is possible to state the general rule, many exceptions exist—for example, in contracts for necessities, infants will be liable for the reasonable value of the goods purchased.

### EXERCISES

1. Eulrich, an auto body mechanic who had never operated a business, entered into a Snap-On Tools franchise agreement. For \$22,000 invested from his savings and the promise of another \$22,000 from the sale of inventory, he was provided a truck full of tools. His job was to drive around his territory and sell them. The agreement allowed termination by either party; if Eulrich terminated, he was entitled to resell to Snap-On any new tools he had remaining. When he complained that his territory was not profitable, his supervisors told him to work it harder, that anybody could make money with Snap-On's marketing system. (In fact, the evidence was the system made money for the supervisors and little for dealers; dealers quickly failed and were replaced by new recruits.) Within several months Eulrich was out of



money and desperate. He tried to “check in” his truck to get money to pay his household bills and uninsured medical bills for his wife; the supervisors put him off for weeks. On the check-in day, the exhausted Eulrich’s supervisors berated him for being a bad businessman, told him no check would be forthcoming until all the returned inventory was sold, and presented him with a number of papers to sign, including a “Termination Agreement” whereby he agreed to waive any claims against Snap-On; he was not aware that was what he had signed. He sued to rescind the contract and for damages. The defendants held up the waiver as a defense. Under what theory might Eulrich recover? <sup>[1]</sup>

2. Chauncey, a college student, worked part-time in a restaurant. After he had worked for several months, the owner of the restaurant discovered that Chauncey had stolen \$2,000 from the cash register. The owner called Chauncey’s parents and told them that if they did not sign a note for \$2,000, he would initiate criminal proceedings against Chauncey. The parents signed and delivered the note to the owner but later refused to pay. May the owner collect on the note? Why?
3. A restaurant advertised a steak dinner that included a “juicy, great-tasting steak, a fresh crisp salad, and a warm roll.” After reading the ad, Clarence visited the restaurant and ordered the steak dinner. The steak was dry, the lettuce in the salad was old and limp with brown edges, and the roll was partly frozen. May Clarence recover from the restaurant on the basis of misrepresentation? Why?
4. Bert purchased Ernie’s car. Before selling the car, Ernie had stated to Bert, “This car runs well and is reliable. Last week I drove the car all the way from Seattle to San Francisco to visit my mother and back again to Seattle.” In fact, Ernie was not telling the truth: he had driven the car to San Francisco to visit his paramour, not his mother. Upon discovery of the truth, may Bert avoid the contract? Why?
5. Randolph enrolled in a business law class and purchased a new business law textbook from the local bookstore. He dropped the class during the first week and sold the book to his friend Scott. Before making the sale, Randolph told Scott that he had purchased the book new and had owned it for one week. Unknown to either Randolph or Scott, the book was in fact a used one. Scott later discovered some underlining in the middle of the book and

attempted to avoid the contract. Randolph refused to refund the purchase price, claiming that he had not intentionally deceived his friend. May Scott avoid the contract? Why?

6. Langstraat was seventeen when he purchased a motorcycle. When applying for insurance, he signed a "Notice of Rejection," declining to purchase uninsured motorist coverage. He was involved in an accident with an uninsured motorist and sought to disaffirm his rejection of the uninsured motorist coverage on the basis of infancy. May he do so?
7. Waters was attracted to Midwest Supply by its advertisements for doing federal income taxes. The ads stated "guaranteed accurate tax preparation." Waters inquired about amending past returns to obtain refunds. Midwest induced him to apply for and receive improper refunds. When Waters was audited, he was required to pay more taxes, and the IRS put tax liens on his wages and bank accounts. In fact, Midwest hired people with no knowledge about taxes at all; if a customer inquired about employees' qualifications, Midwest's manual told the employees to say, "Midwest has been preparing taxes for twenty years." The manual also instructed office managers never to refer to any employee as a "specialist" or "tax expert," but never to correct any news reporters or commentators if they referred to employees as such. What cause of action has Waters, and for what remedies?

8. Mutschler Grain Company (later Jamestown Farmers Elevator) agreed to sell General Mills 30,000 bushels of barley at \$1.22 per bushel. A dispute arose: Mutschler said that transportation was to be by truck but that General Mills never ordered any trucks to pick up the grain; General Mills said the grain was to be shipped by rail (railcars were in short supply). Nine months later, after Mutschler had delivered only about one-tenth the contracted amount, the price of barley was over \$3.00 per bushel. Mutschler defaulted on, and then repudiated, the contract. Fred Mutschler then received this telephone call from General Mills: "We're General Mills, and if you don't deliver this grain to us, why we'll have a battery of lawyers in there tomorrow morning to visit you, and then we are going to the North Dakota Public Service (Commission); we're going to the Minneapolis Grain Exchange and we're going to the people in Montana and there will be no more Mutschler Grain Company. We're going to take your license."

Mutschler then shipped 22,000 bushels of barley at the \$1.22 rate and sued General Mills for the difference between that price and the market price of over \$3.00. Summary judgment issued for General Mills. Upon what basis might Mutschler Grain appeal?

9. Duke decided to sell his car. The car's muffler had a large hole in it, and as a result, the car made a loud noise. Before showing the car to potential buyers, Duke patched the hole with muffler tape to quiet it. Perry bought the car after test-driving it. He later discovered the faulty muffler and sought to avoid the contract, claiming fraud. Duke argued that he had not committed fraud because Perry had not asked about the muffler and Duke had made no representation of fact concerning it. Is Duke correct? Decide and explain.
10. At the end of the term at college, Jose, talking in the library with his friend Leanne, said, "I'll sell you my business law notes for \$25." Leanne agreed and paid him the money. Jose then realized he'd made a mistake in that he had offered his notes when he meant to offer his book. Leanne didn't want the book; she had a book. She wanted the notes. Would Leanne have a cause of action against Jose if he refused to deliver the notes? Decide and explain.

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Misrepresentation that does not go to the core of a contract is

- a. fraud in the execution
- b. fraud in the inducement
- c. undue influence
- d. an example of mistake

In order for a misrepresentation to make a contract voidable,

- a. it must have been intentional
- b. the party seeking to void must have relied on the misrepresentation
- c. it must always be material
- d. none of the above is required

A mistake by one party will not invalidate a contract unless

- a. the other party knew of the mistake
- b. the party making the mistake did not read the contract closely

- c. the parties to the contract had never done business before
- d. the party is mistaken about the law

Upon reaching the age of majority, a person who entered into a contract to purchase goods while a minor may

- a. ratify the contract and keep the goods without paying for them
- b. disaffirm the contract and keep the goods without paying for them
- c. avoid paying for the goods by keeping them without ratifying or disaffirming the contract
- d. none of these

Seller does not disclose to Buyer that the foundation of a house is infested with termites. Upon purchasing the house and remodeling part of the basement, Buyer discovers the termites. Has Buyer a cause of action against Seller?

- a. yes
- b. no

#### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. a
- 2. d
- 3. a
- 4. e
- 5. b

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[1] *Eulrich v. Snap-On Tools Corp.*, 853 P.2d 1350 (Or. Ct. App. 1993).

# Chapter 11

## Consideration

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. What “consideration” is in contract law, what it is not, and what purposes it serves
2. How the sufficiency of consideration is determined
3. In what common situations an understanding of consideration is important
4. What promises are enforceable without consideration

## 11.1 General Perspectives on Consideration

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what “consideration” is in contract law.
2. Recognize what purposes the doctrine serves.
3. Understand how the law determines whether consideration exists.
4. Know the elements of consideration.

### The Purpose of Consideration

This chapter continues our inquiry into whether the parties created a valid contract. In [Chapter 9 "The Agreement"](#), we saw that the first requisite of a valid contract is an agreement: offer and acceptance. In this chapter, we assume that agreement has been reached and concentrate on one of its crucial aspects: the existence of consideration. Which of the following, if any, is a contract?

1. Betty offers to give a book to Lou. Lou accepts.
2. Betty offers Lou the book in exchange for Lou’s promise to pay twenty-five dollars. Lou accepts.
3. Betty offers to give Lou the book if Lou promises to pick it up at Betty’s house. Lou agrees.

In American law, only the second situation is a binding contract, because only that contract contains consideration, a set of mutual promises in which each party agrees to give up something to the benefit of the other. This chapter will explore the meaning and rationale of that statement.

The question of what constitutes a binding contract has been answered differently throughout history and in other cultures. For example, under Roman law, a contract without consideration was binding if certain formal requirements were met. And in the Anglo-American tradition, the presence of a seal—the wax impression affixed to a document—was once sufficient to make a contract binding without any other consideration. The seal is no longer a substitute for consideration, although in some states it creates a presumption of consideration; in forty-nine states, the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) has abolished the seal on contracts for the sale of goods. (Louisiana has not adopted UCC Article 2.)

Whatever its original historical purposes, and however apparently arcane, the doctrine of consideration serves some still-useful purposes. It provides objective evidence for asserting that a contract exists; it distinguishes between enforceable and unenforceable bargains; and it is a check against rash, unconsidered action, against thoughtless promise making. <sup>[1]</sup>

### **A Definition of *Consideration***

Consideration is said to exist when the promisor receives some benefit for his promise and the promisee gives up something in return; it is the bargained-for price you pay for what you get. That may seem simple enough. But as with much in the law, the complicating situations are never very far away. The “something” that is promised or delivered cannot be just anything, such as a feeling of pride, warmth, amusement, or friendship; it must be something known as a legal detriment—an act, forbearance, or a promise of such from the promisee. The detriment need not be an actual detriment; it may in fact be a benefit to the promisee, or at least not a loss. The detriment to one side is usually a legal benefit to the other, but the detriment to the promisee need not confer a tangible benefit on the promisor; the promisee can agree to forego something without that something being given to the promisor. Whether consideration is legally sufficient has nothing to do with whether it is morally or economically adequate to make the bargain a fair one. Moreover, legal consideration need not even be certain; it can be a promise contingent on an event that may never happen. Consideration is a legal concept, and it centers on the giving up of a legal right or benefit.

Consideration has two elements. The first, as just outlined, is whether the promisee has incurred a legal detriment—given up something, paid some “price,” though it may be, for example, the

promise to do something, like paint a house. (Some courts—although a minority—take the view that a bargained-for legal benefit to the promisor is sufficient consideration.) The second element is whether the legal detriment was bargained for: did the promisor specifically intend the act, forbearance, or promise in return for his promise? Applying this two-pronged test to the three examples given at the outset of the chapter, we can easily see why only in the second is there legally sufficient consideration. In the first, Lou incurred no legal detriment; he made no pledge to act or to forbear from acting, nor did he in fact act or forbear from acting. In the third example, what might appear to be such a promise is not really so. Betty made a promise on a condition that Lou comes to her house; the intent clearly is to make a gift.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Consideration is—with some exceptions—a required element of a contract. It is the bargained-for giving up of something of legal value for something in return. It serves the purposes of making formal the intention to contract and reducing rash promise making.

#### EXERCISES

1. Alice promises to give her neighbor a blueberry bush; the neighbor says, “Thank you!” Subsequently, Alice changes her mind. Is she bound by her promise?
2. Why, notwithstanding its relative antiquity, does consideration still serve some useful purposes?
3. Identify the exchange of consideration in this example: A to B, “I will pay you \$800 if you paint my garage.” B to A, “Okay, I’ll paint your garage for \$800.”

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[1] Lon L. Fuller, “Consideration and Form,” *Columbia Law Review* 41 (1941): 799.

## 11.2 Legal Sufficiency

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know in general what “legal sufficiency” means when examining consideration.
2. Recognize how the concept operates in such common situations as threat of litigation, and accord and satisfaction.
3. Understand why illusory promises are unenforceable, and how courts deal with needs, outputs, and exclusive dealings contracts.

## The Concept of Legal Sufficiency

As suggested in [Section 11.1 "General Perspectives on Consideration"](#), what is required in contract is the exchange of a legal detriment and a legal benefit; if that happens, the consideration is said to have legal sufficiency.

### Actual versus Legal Detriment

Suppose Phil offers George \$500 if George will quit smoking for one year. Is Phil's promise binding? Because George is presumably benefiting by making and sticking to the agreement—surely his health will improve if he gives up smoking—how can his act be considered a legal detriment? The answer is that there is forbearance on George's part: George is legally entitled to smoke, and by contracting not to, he suffers a loss of his legal right to do so. This is a legal detriment; consideration does not require an actual detriment.

### Adequacy of Consideration

Scrooge offers to buy Caspar's motorcycle, worth \$700, for \$10 and a shiny new fountain pen (worth \$5). Caspar agrees. Is this agreement supported by adequate consideration? Yes, because both have agreed to give up something that is theirs: Scrooge, the cash and the pen; Caspar, the motorcycle. Courts are not generally concerned with the economic adequacy of the consideration but instead with whether it is present. As Judge Richard A. Posner puts it, "To ask whether there is consideration is simply to inquire whether the situation is one of exchange and a bargain has been struck. To go further and ask whether the consideration is adequate would require the court to do what...it is less well equipped to do than the parties—decide whether the price (and other essential terms) specified in the contract are reasonable."<sup>[1]</sup> In short, "courts do not inquire into the adequacy of consideration."

Of course, normally, parties to contracts will not make such a one-sided deal as Scrooge and Caspar's. But there is a common class of contracts in which nominal consideration—usually one dollar—is recited in printed forms. Usually these are option contracts, in which "in consideration of one dollar in hand paid and receipt of which is hereby acknowledged" one party agrees to hold open the right of the other to make a purchase on agreed terms. The courts will enforce these contracts if the dollar is intended "to support a short-time option proposing an exchange on fair terms."<sup>[2]</sup> If, however, the option is for an unreasonably long period of time and the underlying



bargain is unfair (the Restatement gives as an example a ten-year option permitting the optionee to take phosphate rock from a widow's land at a per-ton payment of only one-fourth the prevailing rate), then the courts are unlikely to hold that the nominal consideration makes the option irrevocable.

Because the consideration on such option contracts is nominal, its recital in the written instrument is usually a mere formality, and it is frequently never paid; in effect, the recital of nominal consideration is false. Nevertheless, the courts will enforce the contract—precisely because the recital has become a formality and nobody objects to the charade. Moreover, it would be easy enough to upset an option based on nominal consideration by falsifying oral testimony that the dollar was never paid or received. In a contest between oral testimonies where the incentive to lie is strong and there is a written document clearly incorporating the parties' agreement, the courts prefer the latter. However, as [Section 11.4.1 "Consideration for an Option"](#), *Board of Control of Eastern Michigan University v. Burgess*, demonstrates, the state courts are not uniform on this point, and it is a safe practice always to deliver the consideration, no matter how nominal.

## **Applications of the Legal Sufficiency Doctrine**

This section discusses several common circumstances where the issue of whether the consideration proffered (offered up) is adequate.

### **Threat of Litigation: Covenant Not to Sue**

Because every person has the legal right to file suit if he or she feels aggrieved, a promise to refrain from going to court is sufficient consideration to support a promise of payment or performance. In *Dedeaux v. Young*, Dedeaux purchased property and promised to make certain payments to Young, the broker. <sup>[3]</sup> But Dedeaux thereafter failed to make these payments, and Young threatened suit; had he filed papers in court, the transfer of title could have been blocked. To keep Young from suing, Dedeaux promised to pay a 5 percent commission if Young would stay out of court. Dedeaux later resisted paying on the ground that he had never made such a promise and that even if he had, it did not amount to a contract because there was no consideration from Young. The court disagreed, holding that the evidence supported Young's contention that Dedeaux had indeed made such a promise and upholding Young's claim for the

commission because “a request to forbear to exercise a legal right has been generally accepted as sufficient consideration to support a contract.” If Young had had no grounds to sue—for example, if he had threatened to sue a stranger, or if it could be shown that Dedeaux had no obligation to him originally—then there would have been no consideration because Young would not have been giving up a legal right. A promise to forebear suing in return for settlement of a dispute is called a covenant not to sue (*covenant* is another word for agreement).

### **Accord and Satisfaction Generally**

Frequently, the parties to a contract will dispute the meaning of its terms and conditions, especially the amount of money actually due. When the dispute is genuine (and not the unjustified attempt of one party to avoid paying a sum clearly due), it can be settled by the parties’ agreement on a fixed sum as the amount due. This second agreement, which substitutes for the disputed first agreement, is called an accord, and when the payment or other term is discharged, the completed second contract is known as an accord and satisfaction. A suit brought for an alleged breach of the original contract could be defended by citing the later accord and satisfaction.

An accord is a contract and must therefore be supported by consideration. Suppose Jan owes Andy \$7,000, due November 1. On November 1, Jan pays only \$3,500 in exchange for Andy’s promise to release Jan from the remainder of the debt. Has Andy (the promisor) made a binding promise? He has not, because there is no consideration for the accord. Jan has incurred no detriment; she has received something (release of the obligation to pay the remaining \$3,500), but she has given up nothing. But if Jan and Andy had agreed that Jan would pay the \$3,500 on October 25, then there would be consideration; Jan would have incurred a legal detriment by obligating herself to make a payment earlier than the original contract required her to. If Jan had paid the \$3,500 on November 11 and had given Andy something else agreed to—a pen, a keg of beer, a peppercorn—the required detriment would also be present.

Let’s take a look at some examples of the accord and satisfaction principle. The dispute that gives rise to the parties’ agreement to settle by an accord and satisfaction may come up in several typical ways: where there is an unliquidated debt; a disputed debt; an “in-full-payment check” for less than what the creditor claims is due; unforeseen difficulties that give rise to a

contract modification, or a novation; or a composition among creditors. But no obligation ever arises—and no real legal dispute can arise—where a person promises a benefit if someone will do that which he has a preexisting obligation to, or where a person promises a benefit to someone not to do that which the promisee is already disallowed from doing, or where one makes an illusory promise.

### **Settling an Unliquidated Debt**

An unliquidated debt is one that is uncertain in amount. Such debts frequently occur when people consult professionals in whose offices precise fees are rarely discussed, or where one party agrees, expressly or by implication, to pay the customary or reasonable fees of the other without fixing the exact amount. It is certain that a debt is owed, but it is not certain how much. (A liquidated debt, on the other hand, is one that is fixed in amount, certain. A debt can be liquidated by being written down in unambiguous terms—“IOU \$100”—or by being mathematically ascertainable—\$1 per pound of ice ordered and 60 pounds delivered; hence the liquidated debt is \$60.)

Here is how the matter plays out: Assume a patient goes to the hospital for a gallbladder operation. The cost of the operation has not been discussed beforehand in detail, although the cost in the metropolitan area is normally around \$8,000. After the operation, the patient and the surgeon agree on a bill of \$6,000. The patient pays the bill; a month later the surgeon sues for another \$2,000. Who wins? The patient: he has forgone his right to challenge the reasonableness of the fee by agreeing to a fixed amount payable at a certain time. The agreement liquidating the debt is an accord and is enforceable. If, however, the patient and the surgeon had agreed on an \$8,000 fee before the operation, and if the patient arbitrarily refused to pay this liquidated debt unless the surgeon agreed to cut her fee in half, then the surgeon would be entitled to recover the other half in a lawsuit, because the patient would have given no consideration—given up nothing, “suffered no detriment”—for the surgeon’s subsequent agreement to cut the fee.

### **Settling a Disputed Debt**

A **disputed debt** arises where the parties *did* agree on (liquidated) the price or fee but subsequently get into a dispute about its fairness, and then settle. When this dispute is settled,

the parties have given consideration to an agreement to accept a fixed sum as payment for the amount due. Assume that in the gallbladder case the patient agrees in advance to pay \$8,000. Eight months after the operation and as a result of nausea and vomiting spells, the patient undergoes a second operation; the surgeons discover a surgical sponge embedded in the patient's intestine. The patient refuses to pay the full sum of the original surgeon's bill; they settle on \$6,000, which the patient pays. This is a binding agreement because subsequent facts arose to make legitimate the patient's quarrel over his obligation to pay the full bill. As long as the dispute is based in fact and is not trumped up, as long as the promisee is acting in good faith, then consideration is present when a disputed debt is settled.

### **The "In-Full-Payment" Check Situation**

To discharge his liquidated debt for \$8,000 to the surgeon, the patient sends a check for \$6,000 marked "payment in full." The surgeon cashes it. There is no dispute. May the surgeon sue for the remaining \$2,000? This may appear to be an accord: by cashing the check, the surgeon seems to be agreeing with the patient to accept the \$6,000 in full payment. But consideration is lacking. Because the surgeon is owed more than the face amount of the check, she causes the patient no legal detriment by accepting the check. If the rule were otherwise, debtors could easily tempt hard-pressed creditors to accept less than the amount owed by presenting immediate cash. The key to the enforceability of a "payment in full" legend is the character of the debt. If unliquidated, or if there is a dispute, then "payment in full" can serve as accord and satisfaction when written on a check that is accepted for payment by a creditor. But if the debt is liquidated and undisputed, there is no consideration when the check is for a lesser amount. (However, it is arguable that if the check is considered to be an agreement modifying a sales contract, no consideration is necessary under Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) Section 2-209.)

### **Unforeseen Difficulties**

An unforeseen difficulty arising after a contract is made may be resolved by an accord and satisfaction, too. Difficulties that no one could foresee can sometimes serve as catalyst for a further promise that may appear to be without consideration but that the courts will enforce nevertheless. Suppose Peter contracts to build Jerry a house for \$390,000. While excavating, Peter unexpectedly discovers quicksand, the removal of which will cost an additional \$10,000.

To ensure that Peter does not delay, Jerry promises to pay Peter \$10,000 more than originally agreed. But when the house is completed, Jerry reneges on his promise. Is Jerry liable? Logically perhaps not: Peter has incurred no legal detriment in exchange for the \$10,000; he had already contracted to build the house. But most courts would allow Peter to recover on the theory that the original contract was terminated, or modified, either by mutual agreement or by an implied condition that the original contract would be discharged if unforeseen difficulties developed. In short, the courts will enforce the parties' own mutual recognition that the unforeseen conditions had made the old contract unfair. The parties either have modified their original contract (which requires consideration at common law) or have given up their original contract and made a new one (called anovation).

It is a question of fact whether the new circumstance is new and difficult enough to make a preexisting obligation into an unforeseen difficulty. Obviously, if Peter encounters only a small pocket of quicksand—say two gallons' worth—he would have to deal with it as part of his already-agreed-to job. If he encounters as much quicksand as would fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool, that's clearly unforeseen, and he should get extra to deal with it. Someplace between the two quantities of quicksand there is enough of the stuff so that Peter's duty to remove it is outside the original agreement and new consideration would be needed in exchange for its removal.

### **Creditors' Composition**

A creditors' composition may give rise to debt settlement by an accord and satisfaction. It is an agreement whereby two or more creditors of a debtor consent to the debtor's paying them pro rata shares of the debt due in full satisfaction of their claims. A composition agreement can be critically important to a business in trouble; through it, the business might manage to stave off bankruptcy. Even though the share accepted is less than the full amount due and is payable after the due date so that consideration appears to be lacking, courts routinely enforce these agreements. The promise of each creditor to accept a lesser share than that owed in return for getting something is taken as consideration to support the promises of the others. A debtor has \$3,000 on hand. He owes \$3,000 each to A, B, and C. A, B, and C agree to accept \$1,000 each and discharge the debtor. Each creditor has given up \$2,000 but in return has at least received

something, the \$1,000. Without the composition, one might have received the entire amount owed her, but the others would have received nothing.

### **Preexisting Duty**

*Not* amenable to settlement by an accord and satisfaction is the situation where a party has a **preexisting duty** and he or she is offered a benefit to discharge it. When the only consideration offered the promisor is an act or promise to act to carry out a preexisting duty, there is no valid contract. As *Denney v. Reppert* (Section 11.4.2 "Consideration: Preexisting Obligation") makes clear, the promisee suffers no legal detriment in promising to undertake that which he is already obligated to do. Where a person is promised a benefit not to do that which he is already disallowed from doing, there is no consideration. David is sixteen years old; his uncle promises him \$50 if he will refrain from smoking. The promise is not enforceable: legally, David already must refrain from smoking, so he has promised to give up nothing to which he had a legal right. As noted previously, the difficulty arises where it is unclear whether a person has a preexisting obligation or whether such unforeseen difficulties have arisen as to warrant the recognition that the parties have modified the contract or entered into a novation. What if Peter insists on additional payment for him to remove one wheelbarrow full of quicksand from the excavation? Surely that's not enough "unforeseen difficulty." How much quicksand is enough?

### **Illusory Promises**

Not every promise is a pledge to do something. Sometimes it is an illusory promise, where the terms of the contract really bind the promisor to give up nothing, to suffer no detriment. For example, Lydia offers to pay Juliette \$10 for mowing Lydia's lawn. Juliette promises to mow the lawn if she feels like it. May Juliette enforce the contract? No, because Juliette has incurred no legal detriment; her promise is illusory, since by doing nothing she still falls within the literal wording of her promise. The doctrine that such bargains are unenforceable is sometimes referred to as the rule of mutuality of obligation: if one party to a contract has not made a binding obligation, neither is the other party bound. Thus if A contracts to hire B for a year at \$6,000 a month, reserving the right to dismiss B at any time (an "option to cancel" clause), and B agrees to work for a year, A has not really promised anything; A is not bound to the agreement, and neither is B.

The illusory promise presents a special problem in agreements for exclusive dealing, outputs, and needs contracts.

### **Exclusive Dealing Agreement**

In an exclusive dealing agreement, one party (the franchisor) promises to deal solely with the other party (the franchisee)—for example, a franchisor-designer agrees to sell all of her specially designed clothes to a particular department store (the franchisee). In return, the store promises to pay a certain percentage of the sales price to the designer. On closer inspection, it may appear that the store's promise is illusory: it pays the designer only if it manages to sell dresses, but it may sell none. The franchisor-designer may therefore attempt to back out of the deal by arguing that because the franchisee is not obligated to do anything, there was no consideration for her promise to deal exclusively with the store.

Courts, however, have upheld exclusive dealing contracts on the theory that the franchisee has an obligation to use reasonable efforts to promote and sell the product or services. This obligation may be spelled out in the contract or implied by its terms. In the classic statement of this concept, Judge Benjamin N. Cardozo, then on the New York Court of Appeals, in upholding such a contract, declared:

*It is true that [the franchisee] does not promise in so many words that he will use reasonable efforts to place the defendant's endorsements and market her designs. We think, however, that such a promise is fairly to be implied. The law has outgrown its primitive stage of formalism when the precise word was the sovereign talisman, and every slip was fatal. It takes a broader view today. A promise may be lacking, and yet the whole writing may be "instinct with an obligation," imperfectly expressed....His promise to pay the defendant one-half of the profits and revenues resulting from the exclusive agency and to render accounts monthly was a promise to use reasonable efforts to bring profits and revenues into existence.* <sup>[4]</sup>

The UCC follows the same rule. In the absence of language specifically delineating the seller's or buyer's duties, an exclusive dealing contract under Section 2-306(2) imposes "an obligation by the seller to use best efforts to supply the goods and by the buyer to use best efforts to promote their sale."

## Outputs Contracts and Needs Contracts

A similar issue arises with outputs contracts and needs contracts. In an outputs contract, the seller—say a coal company—agrees to sell its entire yearly output of coal to an electric utility. Has it really agreed to produce and sell any coal at all? What if the coal-mine owner decides to shut down production to take a year’s vacation—is that a violation of the agreement? Yes. The law imposes upon the seller here a duty to produce and sell a reasonable amount. Similarly, if the electric utility contracted to buy all its requirements of coal from the coal company—a needs contract—could it decide to stop operation entirely and take no coal? No, it is required to take a reasonable amount.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Courts do not inquire into the adequacy of consideration, but (with some exceptions) do require the promisor to incur a legal detriment (the surrender of any legal right he or she possesses—to give up something) in order to receive the bargained-for benefit. The surrender of the right to sue is a legal detriment, and the issue arises in analyzing various kinds of dispute settlement agreements (accord and satisfaction): the obligation to pay the full amount claimed by a creditor on a liquidated debt, an unliquidated debt, and a disputed debt. Where unforeseen difficulties arise, an obligor will be entitled to additional compensation (consideration) to resolve them either because the contract is modified or because the parties have entered into a novation, but no additional consideration is owing to one who performs a preexisting obligation or forbears from performing that which he or she is under a legal duty not to perform. If a promisor gives an illusory promise, he or she gives no consideration and no contract is formed; but exclusive dealing agreements, needs contracts, and outputs contracts are not treated as illusory.

### EXERCISES

1. What is meant by “legally sufficient” consideration?
2. Why do courts usually not “inquire into the adequacy of consideration”?
3. How can it be said there is consideration in the following instances: (a) settlement of an unliquidated debt? (b) settlement of a disputed debt? (c) a person agreeing to do more than originally contracted for because of unforeseen difficulties? (d) a creditor agreeing with other creditors for each of them to accept less than they are owed from the debtor?



4. Why is there no consideration where a person demands extra compensation for that which she is already obligated to do, or for forbearing to do that which she already is forbidden from doing?
5. What is the difference between a contract modification and a novation?
6. How do courts resolve the problem that a needs or outputs contract apparently imposes no detriment—no requirement to pass any consideration to the other side—on the promisor?

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[1] Richard A. Posner, *Economic Analysis of Law* (New York: Aspen, 1973), 46.

[2] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 87(b).

[3] *Dedeaux v. Young*, 170 So.2d 561 (1965).

[4] *Otis F. Wood v. Lucy, Lady Duff-Gordon*, 118 N.E. 214 (1917).

## 11.3 Promises Enforceable without Consideration

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand the exceptions to the requirement of consideration.

For a variety of policy reasons, courts will enforce certain types of promises even though consideration may be absent. Some of these are governed by the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC); others are part of the established common law.

### Promises Enforceable without Consideration at Common Law

#### Past Consideration

Ordinarily, past consideration is not sufficient to support a promise. By past consideration, the courts mean an act that could have served as consideration if it had been bargained for at the time but that was not the subject of a bargain. For example, Mrs. Ace's dog Fluffy escapes from her mistress's condo at dusk. Robert finds Fluffy, sees Mrs. Ace, who is herself out looking for her pet, and gives Fluffy to her. She says, "Oh, thank you for finding my dear dog. Come by my place tomorrow morning and I'll give you fifty dollars as a reward." The next day Robert stops by Mrs. Ace's condo, but she says, "Well, I don't know. Fluffy soiled the carpet again last night. I think maybe a twenty-dollar reward would be plenty." Robert cannot collect the fifty dollars. Even though Mrs. Ace might have a moral obligation to pay him and honor her promise, there

was no consideration for it. Robert incurred no legal detriment; his contribution—finding the dog—was paid out before her promise, and his past consideration is invalid to support a contract. There was no bargained-for exchange.

However, a valid consideration, given in the past to support a promise, can be the basis for another, later contract under certain circumstances. These occur when a person's duty to act for one reason or another has become no longer binding. If the person then makes a new promise based on the unfulfilled past duty, the new promise is binding without further consideration. Three types of cases follow.

#### **Promise Revived after Statute of Limitations Has Passed**

A statute of limitations is a law requiring a lawsuit to be filed within a specified period of years. For example, in many states a contract claim must be sued on within six years; if the plaintiff waits longer than that, the claim will be dismissed, regardless of its merits. When the time period set forth in the statute of limitations has lapsed, the statute is said to have “run.” If a debtor renews a promise to pay or acknowledges a debt after the running of a statute of limitations, then under the common law the promise is binding, although there is no consideration in the usual sense. In many states, this promise or acknowledgment must be in writing and signed by the debtor. Also, in many states, the courts will imply a promise or acknowledgment if the debtor makes a partial payment after the statute has run.

#### **Voidable Duties**

Some promises that might otherwise serve as consideration are voidable by the promisor, for a variety of reasons, including infancy, fraud, duress, or mistake. But a voidable contract does not automatically become void, and if the promisor has not avoided the contract but instead thereafter renews his promise, it is binding. For example, Mr. Melvin sells his bicycle to Seth, age thirteen. Seth promises to pay Mr. Melvin one hundred dollars. Seth may repudiate the contract, but he does not. When he turns eighteen, he renews his promise to pay the one hundred dollars. This promise is binding. (However, a promise made up to the time he turned eighteen would not be binding, since he would still have been a minor.)

#### **Promissory Estoppel**

We examined the meaning of this forbidding phrase in [Chapter 8 "Introduction to Contract Law"](#) (recall the English *High Trees* case). It represents another type of promise that the courts will enforce without consideration. Simply stated, promissory estoppel means that the courts will stop the promisor from claiming that there was no consideration. The doctrine of promissory estoppel is invoked in the interests of justice when three conditions are met: (1) the promise is one that the promisor should reasonably expect to induce the promisee to take action or forbear from taking action of a definite and substantial character; (2) the action or forbearance is taken; and (3) injustice can be avoided only by enforcing the promise. (The complete phraseology is “promissory estoppel with detrimental reliance.”)

Timko served on the board of trustees of a school. He recommended that the school purchase a building for a substantial sum of money, and to induce the trustees to vote for the purchase, he promised to help with the purchase and to pay at the end of five years the purchase price less the down payment. At the end of four years, Timko died. The school sued his estate, which defended on the ground that there was no consideration for the promise. Timko was promised or given nothing in return, and the purchase of the building was of no direct benefit to him (which would have made the promise enforceable as a unilateral contract). The court ruled that under the three-pronged promissory estoppel test, Timko’s estate was liable. <sup>[1]</sup>

Cases involving pledges of charitable contributions have long been troublesome to courts. Recognizing the necessity to charitable institutions of such pledges, the courts have also been mindful that a mere pledge of money to the general funds of a hospital, university, or similar institution does not usually induce substantial action but is, rather, simply a promise without consideration. When the pledge does prompt a charitable institution to act, promissory estoppel is available as a remedy. In about one-quarter of the states, another doctrine is available for cases involving simple pledges: the “mutual promises” theory, whereby the pledges of many individuals are taken as consideration for each other and are binding against each promisor. This theory was not available to the plaintiff in *Timko* because his was the only promise.

### **Moral Obligation**

The Restatement allows, under some circumstances, the enforcement of past-consideration contracts. It provides as follows in Section 86, “Promise for Benefit Received”:

*A promise made in recognition of a benefit previously received by the promisor from the promisee is binding to the extent necessary to prevent injustice.*

*A promise is not binding under Subsection (1)*

*if the promisee conferred the benefit as a gift or for other reasons the promisor has not been unjustly enriched; or*

*to the extent that its value is disproportionate to the benefit.*

## **Promises Enforceable without Consideration by Statute**

We have touched on several common-law exceptions to the consideration requirement. Some also are provided by statute.

### **Under the UCC**

The UCC permits one party to discharge, without consideration, a claim or right arising out of an alleged breach of contract by the other party. This is accomplished by delivering to the other party a signed written waiver or renunciation. <sup>[2]</sup> This provision applies to any contract governed by the UCC and is not limited to the sales provisions of Article 2.

The UCC also permits a party to discharge the other side without consideration when there is no breach, and it permits parties to modify their Article 2 contract without consideration. <sup>[3]</sup> The official comments to the UCC section add the following: “However, modifications made thereunder must meet the test of good faith imposed by this Act. The effective use of bad faith to escape performance on the original contract terms is barred, and the extortion of a “modification” without legitimate commercial reason is ineffective as a violation of the duty of good faith.”

Seller agrees to deliver a ton of coal within seven days. Buyer needs the coal sooner and asks Seller to deliver within four days. Seller agrees. This promise is binding even though Seller received no additional consideration beyond the purchase price for the additional duty agreed to (the duty to get the coal to Buyer sooner than originally agreed). The UCC allows a merchant’s firm offer, signed, in writing, to bind the merchant to keep the offer to buy or sell open without consideration. <sup>[4]</sup> This is the UCC’s equivalent of a common-law option, which, as you recall, does require consideration.

Section 1-207 of the UCC allows a party a reservation of rights while performing a contract. This section raises a difficult question when a debtor issues an in-full-payment check in payment of a disputed debt. As noted earlier in this chapter, because under the common law the creditor's acceptance of an in-full-payment check in payment of a disputed debt constitutes an accord and satisfaction, the creditor cannot collect an amount beyond the check. But what if the creditor, in cashing the check, reserves the right (under Section 1-207) to sue for an amount beyond what the debtor is offering? The courts are split on the issue: regarding the sale of goods governed by the UCC, some courts allow the creditor to sue for the unpaid debt notwithstanding the check being marked "paid in full," and others do not.

### **Bankruptcy**

Bankruptcy is, of course, federal statutory law. The rule here regarding a promise to pay after the obligation is discharged is similar to that governing statutes of limitations. Traditionally, a promise to repay debts after a bankruptcy court has discharged them makes the debtor liable once again. This traditional rule gives rise to potential abuse; after undergoing the rigors of bankruptcy, a debtor could be badgered by creditors into reaffirmation, putting him in a worse position than before, since he must wait six years before being allowed to avail himself of bankruptcy again.

The federal Bankruptcy Act includes certain procedural protections to ensure that the debtor knowingly enters into a reaffirmation of his debt. Among its provisions, the law requires the debtor to have reaffirmed the debt before the debtor is discharged in bankruptcy; he then has sixty days to rescind his reaffirmation. If the bankrupt party is an individual, the law also requires that a court hearing be held at which the consequences of his reaffirmation must be explained, and reaffirmation of certain consumer debts is subject to court approval if the debtor is not represented by an attorney.

### **International Contracts**

Contracts governed by the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (as mentioned in [Chapter 8 "Introduction to Contract Law"](#)) do not require consideration to be binding.

## **KEY TAKEAWAY**

There are some exceptions to the consideration requirement. At common law, past consideration doesn't count, but no consideration is necessary in these cases: where a promise barred by the statute of limitations is revived, where a voidable duty is reaffirmed, where there has been detrimental reliance on a promise (i.e., promissory estoppel), or where a court simply finds the promisor has a moral obligation to keep the promise.

Under statutory law, the UCC has several exceptions to the consideration requirement. No consideration is needed to revive a debt discharged in bankruptcy, and none is called for under the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods.

## EXERCISES

1. Melba began work for Acme Company in 1975 as a filing clerk. Thirty years later she had risen to be comptroller. At a thirty-year celebration party, her boss, Mr. Holder, said, "Melba, I hope you work here for a long time, and you can retire at any time, but if you decide to retire, on account of your years of good service, the company will pay you a monthly pension of \$2,000." Melba continued to work for another two years, then retired. The company paid the pension for three years and then, in an economic downturn, stopped. When Melba sued, the company claimed it was not obligated to her because the pension was of past consideration. What will be the result?
2. What theories are used to enforce charitable subscriptions?
3. What are the elements necessary for the application of the doctrine of promissory estoppel?
4. Under what circumstances does the Restatement employ moral obligation as a basis for enforcing an otherwise unenforceable contract?
5. Promises unenforceable because barred by bankruptcy or by the running of the statute of limitations can be revived without further consideration. What do the two circumstances have in common?
6. Under the UCC, when is no consideration required where it would be in equivalent situations at common law?

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[1] *Estate of Timko v. Oral Roberts Evangelistic Assn.*, 215 N.W.2d 750 (Mich. App. 1974).

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1-107.

[3] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-209(4) and 2-209(1).

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-205.

## 11.4 Cases

### Consideration for an Option

*Board of Control of Eastern Michigan University v. Burgess*

*206 N.W.2d 256 (Mich. 1973)*

Burns, J.

On February 15, 1966, defendant signed a document which purported to grant to plaintiff a 60-day option to purchase defendant's home. That document, which was drafted by plaintiff's agent, acknowledged receipt by defendant of "One and no/100 (\$1.00) Dollar and other valuable consideration." Plaintiff concedes that neither the one dollar nor any other consideration was ever paid or even tendered to defendant. On April 14, 1966, plaintiff delivered to defendant written notice of its intention to exercise the option. On the closing date defendant rejected plaintiff's tender of the purchase price. Thereupon, plaintiff commenced this action for specific performance.

At trial defendant claimed that the purported option was void for want of consideration, that any underlying offer by defendant had been revoked prior to acceptance by plaintiff, and that the agreed purchase price was the product of fraud and mutual mistake. The trial judge concluded that no fraud was involved, and that any mutual mistake was not material. He also held that defendant's acknowledgment of receipt of consideration bars any subsequent contention to the contrary. Accordingly, the trial judge entered judgment for plaintiff.

Options for the purchase of land, if based on valid consideration, are contracts which may be specifically enforced. [Citations] Conversely, that which purports to be an option, but which is not based on valid consideration, is not a contract and will not be enforced. [Citations] One dollar is valid consideration for an option to purchase land, provided the dollar is paid or at least tendered. [Citations] In the instant case defendant received no consideration for the purported option of February 15, 1966.

A written acknowledgment of receipt of consideration merely creates a rebuttable presumption that consideration has, in fact, passed. Neither the parol evidence rule nor the doctrine of estoppel bars the presentation of evidence to contradict any such acknowledgment. [Citation] It is our opinion that the document signed by defendant on February 15, 1966, is not an enforceable option, and that defendant is not barred from so asserting.

The trial court premised its holding to the contrary on *Lawrence v. McCalmont*... (1844). That case is significantly distinguishable from the instant case. Mr. Justice Story held that '(t)he guarantor acknowledged the receipt of one dollar, and is now estopped to deny it.' However, in reliance upon the guaranty substantial credit had been extended to the guarantor's sons. The guarantor had received everything she bargained for, save one dollar. In the instant case defendant claims that she never received any of the consideration promised her.

That which purports to be an option for the purchase of land, but which is not based on valid consideration, is a simple offer to sell the same land. [Citation] An option is a contract collateral to an offer to sell whereby the offer is made irrevocable for a specified period. [Citation] Ordinarily, an offer is revocable at the will of the offeror. Accordingly, a failure of consideration affects only the collateral contract to keep the offer open, not the underlying offer.

A simple offer may be revoked for any reason or for no reason by the offeror at any time prior to its acceptance by the offeree. [Citation] Thus, the question in this case becomes, 'Did defendant effectively revoke her offer to sell before plaintiff accepted that offer?'...

Defendant testified that within hours of signing the purported option she telephoned plaintiff's agent and informed him that she would not abide by the option unless the purchase price was increased. Defendant also testified that when plaintiff's agent delivered to her on April 14, 1966, plaintiff's notice of its intention to exercise the purported option, she told him that 'the option was off'.

Plaintiff's agent testified that defendant did not communicate to him any dissatisfaction until sometime in July, 1966.

If defendant is telling the truth, she effectively revoked her offer several weeks before plaintiff accepted that offer, and no contract of sale was created. If plaintiff's agent is telling the truth, defendant's offer was still open when plaintiff accepted that offer, and an enforceable contract



was created. The trial judge thought it unnecessary to resolve this particular dispute. In light of our holding the dispute must be resolved.

An appellate court cannot assess the credibility of witnesses. We have neither seen nor heard them testify. [Citation] Accordingly, we remand this case to the trial court for additional findings of fact based on the record already before the court....

Reversed and remanded for proceedings consistent with this opinion. Costs to defendant.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the lower court decide the option given by the defendant was valid?
2. Why did the appeals court find the option invalid?
3. The case was remanded. On retrial, how could the plaintiff (the university) still win?
4. It was not disputed that the defendant signed the purported option. Is it right that she should get out of it merely because she didn't really get the \$1.00?

### Consideration: Preexisting Obligation

*Denney v. Reppert*

*432 S.W.2d 647 (Ky. 1968)*

R. L. Myre, Sr., Special Commissioner.

The sole question presented in this case is which of several claimants is entitled to an award for information leading to the apprehension and conviction of certain bank robbers....

On June 12th or 13th, 1963, three armed men entered the First State Bank, Eubank, Kentucky, and with a display of arms and threats robbed the bank of over \$30,000 [about \$208,000 in 2010 dollars]. Later in the day they were apprehended by State Policemen Garret Godby, Johnny Simms and Tilford Reppert, placed under arrest, and the entire loot was recovered.

Later all of the prisoners were convicted and Garret Godby, Johnny Simms and Tilford Reppert appeared as witnesses at the trial.

The First State Bank of Eubank was a member of the Kentucky Bankers Association which provided and advertised a reward of \$500.00 for the arrest and conviction of each bank robber. Hence the outstanding reward for the three bank robbers was \$1,500.00 [about \$11,000 in 2010 dollars]. Many became claimants for the reward and the Kentucky State Bankers Association being unable to determine the merits of the claims for the reward asked the circuit court to

determine the merits of the various claims and to adjudge who was entitled to receive the reward or share in it. All of the claimants were made defendants in the action.

At the time of the robbery the claimants Murrell Denney, Joyce Buis, Rebecca McCollum and Jewell Snyder were employees of the First State Bank of Eubank and came out of the grueling situation with great credit and glory. Each one of them deserves approbation and an accolade. They were vigilant in disclosing to the public and the peace officers the details of the crime, and in describing the culprits, and giving all the information that they possessed that would be useful in capturing the robbers. Undoubtedly, they performed a great service. It is in the evidence that the claimant Murrell Denney was conspicuous and energetic in his efforts to make known the robbery, to acquaint the officers as to the personal appearance of the criminals, and to give other pertinent facts.

The first question for determination is whether the employees of the robbed bank are eligible to receive or share in the reward. The great weight of authority answers in the negative. [Citation] states the rule thusly:

*To the general rule that, when a reward is offered to the general public for the performance of some specified act, such reward may be claimed by any person who performs such act, is the exception of agents, employees and public officials who are acting within the scope of their employment or official duties. \* \* \* '...*

At the time of the robbery the claimants Murrell Denney, Joyce Buis, Rebecca McCollum, and Jewell Snyder were employees of the First State Bank of Eubank. They were under duty to protect and conserve the resources and moneys of the bank, and safeguard every interest of the institution furnishing them employment. Each of these employees exhibited great courage, and cool bravery, in a time of stress and danger. The community and the county have recompensed them in commendation, admiration and high praise, and the world looks on them as heroes. But in making known the robbery and assisting in acquainting the public and the officers with details of the crime and with identification of the robbers, they performed a duty to the bank and the public, for which they cannot claim a reward.

The claims of Corbin Reynolds, Julia Reynolds, Alvie Reynolds and Gene Reynolds also must fail. According to their statements they gave valuable information to the arresting officers.

However, they did not follow the procedure as set forth in the offer of reward in that they never filed a claim with the Kentucky Bankers Association. It is well established that a claimant of a reward must comply with the terms and conditions of the offer of reward. [Citation]

State Policemen Garret Godby, Johnny Simms and Tilford Reppert made the arrest of the bank robbers and captured the stolen money. All participated in the prosecution. At the time of the arrest, it was the duty of the state policemen to apprehend the criminals. Under the law they cannot claim or share in the reward and they are interposing no claim to it.

This leaves the defendant, Tilford Reppert the sole eligible claimant. The record shows that at the time of the arrest he was a deputy sheriff in Rockcastle County, but the arrest and recovery of the stolen money took place in Pulaski County. He was out of his jurisdiction, and was thus under no legal duty to make the arrest, and is thus eligible to claim and receive the reward. In [Citation] it was said:

*'It is \* \* \* well established that a public officer with the authority of the law to make an arrest may accept an offer of reward or compensation for acts or services performed outside of his bailiwick or not within the scope of his official duties. \* \* \*.'...*

It is manifest from the record that Tilford Reppert is the only claimant qualified and eligible to receive the reward. Therefore, it is the judgment of the circuit court that he is entitled to receive payment of the \$1,500.00 reward now deposited with the Clerk of this Court.

The judgment is affirmed.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the Bankers Association put the resolution of this matter into the court's hands?
2. Several claimants came forward for the reward; only one person got it. What was the difference between the person who got the reward and those who did not?

### Consideration: Required for Contract Modification

*Gross v. Diehl Specialties International, Inc.*

*776 S.W.2d 879 (Missouri Ct. App. 1989)*

Smith, J.

Plaintiff appeals from a jury verdict and resultant judgment for defendant in a breach of employment contract case....

Plaintiff was employed under a fifteen year employment contract originally executed in 1977 between plaintiff and defendant. Defendant, at that time called Dairy Specialties, Inc., was a company in the business of formulating ingredients to produce non-dairy products for use by customers allergic to cow's milk. Plaintiff successfully formulated [Vitamite]...for that usage. Thereafter, on August 24, 1977, plaintiff and defendant corporation entered into an employment contract employing plaintiff as general manager of defendant for fifteen years. Compensation was established at \$14,400 annually plus cost of living increases. In addition, when 10% of defendant's gross profits exceeded the annual salary, plaintiff would receive an additional amount of compensation equal to the difference between his compensation and 10% of the gross profits for such year. On top of that plaintiff was to receive a royalty for the use of each of his inventions and formulae of 1% of the selling price of all of the products produced by defendant using one or more of plaintiff's inventions or formulae during the term of the agreement. That amount was increased to 2% of the selling price following the term of the agreement. The contract further provided that during the term of the agreement the inventions and formulae would be owned equally by plaintiff and defendant and that following the term of the agreement the ownership would revert to plaintiff. During the term of the agreement defendant had exclusive rights to use of the inventions and formulae and after the term of agreement a non-exclusive right of use.

At the time of the execution of the contract, sales had risen from virtually nothing in 1976 to \$750,000 annually from sales of Vitamite and a chocolate flavored product formulated by plaintiff called Chocolite. [Dairy's owner] was in declining health and in 1982 desired to sell his company. At that time yearly sales were \$7,500,000. [Owner] sold the company to the Diehl family enterprises for 3 million dollars.

Prior to sale Diehl insisted that a new contract between plaintiff and defendant be executed or Diehl would substantially reduce the amount to be paid for [the company]. A new contract was executed August 24, 1982. It reduced the expressed term of the contract to 10 years, which provided the same expiration date as the prior contract. It maintained the same base salary of \$14,400 effective September 1982, thereby eliminating any cost of living increases incurred since the original contract. The 10% of gross profit provision remained the same. The new

contract provided that plaintiff's inventions and formula were exclusively owned by defendant during the term of the contract and after its termination. The 1% royalty during the term of the agreement remained the same, but no royalties were provided for after the term of the agreement. No other changes were made in the agreement. Plaintiff received no compensation for executing the new contract. He was not a party to the sale of the company by [Owner] and received nothing tangible from that sale.

After the sale plaintiff was given the title and responsibilities of president of defendant with additional duties but no additional compensation. In 1983 and 1984 the business of the company declined severely and in October 1984, plaintiff's employment with defendant was terminated by defendant. This suit followed....

We turn now to the court's holding that the 1982 agreement was the operative contract. Plaintiff contends this holding is erroneous because there existed no consideration for the 1982 agreement. We agree. A modification of a contract constitutes the making of a new contract and such new contract must be supported by consideration. [Citation] Where a contract has not been fully performed at the time of the new agreement, the substitution of a new provision, resulting in a modification of the obligations on *bothsides*, for a provision in the old contract still unperformed is sufficient consideration for the new contract. While consideration may consist of either a detriment to the promisee or a benefit to the promisor, a promise to carry out an already existing contractual duty does not constitute consideration. [Citation]

Under the 1982 contract defendant assumed no detriment it did not already have. The term of the contract expired on the same date under both contracts. Defendant undertook no greater obligations than it already had. Plaintiff on the other hand received less than he had under the original contract. His base pay was reduced back to its amount in 1977 despite the provision in the 1977 contract for cost of living adjustments. He lost his equal ownership in his formulae during the term of the agreement and his exclusive ownership after the termination of the agreement. He lost all royalties after termination of the agreement and the right to use and license the formulae subject to defendant's right to non-exclusive use upon payment of royalties. In exchange for nothing, defendant acquired exclusive ownership of the formulae during and after the agreement, eliminated royalties after the agreement terminated, turned its non-

exclusive use after termination into exclusive use and control, and achieved a reduction in plaintiff's base salary. Defendant did no more than promise to carry out an already existing contractual duty. There was no consideration for the 1982 agreement.

Defendant asserts that consideration flowed to plaintiff because the purchase of defendant by the Diehls might not have occurred without the agreement and the purchase provided plaintiff with continued employment and a financially viable employer. There is no evidence to support this contention. Plaintiff had continued employment with the same employer under the 1977 agreement. Nothing in the 1982 agreement provided for any additional financial protection to plaintiff. The essence of defendant's position is that [the owner] received more from his sale of the company because of the new agreement than he would have without it. We have difficulty converting [the owner's] windfall into a benefit to plaintiff.

[Remanded to determine how much plaintiff should receive.]

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the court determine that Plaintiff's postemployment benefits should revert to those in his original contract instead being limited to those in the modified contract?
2. What argument did Defendant make as to why the terms of the modified contract should be valid?

## 11.5 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Most agreements—including contract modification at common law (but not under the Uniform Commercial Code [UCC])—are not binding contracts in the absence of what the law terms “consideration.” Consideration is usually defined as a “legal detriment”—an act, forbearance, or a promise. The act can be the payment of money, the delivery of a service, or the transfer of title to property. Consideration is a legal concept in that it centers on the giving up of a legal right or benefit.

An understanding of consideration is important in many commonplace situations, including those in which (1) a debtor and a creditor enter into an accord that is later disputed, (2) a duty is preexisting, (3) a promise is illusory, and (4) creditors agree to a composition.

Some promises are enforceable without consideration. These include certain promises under the UCC and other circumstances, including (1) contracts barred by the statute of limitations, (2) promises by a bankrupt to repay debts, and (3) situations in which justice will be served by invoking the doctrine of promissory estoppel. Determining whether an agreement should be upheld despite the lack of consideration, technically defined, calls for a diligent assessment of the factual circumstances.

## EXERCISES

1. Hornbuckle purchased equipment from Continental Gin (CG) for \$6,300. However, after some of the equipment proved defective, Hornbuckle sent CG a check for \$4,000 marked “by endorsement this check is accepted in full payment,” and CG endorsed and deposited the check. May CG force Hornbuckle to pay the remaining \$2,300? Why?
2. Joseph Hoffman alleged that Red Owl Stores promised him that it would build a store building in Chilton, Wisconsin, and stock it with merchandise for Hoffman to operate in return for Hoffman’s investment of \$18,000. The size, cost, design, and layout of the store building was not discussed, nor were the terms of the lease as to rent, maintenance, and purchase options. Nevertheless, in reliance on Red Owl’s promise, the Hoffmans sold their bakery and grocery store business, purchased the building site in Chilton, and rented a residence there for the family. The deal was never consummated: a dispute arose, Red Owl did not build the store, and it denied liability to Hoffman on the basis that its promise to him was too indefinite with respect to all details for a contract to have resulted. Is Hoffman entitled to some relief? On what theory?
3. Raquel contracted to deliver one hundred widgets to Sam on December 15, for which he would pay \$4,000. On November 25, Sam called her and asked if she could deliver the widgets on December 5. Raquel said she could, and she promised delivery on that day. Is her promise binding? Why?
4. Richard promised to have Darlene’s deck awning constructed by July 10. On June 20, Darlene called him and asked if he could get the job done by July 3, in time for Independence Day. Richard said he could, but he failed to do so, and Darlene had to rent two canopies at some

expense. Darlene claims that because Richard breached his promise, he is liable for the cost of awning rental. Is she correct—was his promise binding? Why?

5. Seller agreed to deliver gasoline to Buyer at \$3.15 per gallon over a period of one year. By the sixth month, gasoline had increased in price over a dollar a gallon. Although Seller had gasoline available for sale, he told Buyer the price would have to increase by that much or he would be unable to deliver. Buyer agreed to the increase, but when billed, refused to pay the additional amount. Is Buyer bound by the promise? Explain.
6. Montbanks's son, Charles, was seeking an account executive position with Dobbs, Smith & Fogarty, Inc., a large brokerage firm. Charles was independent and wished no interference by his well-known father. The firm, after several weeks' deliberation, decided to hire Charles. They made him an offer on April 12, 2010, and Charles accepted. Montbanks, unaware that his son had been hired and concerned that he might not be, mailed a letter to Dobbs on April 13 in which he promised to give the brokerage firm \$150,000 in commission business if the firm would hire his son. The letter was received by Dobbs, and the firm wishes to enforce it against Montbanks. May Dobbs enforce the promise? Why?
7. In 1869, William E. Story promised his nephew, William E. Story II (then sixteen years old), \$5,000 (about \$120,000 in today's money) if "Willie" would abstain from drinking alcohol, smoking, swearing, and playing cards or billiards for money until the nephew reached twenty-one years of age. All of these were legally permissible activities for the teenager at that time in New York State. Willie accepted his uncle's promise and did refrain from the prohibited acts until he turned twenty-one. When the young man asked for the money, his uncle wrote to him that he would honor the promise but would rather wait until Willie was older before delivering the money, interest added on. Willie agreed. Subsequently, Willie assigned the right to receive the money to one Hamer (Willie wanted the money sooner), and Story I died without making any payment. The estate, administered by Franklin Sidway, refused to pay, asserting there was no binding contract due to lack of consideration: the boy suffered no "detriment," and the uncle got no benefit. The trial court agreed with the estate, and the plaintiff appealed. Should the court on appeal affirm or reverse? Explain.



8. Harold Pearsall and Joe Alexander were friends for over twenty-five years. About twice a week, they bought what they called a package: a half-pint of vodka, orange juice, two cups, and two lottery tickets. They went to Alexander's house to watch TV, drink screwdrivers, and scratch the lottery tickets. The two had been sharing tickets and screwdrivers since the Washington, DC, lottery began. On the evening in issue, Pearsall bought the package and asked Alexander, "Are you in on it?" Alexander said yes. Pearsall asked for his half of the purchase price, but Alexander had no money. A few hours later, Alexander, having come by some funds of his own, bought another package. He handed one ticket to Pearsall, and they both scratched the tickets; Alexander's was a \$20,000 winner. When Pearsall asked for his share, Alexander refused to give him anything. Are the necessary elements of offer, acceptance, and consideration present here so as to support Pearsall's assertion the parties had a contract?
9. Defendant, Lee Taylor, had assaulted his wife, who took refuge in the house of Plaintiff, Harrington. The next day, Taylor gained access to the house and began another assault upon his wife. Mrs. Taylor knocked him down with an axe and was on the point of cutting his head open or decapitating him while he was lying on the floor when Plaintiff intervened and caught the axe as it was descending. The blow intended for Defendant fell upon Harrington's hand, mutilating it badly, but saving Defendant's life. Subsequently, Defendant orally promised to pay Plaintiff her damages but, after paying a small sum, failed to pay anything more. Is Harrington entitled to enforce Taylor's entire promise?
10. White Sands Forest Products (Defendant) purchased logging equipment from Clark Corporation (Plaintiff) under an installment contract that gave Plaintiff the right to repossess and resell the equipment if Defendant defaulted on the contract. Defendant did default and agreed to deliver the equipment to Plaintiff if Plaintiff would then discharge Defendant from further obligation. Plaintiff accepted delivery and resold the equipment, but the sale left a deficiency (there was still money owing by Defendant). Plaintiff then sued for the deficiency, and Defendant set up as a defense the accord and satisfaction. Is the defense good?

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Consideration

- a. can consist of a written acknowledgment of some benefit received, even if in fact the benefit is not delivered
- b. cannot be nominal in amount
- c. is a bargained-for act, forbearance, or promise from the promisee
- d. is all of the above

An example of valid consideration is a promise

- a. by a seventeen-year-old to refrain from drinking alcohol
- b. to refrain from going to court
- c. to cook dinner if the promisor can get around to it
- d. to repay a friend for the four years of free legal advice he had provided

An unliquidated debt is a debt

- a. one is not able to pay
- b. not yet paid
- c. of uncertain amount
- d. that is unenforceable debt

The rule that if one party to a contract has not made a binding obligation, the other party is not bound is called

- a. revocation
- b. mutuality of obligation
- c. accord and satisfaction
- d. estoppel

Examples of promises enforceable without consideration include

- a. an agreement modifying a sales contract
- b. a promise to pay a debt after the statute of limitations has run
- c. a debtor's promise to repay a debt that has been discharged in bankruptcy
- d. all of the above

## SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. c
- 2. b

3. c
4. b
5. d



# Chapter 12

## Legality

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. The types of contracts (bargains) that are deemed illegal
2. How courts deal with disputes concerning illegal contracts
3. Under what circumstances courts will enforce otherwise illegal contracts

## 12.1 General Perspectives on Illegality

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why courts refuse to enforce illegal agreements.
2. Recognize the rationale behind exceptions to the rule.

We have discussed the requirements of mutual assent, real assent, and consideration. We now turn to the fourth of the five requirements for a valid contract: the legality of the underlying bargain. The basic rule is that courts will not enforce an illegal bargain. (The term *illegal bargain* is better than *illegal contract* because a contract is by definition a legal agreement, but the latter terminology prevails in common usage.) Why should this be? Why should the courts refuse to honor contracts made privately by people who presumably know what they are doing—for example, a wager on the World Series or a championship fight? Two reasons are usually given. One is that refusal to enforce helps discourage unlawful behavior; the other is that honoring such contracts would demean the judiciary. Are these reasons valid? Yes and no, in the opinion of one contracts scholar:

*[D]enying relief to parties who have engaged in an illegal transaction...helps to effectuate the public policy involved by discouraging the conduct that is disapproved. Mere denial of contractual and quasi-contractual remedy [however] rarely has a substantial effect in discouraging illegal conduct. A man who is hired to perform a murder is not in the least deterred by the fact that the courts are not open to him to collect his fee. Such a man has other methods of enforcement, and they are in fact more effective than legal process. The same is true in varying degrees where less*

*heinous forms of illegal conduct are involved. Even in the matter of usury it was found that mere denial of enforcement was of little value in the effort to eliminate the loan shark. And restraints of trade were not curbed to an appreciable extent until contracts in restraint of trade were made criminal.*

*In most instances, then, the protection of the good name of the judicial institution must provide the principal reason for the denial of a remedy to one who has trafficked in the forbidden. This is, moreover, a very good reason. The first duty of an institution is to preserve itself, and if the courts to any appreciable extent busied themselves with "justice among thieves," the community...would be shocked and the courts would be brought into disrepute.<sup>[1]</sup>*

Strictly enforced, the rule prohibiting courts from ordering the parties to honor illegal contracts is harsh. It means that a promisee who has already performed under the contract can neither obtain performance of the act for which he bargained nor recover the money he paid or the value of the performance he made. The court will simply leave the parties where it finds them, meaning that one of the parties will have received an uncompensated benefit.

Not surprisingly, the severity of the rule against enforcement has led courts to seek ways to moderate its impact, chiefly by modifying it according to the principle of restitution. In general, restitution requires that one who has conferred a benefit or suffered a loss should not unfairly be denied compensation.

Pursuing this notion, the courts have created several exceptions to the general rule. Thus a party who is excusably ignorant that his promise violates public policy and a party who is not equally in the wrong may recover. Likewise, when a party "would otherwise suffer a forfeiture that is disproportionate in relation to the contravention of public policy involved," restitution will be allowed.<sup>[2]</sup> Other exceptions exist when the party seeking restitution withdraws from the transaction contemplated in the contract before the illegal purpose has been carried out and when "allowing the claim would put an end to a continuing situation that is contrary to the public interest."<sup>[3]</sup> An example of the latter situation occurs when two bettors place money in the hands of a stakeholder. If the wager is unlawful, the loser of the bet has the right to recover his money from the stakeholder before it is paid out to the winner.

Though by and large courts enforce contracts without considering the worth or merits of the bargain they incorporate, freedom of contract can conflict with other public policies. Tensions arise between the desire to let people pursue their own ends and the belief that certain kinds of conduct should not be encouraged. Thus a patient may agree to be treated by an herbalist, but state laws prohibit medical care except by licensed physicians. Law and public policies against usury, gambling, obstructing justice, bribery, corrupt influence, perjury, restraint of trade, impairment of domestic relations, and fraud all significantly affect the authority and willingness of courts to enforce contracts.

In this chapter, we will consider two types of illegality: (1) that which results from a bargain that violates a statute and (2) that which the courts deem contrary to public policy, even though not expressly set forth in statutes.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Courts refuse to enforce illegal bargains notwithstanding the basic concept of freedom to contract because they do not wish to reward illegal behavior or sully themselves with adjudication of that which is forbidden to undertake. However, fairness sometimes compels courts to make exceptions.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why is *illegal contract* a contradiction in terms?
2. Why do courts refuse to enforce contracts (or bargains) made by competent adults if the contracts harm no third party but are illegal?

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[1] Harold C. Havighurst, review of *Corbin on Contracts*, by Arthur L. Corbin, *Yale Law Journal* 61 (1952): 1143, 1144–45.

[2] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 197(b).

[3] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 197(b).

## 12.2 Agreements in Violation of Statute

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand that various types of bargains may be made illegal by statute, including gambling, some service-for-fee agreements involving unlicensed practitioners, and usury.

2. Recognize that while gambling contracts are often illegal, some agreements that might appear to involve gambling are not.

## Overview

Any bargain that violates the criminal law—including statutes that govern extortion, robbery, embezzlement, forgery, some gambling, licensing, and consumer credit transactions—is illegal. Thus determining whether contracts are lawful may seem to be an easy enough task. Clearly, whenever the statute itself explicitly forbids the making of the contract or the performance agreed upon, the bargain (such as a contract to sell drugs) is unlawful. But when the statute does not expressly prohibit the making of the contract, courts examine a number of factors, as discussed in [Section 12.5.1 "Extension of Statutory Illegality Based on Public Policy"](#) involving the apparently innocent sale of a jewelry manufacturing firm whose real business was making marijuana-smoking paraphernalia.

## Types of Bargains Made Illegal by Statute

### Gambling Contracts

All states have regulations affecting gambling (wagering) contracts because gambling tends to be an antiutilitarian activity most attractive to those who can least afford it, because gambling tends to reinforce fatalistic mind-sets fundamentally incompatible with capitalism and democracy, because gambling can be addictive, and because gambling inevitably attracts criminal elements lured by readily available money. With the spread of antitax enthusiasms over the last thirty-some years, however, some kinds of gambling have been legalized and regulated, including state-sponsored lotteries. Gambling is betting on an outcome of an event over which the bettors have no control where the purpose is to play with the risk.

But because the outcome is contingent on events that lie outside the power of the parties to control does not transform a bargain into a wager. For example, if a gardener agrees to care for the grounds of a septuagenarian for life in return for an advance payment of \$10,000, the uncertainty of the date of the landowner's death does not make the deal a wager. The parties have struck a bargain that accurately assesses, to the satisfaction of each, the risks of the contingency in question. Likewise, the fact that an agreement is phrased in the form of a wager does not make it one. Thus a father says to his daughter, "I'll bet you can't get an A in organic

chemistry. If you do, I'll give you \$50." This is a unilateral contract, the consideration to the father being the daughter's achieving a good grade, a matter over which she has complete control.

Despite the general rule against enforcing wagers, there are exceptions, most statutory but some rooted in the common law. The common law permits the sale or purchase of securities: Sally invests \$6,000 in stock in Acme Company, hoping the stock will increase in value, though she has no control over the firm's management. It is not called gambling; it is considered respectable risk taking in the capitalist system, or "entrepreneurialism." (It really is gambling, though, similar to horse-race gambling.) But because there are speculative elements to some agreements, they are subject to state and federal regulation.

Insurance contracts are also speculative, but unless one party has no insurable interest (a concern for the person or thing insured) in the insured, the contract is not a wager. Thus if you took out a life insurance contract on the life of someone whose name you picked out of the phone book, the agreement would be void because you and the insurance company would have been gambling on a contingent event. (You bet that the person would die within the term of the policy, the insurance company that she would not.) If, however, you insure your spouse, your business partner, or your home, the contingency does not make the policy a wagering agreement because you will have suffered a direct loss should it occur, and the agreement, while compensating for a possible loss, does not create a new risk just for the "game."

### **Sunday Contracts**

At common law, contracts entered into on Sundays, as well as other commercial activities, were valid and enforceable. But a separate, religious tradition that traces to the Second Commandment frowned on work performed on "the Lord's Day." In 1781 a New Haven city ordinance banning Sunday work was printed on blue paper, and since that time such laws have been known as blue laws. The first statewide blue law was enacted in the United States in 1788; it prohibited travel, work, sports and amusements, and the carrying on of any business or occupation on Sundays. The only exceptions in most states throughout most of the nineteenth century were mutual promises to marry and contracts of necessity or charity. As the Puritan fervor wore off, and citizens were, more and more, importuned to consider themselves



“consumers” in a capitalistic economic system, the laws have faded in importance and are mostly repealed, moribund, or unenforced. Washington State, up until 2008, completely prohibited hard alcohol sales on Sunday, and all liquor stores were closed, but subsequently the state—desperate for tax revenue—relaxed the prohibition.

### **Usury**

A usury statute is one that sets the maximum allowable interest that may be charged on a loan; usury is charging illegal interest rates. Formerly, such statutes were a matter of real importance because the penalty levied on the lender—ranging from forfeiture of the interest, or of both the principal and the interest, or of some part of the principal—was significant. But usury laws, like Sunday contract laws, have been relaxed to accommodate an ever-more-frenzied consumer society. There are a number of transactions to which the laws do not apply, varying by state: small consumer loans, pawn shop loans, payday loans, and corporate loans. In *Marquette v. First Omaha Service Corp.*, the Supreme Court ruled that a national bank could charge the highest interest rate allowed in its home state to customers living anywhere in the United States, including states with restrictive interest caps. <sup>[1]</sup> Thus it was that in 1980 Citibank moved its credit card headquarters from cosmopolitan New York City to the somewhat less cosmopolitan Sioux Falls, South Dakota. South Dakota had recently abolished its usury laws, and so, as far as credit-card interest rates, the sky was the limit. That appealed to Citibank and a number of other financial institutions, and to the state: it became a major player in the US financial industry, garnering many jobs. <sup>[2]</sup>

### **Licensing Statutes**

To practice most professions and carry on the trade of an increasing number of occupations, states require that providers of services possess licenses—hairdressers, doctors, plumbers, real estate brokers, and egg inspectors are among those on a long list. As sometimes happens, though, a person may contract for the services of one who is unlicensed either because he is unqualified and carrying on his business without a license or because for technical reasons (e.g., forgetting to mail in the license renewal application) he does not possess a license at the moment. Robin calls Paul, a plumber, to install the pipes for her new kitchen. Paul, who has no

license, puts in all the pipes and asks to be paid. Having discovered that Paul is unlicensed, Robin refuses to pay. May Paul collect?

To answer the question, a three-step analysis is necessary. First, is a license required? Some occupations may be performed without a license (e.g., lawn mowing). Others may be performed with or without certain credentials, the difference lying in what the professional may tell the public. (For instance, an accountant need not be a certified public accountant to carry on most accounting functions.) Let us assume that the state requires everyone who does any sort of plumbing for pay to have a valid license.

The second step is to determine whether the licensing statute explicitly bars recovery by someone who has performed work while unlicensed. Some do; many others contain no specific provision on the point. Statutes that do bar recovery must of course govern the courts when they are presented with the question.

If the statute is silent, courts must, in the third step of the analysis, distinguish between “regulatory” and “revenue” licenses. A regulatory license is intended to protect the public health, safety, and welfare. To obtain these licenses, the practitioner of the art must generally demonstrate his or her abilities by taking some sort of examination, like the bar exam for lawyers or the medical boards for doctors. A plumber’s or electrician’s licensing requirement might fall into this category. A revenue license generally requires no such examination and is imposed for the sake of raising revenue and to ensure that practitioners register their address so they can be found if a disgruntled client wants to serve them legal papers for a lawsuit. Some revenue licenses, in addition to requiring registration, require practitioners to demonstrate that they have insurance. A license to deliver milk, open to anyone who applies and pays the fee, would be an example of a revenue license. (In some states, plumbing licenses are for revenue purposes only.)

Generally speaking, failure to hold a regulatory license bars recovery, but the absence of a revenue or registration license does not—the person may obtain the license and then move to recover. See [Section 12.5.2 "Unlicensed Practitioner Cannot Collect Fee"](#) for an example of a situation in which the state statute demands practitioners be licensed.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Gambling, interest rates, and Sunday contracts are among the types of contracts that have, variously, been subject to legislative illegality. Laws may require certain persons to have licenses in order to practice a trade or profession. Whether an unlicensed person is barred from recovering a fee for service depends on the language of the statute and the purpose of the requirement: if it is a mere revenue-raising or registration statute, recovery will often be allowed. If the practitioner is required to prove competency, no recovery is possible for an unlicensed person.

## EXERCISES

1. List the typical kinds of contracts made illegal by statute.
2. Why are some practitioners completely prohibited from collecting a fee for service if they don't have a license, and others allowed to collect the fee after they get the license?
3. If no competency test is required, why do some statutes require the practitioner to be licensed?

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[1] *Marquette v. First Omaha Service Corp.*, 439 US 299 (1978).

[2] See Thomas M. Reardon, "T. M. Reardon's first-hand account of Citibank's move to South Dakota," *NorthWestern Financial Review*, September 15, 2004, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-708279811.html>. Mr. Reardon was a member of the South Dakota Bankers' Association.

## 12.3 Bargains Made Illegal by Common Law

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand what contracts or bargains have been declared illegal by courts.

### Overview

Public policy is expressed by courts as well as legislatures. In determining whether to enforce a contract where there is no legislative dictate, courts must ordinarily balance the interests at stake. To strike the proper balance, courts must weigh the parties' expectations, the forfeitures that would result from denial of enforcement, and the public interest favoring enforcement against these factors: the strength of the policy, whether denying enforcement will further the

policy, the seriousness and deliberateness of the violation, and how direct the connection is between the misconduct and the contractual term to be enforced. <sup>[1]</sup>

## **Types of Bargains Made Illegal by Common Law**

### **Common-Law Restraint of Trade**

One of the oldest public policies evolved by courts is the common-law prohibition against restraint of trade. From the early days of industrialism, the courts took a dim view of ostensible competitors who agreed among themselves to fix prices or not to sell in each other's territories. Since 1890, with the enactment of the Sherman Act, the law of restraint of trade has been absorbed by federal and state antitrust statutes. But the common-law prohibition still exists. Though today it is concerned almost exclusively with promises not to compete in sales of businesses and employment contracts, it can arise in other settings. For example, George's promise to Arthur never to sell the parcel of land that Arthur is selling to him is void because it unreasonably restrains trade in the land.

The general rule is one of reason: not every restraint of trade is unlawful; only unreasonable ones are. As the Restatement puts it, "Every promise that relates to business dealings or to a professional or other gainful occupation operates as a restraint in the sense that it restricts the promisor's future activity. Such a promise is not, however, unenforceable, unless the restraint that it imposes is unreasonably detrimental to the smooth operation of a freely competitive private economy." <sup>[2]</sup> An agreement that restrains trade will be construed as unreasonable unless it is ancillary to a legitimate business interest and is no greater than necessary to protect the legitimate interest. Restraint-of-trade cases usually arise in two settings: (1) the sale of a business and an attendant agreement not to compete with the purchasers and (2) an employee's agreement not to compete with the employer should the employee leave for any reason.

### **Sale of a Business**

A first common area where a restraint-of-trade issue may arise is with the sale of a business. Regina sells her lingerie store to Victoria and promises not to establish a competing store in town for one year. Since Victoria is purchasing Regina's goodwill (the fact that customers are used to shopping at her store), as well as her building and inventory, there is clearly a property interest to be protected. And the geographical limitation ("in town") is reasonable if that is

where the store does business. But if Regina had agreed not to engage in any business in town, or to wait ten years before opening up a new store, or not to open up a new store anywhere within one hundred miles of town, she could avoid the noncompetition terms of the contract because the restraint in each case (nature, duration, and geographic area of restraint) would have been broader than necessary to protect Victoria's interest. Whether the courts will uphold an agreement not to compete depends on all the circumstances of the particular case, as the Connecticut barber in [Section 12.5.3 "Unconscionability"](#) discovered.

### **Employment Noncompete Agreements**

A second common restraint-of-trade issue arises with regard to noncompete agreements in employment contracts. As a condition of employment by the research division of a market research firm, Bruce, a product analyst, is required to sign an agreement in which he promises, for a period of one year after leaving the company, not to “engage, directly or indirectly, in any business competing with the company and located within fifty miles of the company's main offices.” The principal reason recited in the agreement for this covenant not to compete is that by virtue of the employment, Bruce will come to learn a variety of internal secrets, including client lists, trade or business secrets, reports, confidential business discussions, ongoing research, publications, computer programs, and related papers. Is this agreement a lawful restraint of trade?

Here both the property interest of the employer and the extent of the restraint are issues. Certainly an employer has an important competitive interest in seeing that company information not walk out the door with former employees. Nevertheless, a promise by an employee not to compete with his or her former employer is scrutinized carefully by the courts, and an injunction (an order directing a person to stop doing what he or she should not do) will be issued cautiously, partly because the prospective employee is usually confronted with a contract of adhesion (take it or leave it) and is in a weak bargaining position compared to the employer, and partly because an injunction might cause the employee's unemployment. Many courts are not enthusiastic about employment noncompete agreements. The California Business and Professions Code provides that “every contract by which anyone is restrained from engaging in a lawful profession, trade, or business of any kind is to that extent void.” <sup>[3]</sup> As a result of the

statute, and to promote entrepreneurial robustness, California courts typically interpret the statute broadly and refuse to enforce noncompete agreements. Other states are less stingy, and employers have attempted to avoid the strictures of no-enforcement state rulings by providing that their employment contracts will be interpreted according to the law of a state where noncompetes are favorably viewed.

If a covenant not to compete is ruled unlawful, the courts can pursue one of three courses by way of remedy. A court can refuse to enforce the entire covenant, freeing the employee to compete thenceforth. The court could delete from the agreement only that part that is unreasonable and enforce the remainder (the “blue pencil” rule). In some states, the courts have moved away from this rule and have actually taken to rewriting the objectionable clause themselves. Since the parties intended that there be some form of restriction on competition, a reasonable modification would achieve a more just result. <sup>[4]</sup>

### **Unconscionable Contracts**

Courts may refuse to enforce unconscionable contracts, those that are very one-sided, unfair, the product of unequal bargaining power, or oppressive; a court may find the contract divisible and enforce only the parts that are not unconscionable.

The common-law rule is reflected in Section 208 of the Restatement: “If a contract or term thereof is unconscionable at the time the contract is made a court may refuse to enforce the contract, or may enforce the remainder of the contract without the unconscionable term, or may so limit the application of any unconscionable term as to avoid any unconscionable result.”

And the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) (again, of course, a statute, not common law) provides a similar rule in Section 2-302(1): “If the court as a matter of law finds the contract or any clause of the contract to have been unconscionable at the time it was made the court may refuse to enforce the contract, or it may enforce the remainder of the contract without the unconscionable clause, or it may so limit the application of any unconscionable clause as to avoid any unconscionable result.”

*Unconscionable* is not defined in the Restatement or the UCC, but cases have given gloss to the meaning, as in [Section 12.5.3 "Unconscionability"](#), *Williams v. Walker-Thomas Furniture Co.*, a well-known early interpretation of the section by the DC Court of Appeals.

Unconscionability may arise procedurally or substantively. A term is procedurally unconscionable if it is imposed upon the “weaker” party because of fine or inconspicuous print, unexpected placement in the contract, lack of opportunity to read the term, lack of education or sophistication that precludes understanding, or lack of equality of bargaining power.

Substantive unconscionability arises where the affected terms are oppressive and harsh, where the term deprives a party of any real remedy for breach. Most often—but not always—courts find unconscionable contracts in the context of consumer transactions rather than commercial transactions. In the latter case, the assumption is that the parties tend to be sophisticated businesspeople able to look out for their own contract interests.

### **Exculpatory Clauses**

The courts have long held that public policy disfavors attempts to contract out of tort liability. Exculpatory clauses that exempt one party from tort liability to the other for harm caused intentionally or recklessly are unenforceable without exception. A contract provision that exempts a party from tort liability for negligence is unenforceable under two general circumstances: (1) when it “exempts an employer from liability to an employee for injury in the course of his employment” or (2) when it exempts one charged with a duty of public service and who is receiving compensation from liability to one to whom the duty is owed. <sup>[5]</sup> Contract terms with offensive exculpatory clauses may be considered somewhat akin to unconscionability.

Put shortly, exculpatory clauses are OK if they are reasonable. Put not so shortly, exculpatory clauses will generally be held valid if (1) the agreement does not involve a business generally thought suitable for public regulation (a twenty-kilometer bicycle race, for example, is probably not one thought generally suitable for public regulation, whereas a bus line is); (2) the party seeking exculpation is not performing a business of great importance to the public or of practical necessity for some members of the public; (3) the party does not purport to be performing the service to just anybody who comes along (unlike the bus line); (4) the parties are dealing at arms’ length, able to bargain about the contract; (5) the person or property of the purchaser is not placed under control of the seller, subject to his or his agent’s carelessness; or (6) the clause is conspicuous and clear. <sup>[6]</sup>

### **Obstructing the Administration of Justice or Violating a Public Duty**

It is well established under common law that contracts that would interfere with the administration of justice or that call upon a public official to violate a public duty are void and unenforceable. Examples of such contracts are numerous: to conceal or compound a crime, to pay for the testimony of a witness in court contingent on the court's ruling, to suppress evidence by paying a witness to leave the state, or to destroy documents. Thus, in an unedifying case in Arkansas, a gambler sued a circuit court judge to recover \$1,675 allegedly paid to the judge as protection money, and the Arkansas Supreme Court affirmed the dismissal of the suit, holding, "The law will not aid either party to the alleged illegal and void contract...but will leave them where it finds them, if they have been equally cognizant of the illegality."<sup>[7]</sup> Also in this category are bribes, agreements to obstruct or delay justice (jury tampering, abuse of the legal process), and the like.

### **Family Relations**

Another broad area in which public policy intrudes on private contractual arrangements is that of undertakings between couples, either prior to or during marriage. Marriage is quintessentially a relationship defined by law, and individuals have limited ability to change its scope through legally enforceable contracts. Moreover, marriage is an institution that public policy favors, and agreements that unreasonably restrain marriage are void. Thus a father's promise to pay his twenty-one-year-old daughter \$100,000 if she refrains from marrying for ten years would be unenforceable. However, a promise in a postnuptial (after marriage) agreement that if the husband predeceases the wife, he will provide his wife with a fixed income for as long as she remains unmarried is valid because the offer of support is related to the need. (Upon remarriage, the need would presumably be less pressing.) Property settlements before, during, or upon the breakup of a marriage are generally enforceable, since property is not considered to be an essential incident of marriage. But agreements in the form of property arrangements that tend to be detrimental to marriage are void—for example, a prenuptial (premarital) contract in which the wife-to-be agrees on demand of the husband-to-be to leave the marriage and renounce any claims upon the husband-to-be at any time in the future in return for which he will pay her \$100,000. Separation agreements are not considered detrimental to marriage as long as they are entered after or in contemplation of immediate separation; but a separation



agreement must be “fair” under the circumstances, and judges may review them upon challenge. Similarly, child custody agreements are not left to the whim of the parents but must be consistent with the best interest of the child, and the courts retain the power to examine this question.

The types of contracts or bargains that might be found illegal are innumerable, limited only by the ingenuity of those who seek to overreach.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Courts will not enforce contracts that are, broadly speaking, contrary to public policy. These include some noncompete agreements, exculpatory clauses, unconscionable bargains, contracts to obstruct the public process or justice, and contracts interfering with family relations.

### EXERCISES

1. Why are employment noncompete agreements viewed less favorably than sale-of-business noncompete agreements?
2. Can a person by contract exculpate herself from liability for gross negligence? For ordinary negligence?
3. A parking lot agreement says the parking lot is “not responsible for loss of contents or damage to the vehicle.” Is that acceptable? Explain.
4. A valet parking lot agreement—where the car owner gives the keys to the attendant who parks the car—has the same language as that for the lot in Exercise 3. Is that acceptable? Explain.

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- [1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 178.
  - [2] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 186(a).
  - [3] California Business and Professions Code, Section 16600.
  - [4] *Raimondo v. Van Vlerah*, 325 N.E.2d 544 (Ohio 1975).
  - [5] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 195.
  - [6] *Henriouille v. Marin Ventures, Inc.*, 573 P.2d 465 (Calif. 1978).
  - [7] *Womack v. Maner*, 301 S.W.2d 438 (Ark. 1957).

## 12.4 Effect of Illegality and Exceptions

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize that courts will not enforce illegal bargains.
2. Know that there are exceptions to that rule.

### Effect of Illegality

The general rule is this: courts will not enforce illegal bargains. The parties are left where the court found them, and no relief is granted: it's a hands-off policy. The illegal agreement is void, and that a wrongdoer has benefited to the other's detriment does not matter.

For example, suppose a specialty contractor, statutorily required to have a license, constructs a waterslide for Plaintiff, when the contractor knew or should have known he was unlicensed. Plaintiff discovers the impropriety and refuses to pay the contractor \$80,000 remaining on the deal. The contractor will not get paid.<sup>[1]</sup> In another example, a man held himself out to be an architect in a jurisdiction requiring that architects pass a test to be licensed. He was paid \$80,000 to design a house costing \$900,000. The project was late and over budget, and the building violated relevant easement building-code rules. The unlicensed architect was not allowed to keep his fee.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Exceptions

As always in the law, there are exceptions. Of relevance here are situations where a court might permit one party to recover: party withdrawing before performance, party protected by statute, party not equally at fault, excusable ignorance, and partial illegality.

#### Party Withdrawing before Performance

Samantha and Carlene agree to bet on a soccer game and deliver their money to the stakeholder. Subsequently, but before the payout, Carlene decides she wants out; she can get her money from the stakeholder. Ralph hires Jacob for \$5,000 to arrange a bribe of a juror. Ralph has a change of heart; he can get his money from Jacob.

#### Party Protected by Statute

An airline pilot, forbidden by federal law from working overtime, nevertheless does so; she would be entitled to payment for the overtime worked. Securities laws forbid the sale or

purchase of unregistered offerings—such a contract is illegal; the statute allows the purchaser rescission (return of the money paid). An attorney (apparently unwittingly) charged his client beyond what the statute allowed for procuring for the client a government pension; the pensioner could get the excess from the attorney.

### **Party Not Equally at Fault**

One party induces another to make an illegal contract by undue influence, fraud, or duress; the victim can recover the consideration conveyed to the miscreant if possible.

### **Excusable Ignorance**

A woman agrees to marry a man not knowing that he is already married; bigamy is illegal, the marriage is void, and she may sue him for damages. A laborer is hired to move sealed crates, which contain marijuana; it is illegal to ship, sell, or use marijuana, but the laborer is allowed payment for his services.

### **Partial Illegality**

A six-page employment contract contains two paragraphs of an illegal noncompete agreement. The illegal part is thrown out, but the legal parts are enforceable.

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

There are a number of exceptions to the general rule that courts give no relief to either party to an illegal contract. The rule may be relaxed in cases where justice would be better served than by following the stricture of hands off.

#### **EXERCISES**

1. When, in general, will a court allow a party relief from an illegal contract (or bargain)?
2. A and B engage in a game of high-stakes poker under circumstances making the game illegal in the jurisdiction. A owes B \$5,000 when A loses. When A does not pay, B sues. Does B get the money? What if A had paid B the \$5,000 and then sued to get it back?

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[1] *Pacific Custom Pools, Inc. v. Turner Construction*, 94 Cal. Rptr. 2d 756 (Calif. 2000).

[2] *Ransburg v. Haase*, 586 N.E. 2d 1295 (Ill. Ct. App. 1992).

## **12.5 Cases**

## Extension of Statutory Illegality Based on Public Policy

*Bovard v. American Horse Enterprises*

*247 Cal. Rptr. 340 (Calif. 1988)*

*[Bovard sued Ralph and American Horse Enterprises (a corporation) to recover on promissory notes that were signed when Ralph purchased the corporation, ostensibly a jewelry-making business. The trial court dismissed Bovard's complaint.]*

Puglia, J.

The court found that the corporation predominantly produced paraphernalia used to smoke marijuana [roach clips and bongs] and was not engaged significantly in jewelry production, and that Bovard had recovered the corporate machinery through self-help [i.e., he had repossessed it]. The parties do not challenge these findings. The court acknowledged that the manufacture of drug paraphernalia was not itself illegal in 1978 when Bovard and Ralph contracted for the sale of American Horse Enterprises, Inc. However, the court concluded a public policy against the manufacture of drug paraphernalia was implicit in the statute making the possession, use and transfer of marijuana unlawful. The trial court held the consideration for the contract was contrary to the policy of express law, and the contract was therefore illegal and void. Finally, the court found the parties were in *pari delicto* [equally at fault] and thus with respect to their contractual dispute should be left as the court found them.

The trial court concluded the consideration for the contract was contrary to the policy of the law as expressed in the statute prohibiting the possession, use and transfer of marijuana. Whether a contract is contrary to public policy is a question of law to be determined from the circumstances of the particular case. Here, the critical facts are not in dispute. Whenever a court becomes aware that a contract is illegal, it has a duty to refrain from entertaining an action to enforce the contract. Furthermore the court will not permit the parties to maintain an action to settle or compromise a claim based on an illegal contract....

[There are several] factors to consider in analyzing whether a contract violates public policy:

“Before labeling a contract as being contrary to public policy, courts must carefully inquire into the nature of the conduct, the extent of public harm which may be involved, and the moral

quality of the conduct of the parties in light of the prevailing standards of the community [Citations]”

These factors are more comprehensively set out in the Restatement Second of Contracts section 178:

*(1) A promise or other term of an agreement is unenforceable on grounds of public policy if legislation provides that it is unenforceable or the interest in its enforcement is clearly outweighed in the circumstances by a public policy against the enforcement of such terms.*

*(2) In weighing the interest in the enforcement of a term, account is taken of*

*(a) the parties' justified expectations,*

*(b) any forfeiture that would result if enforcement were denied, and*

*(c) any special public interest in the enforcement of the particular term.*

*(3) In weighing a public policy against enforcement of a term, account is taken of*

*(a) the strength of that policy as manifested by legislation or judicial decisions,*

*(b) the likelihood that a refusal to enforce the term will further that policy,*

*(c) the seriousness of any misconduct involved and the extent to which it was deliberate, and*

*(d) the directness of the connection between that misconduct and the term.*

Applying the Restatement test to the present circumstances, we conclude the interest in enforcing this contract is very tenuous. Neither party was reasonably justified in expecting the government would not eventually act to geld American Horse Enterprises, a business harnessed to the production of paraphernalia used to facilitate the use of an illegal drug. Moreover, although voidance of the contract imposed a forfeiture on Bovard, he did recover the corporate machinery, the only assets of the business which could be used for lawful purposes, i.e., to manufacture jewelry. Thus, the forfeiture was significantly mitigated if not negligible. Finally, there is no special public interest in the enforcement of this contract, only the general interest in preventing a party to a contract from avoiding a debt.

On the other hand, the Restatement factors favoring a public policy against enforcement of this contract are very strong. As we have explained, the public policy against manufacturing

paraphernalia to facilitate the use of marijuana is strongly implied in the statutory prohibition against the possession, use, etc., of marijuana, a prohibition which dates back at least to 1929....Obviously, refusal to enforce the instant contract will further that public policy not only in the present circumstances but by serving notice on manufacturers of drug paraphernalia that they may not resort to the judicial system to protect or advance their business interests. Moreover, it is immaterial that the business conducted by American Horse Enterprises was not expressly prohibited by law when Bovard and Ralph made their agreement since both parties knew that the corporation's products would be used primarily for purposes which were expressly illegal. We conclude the trial court correctly declared the contract contrary to the policy of express law and therefore illegal and void.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the court think it was significant that Bovard had repossessed the jewelry-making equipment?
2. What did Bovard want in this case?
3. If it was not illegal to make bongs and roach clips, why did the court determine that this contract should not be enforced?

### Unlicensed Practitioner Cannot Collect Fee

*Venturi & Company v. Pacific Malibu Development Corp.*

*172 Cal.App.4th 1417 (Calif. Ct. App. 2009)*

Rubin, J.

In June 2003, plaintiff Venturi & Company LLC and defendant Pacific Malibu Development Corp. entered into a contract involving development of a high-end resort on undeveloped property on the Bahamian island of Little Exuma. Under the contract, plaintiff agreed to serve as a financial advisor and find financing for the Little Exuma project....[P]laintiff was entitled to some payment under the contract even if plaintiff did not secure financing for the project [called a success fee].

After signing the contract, plaintiff contacted more than 60 potential sources of financing for the project....[I]n the end, defendants did not receive financing from any source that plaintiff had identified.

Defendants terminated the contract in January 2005. Two months earlier, however, defendants had signed a [financing agreement] with the Talisker Group. Plaintiff was not involved in defendants' negotiations with the Talisker Group....Nevertheless, plaintiff claimed the contract's provision for a success fee entitled plaintiff to compensation following the [agreement]. When defendants refused to pay plaintiff's fee, plaintiff sued defendants for the fee and for the reasonable value of plaintiff's services.

Defendants moved for summary judgment. They argued plaintiff had provided the services of a real estate broker by soliciting financing for the Little Exuma project yet did not have a broker's license. Thus, defendants asserted...the Business and Professions Code barred plaintiff from receiving any compensation as an unlicensed broker....Plaintiff opposed summary judgment. It argued that one of its managing principals, Jane Venturi, had a real estate sales license and was employed by a real estate broker (whom plaintiff did not identify) when defendants had signed their term sheet with the Talisker Group, the document that triggered plaintiff's right to a fee. The court entered summary judgment for defendants. The court found plaintiff had acted as a real estate broker when working on the Little Exuma project. The court pointed, however, to plaintiff's lack of evidence that Jane Venturi's unnamed broker had employed or authorized her to work on the project....[Summary judgment was issued in favor of defendants, denying plaintiff any recovery.] This appeal followed.

The court correctly ruled plaintiff could not receive compensation for providing real estate broker services to defendants because plaintiff was not a licensed broker. (Section 11136 [broker's license required to collect compensation for broker services].) But decisions such as *Lindenstadt* [Citation] establish that the court erred in denying plaintiff compensation to the extent plaintiff's services were not those of a real estate broker. In *Lindenstadt*, the parties entered into 25 to 30 written agreements in which the plaintiff promised to help the defendant find businesses for possible acquisition. After the plaintiff found a number of such businesses, the defendant refused to compensate the plaintiff. The defendant cited the plaintiff's performance of broker's services without a license as justifying its refusal to pay. On appeal, the appellate court rejected the defendant's sweeping contention that the plaintiff's unlicensed services for *some* business opportunities meant the plaintiff could not receive compensation

for *any* business opportunity. Rather, the appellate court directed the trial court to examine individually each business opportunity to determine whether the plaintiff acted as an unlicensed broker for that transaction or instead provided only services for which it did not need a broker's license.

Likewise here, the contract called for plaintiff to provide a range of services, some apparently requiring a broker's license, others seemingly not. Moreover, and more to the point, plaintiff denied having been involved in arranging, let alone negotiating, defendants' placement of Securities with the Talisker Group for which plaintiff claimed a "success fee" under the contract's provision awarding it a fee even if it had no role in procuring the financing. Thus, triable issues existed involving the extent to which plaintiff provided either unlicensed broker services or, alternatively, non-broker services for which it did not need a license. (Accord: [Citation] [severability allowed partial enforcement of personal manager employment contract when license required for some, but not all, services rendered under the contract].)

[T]he contract here...envisioned plaintiff directing its efforts toward many potential sources of financing. As to some of those sources, plaintiff may have crossed the line into performing broker services. But for other sources, plaintiff may have provided only financial and marketing advice for which it did not need a broker's license. (See, e.g. [Citation] [statute barring unlicensed contractor from receiving fees for some services did not prohibit recovery for work not within scope of licensing statute].) And finally, as to the Talisker Group, plaintiff may have provided even less assistance than financial and marketing advice, given that plaintiff denied involvement with the group. Whether plaintiff crossed the line into providing broker services is thus a triable issue of fact that we cannot resolve on summary judgment.

...Plaintiff...did not have a broker's license, and therefore was not entitled to compensation for broker's services. Plaintiff contends it was properly licensed because one of its managers, Jane Venturi, obtained a real estate sales license in February 2004. Thus, she, and plaintiff claims by extension itself, were licensed when defendants purportedly breached the contract by refusing to pay plaintiff months later for the Talisker Group placement. Jane Venturi's sales license was not, however, sufficient; only a licensed broker may provide broker services. A sales license does not permit its holder to represent another unless the salesperson acts under a broker's authority.



The judgment for defendants is vacated, and the trial court is directed to enter a new order denying defendants' motion for summary judgment....

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the plaintiff think it should be entitled to full recovery under the contract, including for services rendered as a real estate broker? Why did the court deny that?
2. Even if the plaintiff were not a real estate broker, why would that mean it could not recover for real estate services provided to the defendant?
3. The appeals court remanded the case; what did it suggest the plaintiff should recover on retrial?

### Unconscionability

*Williams v. Walker-Thomas Furniture Co.*

*350 F.2d 445 (D.C. Ct. App. 1965)*

Wright, J.

Appellee, Walker-Thomas Furniture Company, operates a retail furniture store in the District of Columbia. During the period from 1957 to 1962 each appellant in these cases purchased a number of household items from Walker-Thomas, for which payment was to be made in installments. The terms of each purchase were contained in a printed form contract which set forth the value of the purchased item and purported to lease the item to appellant for a stipulated monthly rent payment. The contract then provided, in substance, that title would remain in Walker-Thomas until the total of all the monthly payments made equaled the stated value of the item, at which time appellants could take title. In the event of a default in the payment of any monthly installment, Walker-Thomas could repossess the item.

The contract further provided that 'the amount of each periodical installment payment to be made by (purchaser) to the Company under this present lease shall be inclusive of and not in addition to the amount of each installment payment to be made by (purchaser) under such prior leases, bills or accounts; and all payments now and hereafter made by (purchaser) shall be credited pro rata on all outstanding leases, bills and accounts due the Company by (purchaser) at the time each such payment is made.' The effect of this rather obscure provision was to keep a balance due on every item purchased until the balance due on all items, whenever purchased,

was liquidated. As a result, the debt incurred at the time of purchase of each item was secured by the right to repossess all the items previously purchased by the same purchaser, and each new item purchased automatically became subject to a security interest arising out of the previous dealings.

On May 12, 1962, appellant Thorne purchased an item described as a daveno, three tables, and two lamps, having total stated value of \$391.11 [about \$2,800 in 2011 dollars]. Shortly thereafter, he defaulted on his monthly payments and appellee sought to replevy [repossess] all the items purchased since the first transaction in 1958. Similarly, on April 17, 1962, appellant Williams bought a stereo set of stated value of \$514.95 [about \$3,600 in 2011 dollars]. She too defaulted shortly thereafter, and appellee sought to replevy all the items purchased since December, 1957. The Court of General Sessions granted judgment for appellee. The District of Columbia Court of Appeals affirmed, and we granted appellants' motion for leave to appeal to this court.

Appellants' principal contention, rejected by both the trial and the appellate courts below, is that these contracts, or at least some of them, are unconscionable and, hence, not enforceable. [In its opinion the lower court said:]

*The record reveals that prior to the last purchase appellant had reduced the balance in her account to \$164. The last purchase, a stereo set, raised the balance due to \$678. Significantly, at the time of this and the preceding purchases, appellee was aware of appellant's financial position. The reverse side of the stereo contract listed the name of appellant's social worker and her \$218 monthly stipend from the government. Nevertheless, with full knowledge that appellant had to feed, clothe and support both herself and seven children on this amount, appellee sold her a \$514 stereo set. We cannot condemn too strongly appellee's conduct. It raises serious questions of sharp practice and irresponsible business dealings. A review of the legislation in the District of Columbia affecting retail sales and the pertinent decisions of the highest court in this jurisdiction disclose, however, no ground upon which this court can declare the contracts in question contrary to public policy. We note that were the Maryland Retail Installment Sales Act...or its equivalent, in force in the District of*

*Columbia, we could grant appellant appropriate relief. We think Congress should consider corrective legislation to protect the public from such exploitive contracts as were utilized in the case at bar.*

We do not agree that the court lacked the power to refuse enforcement to contracts found to be unconscionable. In other jurisdictions, it has been held as a matter of common law that unconscionable contracts are not enforceable. While no decision of this court so holding has been found, the notion that an unconscionable bargain should not be given full enforcement is by no means novel....

Since we have never adopted or rejected such a rule, the question here presented is actually one of first impression....[W]e hold that where the element of unconscionability is present at the time a contract is made, the contract should not be enforced.

Unconscionability has generally been recognized to include an absence of meaningful choice on the part of one of the parties together with contract terms which are unreasonably favorable to the other party. Whether a meaningful choice is present in a particular case can only be determined by consideration of all the circumstances surrounding the transaction. In many cases the meaningfulness of the choice is negated by a gross inequality of bargaining power. The manner in which the contract was entered is also relevant to this consideration. Did each party to the contract, considering his obvious education or lack of it, have a reasonable opportunity to understand the terms of the contract, or were the important terms hidden in a maze of fine print and minimized by deceptive sales practices? Ordinarily, one who signs an agreement without full knowledge of its terms might be held to assume the risk that he has entered a one-sided bargain. But when a party of little bargaining power, and hence little real choice, signs a commercially unreasonable contract with little or no knowledge of its terms, it is hardly likely that his consent, or even an objective manifestation of his consent, was ever given to all the terms. In such a case the usual rule that the terms of the agreement are not to be questioned should be abandoned and the court should consider whether the terms of the contract are so unfair that enforcement should be withheld....

In determining reasonableness or fairness, the primary concern must be with the terms of the contract considered in light of the circumstances existing when the contract was made. The test

is not simple, nor can it be mechanically applied. The terms are to be considered ‘in the light of the general commercial background and the commercial needs of the particular trade or case.’ Corbin suggests the test as being whether the terms are ‘so extreme as to appear unconscionable according to the mores and business practices of the time and place.’ We think this formulation correctly states the test to be applied in those cases where no meaningful choice was exercised upon entering the contract. So ordered.

Danaher, J. (dissenting):

[The lower] court...made no finding that there had actually been sharp practice. Rather the appellant seems to have known precisely where she stood.

There are many aspects of public policy here involved. What is a luxury to some may seem an outright necessity to others. Is public oversight to be required of the expenditures of relief funds? A washing machine, e.g., in the hands of a relief client might become a fruitful source of income. Many relief clients may well need credit, and certain business establishments will take long chances on the sale of items, expecting their pricing policies will afford a degree of protection commensurate with the risk. Perhaps a remedy when necessary will be found within the provisions of the D.C. “Loan Shark” law, [Citation].

I mention such matters only to emphasize the desirability of a cautious approach to any such problem, particularly since the law for so long has allowed parties such great latitude in making their own contracts. I dare say there must annually be thousands upon thousands of installment credit transactions in this jurisdiction, and one can only speculate as to the effect the decision in these cases will have.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. Did the court here say that cross-collateral contracts are necessarily unconscionable?
2. Why is it relevant that the plaintiff had seven children and was on welfare?
3. Why did the defendant have a cross-collateral clause in the contract? What would happen if no such clauses were allowed?
4. What are the elements of unconscionability that the court articulates?

## 12.6 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

In general, illegal contracts are unenforceable. The courts must grapple with two types of illegalities: (1) statutory violations and (2) violations of public policy not expressly declared unlawful by statute. The former include gambling contracts, contracts with unlicensed professionals, and Sunday contracts.

Contracts that violate public policy include many types of covenants not to compete. No general rule for determining their legality can be given, except to say that the more rigid their restrictions against working or competing, the less likely they will withstand judicial scrutiny.

Other types of agreements that may violate public policy and hence are unenforceable include provisions that waive tort liability and contracts that interfere with family relationships.

The exceptions to the rule that illegal agreements will not be enforced and that courts leave the parties where they are generally involve situations where the hands-off approach would lead to an unfair result: where the parties are not equally at fault, where one is excusably ignorant or withdraws before performance, or where one is protected by a statute. A court may sometimes divide a contract, enforcing the legal part and not the illegal part.

## EXERCISES

1. Henriouille was an unemployed widower with two children who received public assistance from the Marin County (California) Department of Social Services. There was a shortage of housing for low-income residents in Marin County. He entered into a lease agreement on a printed form by which the landlord disclaimed any liability for any injury sustained by the tenants anywhere on the property. Henriouille fractured his wrist when he tripped on a rock on the common stairs in the apartment building. The landlord had been having a hard time keeping the area clean. Is the disclaimer valid? Explain.
2. Albert Bennett, an amateur cyclist, entered a bicycle race sponsored by the United States Cycling Federation. He signed a release exculpating the federation for liability: "I further understand that serious accidents occasionally occur during bicycle racing and that participants in bicycle racing occasionally sustain mortal or serious personal injuries, and/or property damage, as a consequence thereof. Knowing the risks of bicycle racing, nevertheless I hereby agree to assume those risks and to release and hold harmless all the persons or entities mentioned above

who (through negligence or carelessness) might otherwise be liable to me (or my heirs or assigns) for damages.”

During the race, Bennett was hit by an automobile that had been allowed on the otherwise blocked-off street by agents of the defendant. Bennett sued; the trial court dismissed the case on summary judgment. Bennett appealed. What was the decision on appeal?

3. Ramses owned an industrial supply business. He contracted to sell the business to Tut. Clause VI of their Agreement of Sale provided as follows: “In further consideration for the purchase, Ramses agrees that he shall not compete, either directly or indirectly, in the same business as is conducted by the corporation in its established territory.”

Two months after the sale, Ramses opened a competing business across the street from the business now owned by Tut, who brought suit, asking the court to close Ramses’s business on the basis of Clause VI. What should the court decide? Why?

4. After taking a business law class at State U, Elke entered into a contract to sell her business law book to a classmate, Matthew, for \$45. As part of the same contract, she agreed to prepare a will for Matthew’s mother for an additional \$110. Elke prepared the will and sent the book to Matthew, but he refused to pay her. Is she entitled to any payment? Explain.

5. Elmo, a door-to-door salesman, entered into a contract to sell the Wilson family \$320 worth of household products on credit. The Wilsons later learned that Elmo had failed to purchase a city license to make door-to-door sales and refused to pay him. May Elmo collect from the Wilsons? Why?

6. Gardner purchased from Singer a sewing machine (\$700) and three vacuums (about \$250 each), one after the other, on Singer’s “1 to 36 month plan.” Gardner defaulted after paying a total of \$400 on account, and Singer sued to repossess all the purchases. Gardner defended by claiming the purchase plan was unconscionable and pointed to the *Williams* case ([Section 12.5.3 "Unconscionability"](#)) as controlling law (that cross-collateral contracts are

unconscionable). The trial court ruled for Gardner; Singer appealed. What was the result on appeal?

7. Blubaugh leased a large farm combine from John Deere Leasing by signing an agreement printed on very lightweight paper. The back side of the form was “written in such fine, light print as to be nearly illegible....The court was required to use a magnifying glass.” And the wording was “unreasonably complex,” but it contained terms much in John Deere’s favor. When Blubaugh defaulted, John Deere repossessed the combine, sold it for more than he had paid, and sued him for additional sums in accordance with the default clauses on the back side of the lease. Blubaugh defended by asserting the clauses were unconscionable. Is this a case of procedural, substantive, or no unconscionability? Decide.
8. Sara Hohe, a fifteen-year-old junior at Mission Bay High School in San Diego, was injured during a campus hypnotism show sponsored by the PTSA as a fund-raiser for the senior class. Hypnotism shows had been held annually since 1980, and Sara had seen the previous year’s show. She was selected at random from a group of many volunteers. Her participation in the “Magic of the Mind Show” was conditioned on signing two release forms. Hohe’s father signed a form entitled “Mission Bay High School PTSA Presents Dr. Karl Santo.” Hohe and her father both signed a form titled “Karl Santo Hypnotist,” releasing Santo and the school district from all liability. During the course of the show, while apparently hypnotized, Hohe slid from her chair and also fell to the floor about six times and was injured. She, through her father, then sued the school district. The Hohes claimed the release was contrary to public policy; the trial court dismissed the suit on summary judgment. Was the release contrary to public policy? Decide.
9. In 1963 the Southern Railway Company was disturbed by an order issued by the Interstate Commerce Commission, a federal agency, which would adversely affect the firm’s profit by some \$13 million [about \$90 million in 2011 dollars]. Southern hired a lawyer, Robert Troutman, who was a friend of President John F. Kennedy, to lobby the president that the latter might convince the attorney general, Robert Kennedy, to back Southern’s position in a lawsuit against the ICC. It worked; Southern won. Southern then refused to pay Troutman’s bill in the amount of \$200,000 [about \$14 million in 2011 dollars] and moved for summary

judgment dismissing Troutman’s claim, asserting—among other things—that contracts whereby one person is hired to use his influence with a public official are illegal bargains. Should summary judgment issue? Decide.

10. Buyer, representing himself to be experienced in timber negotiations, contracted to buy the timber on Seller’s land. The first \$11,500 would go to Buyer, the next \$2,000 would go to Seller, and the rest would be divided fifty-fifty after costs of removal of the timber. Buyer said the timber would be worth \$18,000–\$20,000. When Seller discovered the timber was in fact worth more than \$50,000, he sued, claiming the contract was unconscionable. How should the court rule?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Gambling contracts are

- a. always unenforceable
- b. enforceable if written
- c. in effect enforceable in certain situations involving the sale of securities
- d. always enforceable when made with insurance companies

In State X, plumbers must purchase a license but do not have to pass an examination. This is an example of

- a. a regulatory license
- b. a revenue license
- c. both a and b
- d. neither a nor b

A contract to pay a lobbyist to influence a public official is generally illegal.

- a. true
- b. false

Exculpatory clauses are sometimes enforceable when they relieve someone from liability for

- a. an intentional act
- b. recklessness
- c. negligence



d. all of the above

An employee's promise not to compete with the employer after leaving the company

- a. is never enforceable because it restrains trade
- b. is always enforceable if in writing
- c. is always enforceable
- d. is enforceable if related to the employer's property interests

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. c
- 2. b
- 3. b
- 4. c
- 5. d



# Chapter 13

## Form and Meaning

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. What kinds of contracts must be evidenced by some writing under the Statute of Frauds, what the exceptions to the requirements are, and what satisfies a writing requirement
2. What effect prior or contemporaneous “side” agreements have on a written contract
3. How a contract is to be interpreted if its meaning is disputed

In four chapters, we have focused on the question of whether the parties created a valid contract and have examined the requirements of (1) agreement (offer and acceptance), (2) real consent (free will, knowledge, and capacity), (3) consideration, and (4) legality. Assuming that these requirements have been met, we now turn to the form and meaning of the contract itself. Does the contract have to be in a written form, and—if there is a dispute—what does the contract mean?

## 13.1 The Statute of Frauds

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know which contracts are required to be evidenced by some writing to be enforceable.
2. Understand the exceptions to that requirement.
3. Recognize what the writing requirement means.
4. Understand the effect of noncompliance with the Statute of Frauds.

### Overview of the Statute of Frauds

The general rule is this: a contract need not be in writing to be enforceable. An oral agreement to pay a high-fashion model \$2 million to pose for photographs is as binding as if the language of the deal were printed on vellum and signed in the presence of twenty bishops. For three centuries, however, a large exception grew up around the Statute of Frauds, first enacted in England in 1677 under the formal name “An Act for the Prevention of Frauds and Perjuries.” The Statute of Frauds requires that some contracts be evidenced by a writing, signed by the party to be bound. The English statute’s two sections dealing with contracts read as follows:

*[Sect. 4]...no action shall be brought*

- 1. whereby to charge any executor or administrator upon any special promise, to answer damages out of his own estate;*
- 2. or whereby to charge the defendant upon any special promise to answer for the debt, default or miscarriages of another person;*
- 3. or to charge any person upon any agreement made upon consideration of marriage;*
- 4. or upon any contract or sale of lands, tenements or hereditaments, or any interest in or concerning them;*
- 5. or upon any agreement that is not to be performed within the space of one year from the making thereof;*

*unless the agreement upon which such action shall be brought, or some memorandum or note thereof, shall be in writing, and signed by the party to be charged therewith, or some other person thereunto by him lawfully authorized.*

*[Sect. 17]...no contract for the sale of any goods, wares and merchandizes, for the price of ten pounds sterling or upwards, shall be allowed to be good, except the buyer shall accept part of the goods so sold, and actually receive the same, or give something in earnest to bind the bargain or in part of payment, or that some note or memorandum in writing of the said bargain be made and signed by the parties to be charged by such contract, or their agents thereunto lawfully authorized.*

As may be evident from the title of the act and its language, the general purpose of the law is to provide evidence, in areas of some complexity and importance, that a contract was actually made. To a lesser degree, the law serves to caution those about to enter a contract and “to create a climate in which parties often regard their agreements as tentative until there is a signed writing.” <sup>[1]</sup> Notice, of course, that this is a *statute*; it is a legislative intrusion into the common law of contracts. The name of the act is somewhat unfortunate: insofar as it deals with fraud at all, it does not deal with fraud as we normally think of it. It tries to avoid the fraud that occurs when one person attempts to impose on another a contract that never was agreed to.

The Statute of Frauds has been enacted in form similar to the seventeenth-century act in every state but Maryland and New Mexico, where judicial decisions have given it legal effect, and

Louisiana. With minor exceptions in Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, the laws all embrace the same categories of contracts that are required to be in writing. Early in the twentieth century, Section 17 was replaced by a section of the Uniform Sales Act, and this in turn has now been replaced by provisions in the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC).

*Figure 13.1 Contracts Required to Be in Writing*

Statute of Frauds	UCC Sales of Contracts
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promises to Pay Debt of Another</li> <li>2. Agreements of Executor or Administrator</li> <li>3. Marriage Promises</li> <li>4. Sale of Land</li> <li>5. Contracts Not to be Performed Within One Year</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sale of Goods for \$500 or More</li> <li>2. Sale of Securities</li> <li>3. Other Sales Exceedings \$5000</li> </ol>

However ancient, the Statute of Frauds is alive and well in the United States. Today it is used as a technical defense in many contract actions, often with unfair results: it can be used by a person to wriggle out of an otherwise perfectly fine oral contract (it is said then to be used “as a sword instead of a shield”). Consequently, courts interpret the law strictly and over the years have enunciated a host of exceptions—making what appears to be simple quite complex. Indeed, after more than half a century of serious scholarly criticism, the British Parliament repealed most of the statute in 1954. As early as 1885, a British judge noted that “in the vast majority of cases [the statute’s] operation is simply to enable a man to break a promise with impunity because he did not write it down with sufficient formality.” A proponent of the repeal said on the floor of the House of Commons that “future students of law will, I hope, have their labours lightened by the



passage of this measure.” In the United States, students have no such reprieve from the Statute of Frauds, to which we now turn for examination.

## Types of Contracts Required in Writing and the Exceptions

### Promises to Pay the Debt of Another

**The rule:** a promise to pay the debt of another person must be evidenced by some writing if it is a “collateral promise of suretyship (or ‘guaranty’).” A collateral promise is one secondary or ancillary to some other promise. A surety or guarantor (the terms are essentially synonymous) is one who promises to perform upon the default of another. Consider this:

*A and B agree to pay C.*

Here, both A and B are making a direct promise to pay C. Although A is listed first, both are promising to pay C. Now consider this:

*B agrees to pay C if A does not.*

Here it is clear that there must be another agreement somewhere for A to pay C, but that is not contained in this promise. Rather, B is making an agreement with C that is *collateral*—on the side—to the promise A is making to C. Sometimes the other agreement somewhere for A to pay C is actually in the same document as B’s promise to pay C if A does not. That does not make B’s promise a direct promise as opposed to a collateral one.

Suppose Lydia wishes to purchase on credit a coat at Miss Juliette’s Fine Furs. Juliette thinks Lydia’s creditworthiness is somewhat shaky. So Lydia’s friend Jessica promises Miss Juliette’s that if the store will extend Lydia credit, Jessica will pay whatever balance is due should Lydia default. Jessica is a surety for Lydia, and the agreement is subject to the Statute of Frauds; an oral promise will not be enforceable. <sup>[2]</sup> Suppose Jessica very much wants Lydia to have the coat, so she calls the store and says, “Send Lydia the fur, and I will pay for it.” This agreement does not create a suretyship, because Jessica is primarily liable: she is making a direct promise to pay. To fall within the Statute of Frauds, the surety must back the debt of another person to a third-party promisee (also known as the obligee of the principal debtor). The “debt,” incidentally, need not be a money obligation; it can be any contractual duty. If Lydia had promised to work as a cashier on Saturdays at Miss Juliette’s in return for the coat, Jessica could become surety to

that obligation by agreeing to work in Lydia's place if she failed to show up. Such a promise would need to be in writing to be enforceable.

**The exception:** the main purpose doctrine. The main purpose doctrine is a major exception to the surety provision of the Statute of Frauds. It holds that if the promisor's principal reason for acting as surety is to secure her own economic advantage, then the agreement is not bound by the Statute of Frauds writing requirement. Suppose, in the previous example, that Jessica is really the one who wants the fur coat but cannot, for reasons of prudence, let it be known that she has bought one. So she proposes that Lydia "buy" it for her and that she will guarantee Lydia's payments. Since the main purpose of Jessica's promise is to advance her own interests, an oral agreement is binding. Normally, the main purpose rule comes into play when the surety desires a financial advantage to herself that cannot occur unless she provides some security. For example, the board chairman of a small company, who also owns all the voting stock, might guarantee a printer that if his company defaulted in paying the bill for desperately needed catalogs, he would personally pay the bill. If his main purpose in giving the guarantee was to get the catalogues printed in order to stave off bankruptcy, and thus to preserve his own interest in the company, he would be bound by an oral agreement.<sup>[3]</sup> The same principle can be used to bind other creditors to oral agreements, as the bank discovered in [Section 13.4.1 "The Statute of Frauds' Main Purpose Doctrine" \(Wilson Floors\)](#).

#### **Agreements of Executor or Administrator**

**The rule:** the promise by an executor or administrator of an estate to answer personally for the debt or other duty of the deceased is analogous to the surety provision—it must be evidenced by some writing if it is to be enforced over an objection by the would-be obligor. For an agreement to be covered by the statute, there must have been an obligation before the decedent's death. Thus if the executor arranges for a funeral and guarantees payment should the estate fail to pay the fee, an oral contract is binding, because there was no preexisting obligation. If, however, the decedent has made his own arrangements and signed a note obligating his estate to pay, the executor's promise to guarantee payment would be binding only if written.

**The exception:** the main purpose exception to the surety provision applies to this section of the Statute of Frauds as well as to the “promises to pay the debts of another” section, noted earlier.

### The Marriage Provision

**The rule:** if any part of the marriage or the promise to marry consists also of a promise to exchange some consideration, the Statute of Frauds requires that part to be evidenced by some writing. <sup>[4]</sup> Mutual promises to marry are not within the rule. John and Sally exchange promises to marry; the promise would not be unenforceable for failure to be evidenced by some writing. (Of course courts are very unlikely to force anybody to keep a promise to marry; the point is, the Statute of Frauds doesn’t apply). But if Sally understands John to say, “If you marry me, I will deed to you my property in the Catskill Mountains,” the part about the property would need to be evidenced by some writing to be enforced over John’s denial. The Statute of Frauds governs such promises regardless of who makes them. Suppose John’s father had said, “If you marry Sally and settle down, I will give you \$1 million,” and John agrees and marries Sally. The father’s promise is not enforceable unless written, if he denies it.

Sometimes couples—especially rich people like movie stars—execute written property settlement agreements to satisfy the statute, stipulating how their assets will be treated upon marriage or upon divorce or death. If done before marriage, they are called prenuptial (premarital) agreements; if after marriage, postnuptial (after marriage) agreements (“prenupts” and “postnupts” in lawyer lingo).

**The exception:** there is no “named” exception here, but courts are free to make equitable adjustments of property of the marriage to avoid an injustice.

*The factors to be considered in the division of the marital estate are set forth at [Citation], which states, inter alia [among other things], that the court shall finally and equitably apportion the property of the parties, however and whenever acquired. The statute vests wide discretion in the district court. [Citation]. The court is free to adopt any reasonable valuation of marital property which is supported by the record.* <sup>[5]</sup>

### Contracts Affecting an Interest in Real Estate

**The rule:** almost all contracts involving an interest in real estate are subject to the Statute of Frauds. “An interest in land” is a broad description, including the sale, mortgaging, and leasing of real property (including homes and buildings); profits from the land; the creation of easements; and the establishment of other interests through restrictive covenants and agreements concerning use. Short-term leases, usually for a term of one year or less, are exempt from the provision.

**The exception:** the part performance doctrine. The name here is a misnomer, because it is a doctrine of reliance, and the acts taken in reliance on the contract are not necessarily partial performances under it. As in all such cases, the rationale is that it is unjust not to give the promisee specific performance if he or she acted in reasonable reliance on the contract and the promisor has continued to manifest assent to its terms. An oral contract to sell land is not binding simply because the buyer has paid the purchase price; payment is not by itself reliance, and if the seller refuses to transfer title, the buyer may recover the purchase price. However, if the buyer has taken possession and made improvements on the property, courts will usually say the case is out of the statute, and the party claiming an oral contract can attempt to prove the existence of the oral contract.

### **The One-Year Rule**

**The rule:** any agreement that cannot be performed within one year from its making must be evidenced by some writing to be enforceable. The purpose of this part is perhaps more obvious than most of the statute’s provisions: memories fade regarding the terms of oral contracts made long ago; people die; disputes are not uncommon. Notice the critical time frame is not how long it will take to perform the contract, but how long from the time it is made until performance is complete. If a contract is made on January 1 for a house to be constructed starting on June 1 and to be completed on February 1 of the next year, the performance will be completed in eight months from the time it was begun, but thirteen months from the time the contract was made. It falls within the statute.

**The exception:** the possibility test. The statute’s one-year rule has been universally interpreted to mean a contract that is impossible to be fully performed within one year; if there is even the slightest chance of carrying out the agreement completely within the year, an oral contract is



enforceable. Thus an oral agreement to pay a sum of money on a date thirteen months hence is within the statute and not enforceable, but one calling for payment “within thirteen months” would be enforceable, since it is possible under the latter contract to pay in less than a year. Because in many cases strict application of the statute would dictate harsh results, the courts often strain for an interpretation that finds it possible to perform the agreement within the year. Courts will even hold that because any person may die within the year, a contract without a fixed term may be fully performed in under a year and does not, therefore, fall within the statute.

### **Under the UCC**

**The rule:** contracts for the sale of goods in an amount greater than \$500 must be evidenced by some writing to be enforceable. Section 2-201 of the UCC requires all contracts for the sale of goods for the price of \$500 or more to be in writing, but oral agreements for the sale of goods valued at less than \$500 are fully enforceable without exception.

### **Other Writing Requirements**

In addition to these requirements, the UCC provides that agreements for the sale of securities (e.g., most stocks and bonds) usually need to be evidenced by a writing, and agreements for property not included in the sales or securities articles of the UCC that exceed \$5,000 in value need to be so evidenced. <sup>[6]</sup> Included here would be intangible property such as rights to royalties and to mortgage payments, and other rights created by contract. And in many states, other statutes require a writing for several different kinds of contracts. These include agreements to pay commissions to real estate brokers, to make a will, to pay debts already discharged in bankruptcy, to arbitrate rather than litigate, to make loans, and to make installment contracts.

### **Exceptions under the UCC**

There are four exceptions to the UCC’s Statute of Frauds requirement that are relevant here.

#### **The Ten-Day-Reply Doctrine**

This provides that, as between merchants, if an oral agreement is reached and one party sends the other a written statement confirming it, the other party has ten days to object in writing or the agreement is enforceable. <sup>[7]</sup>

#### **“Specially Manufactured Goods”**

This exception provides that a seller who has manufactured goods to the buyer's specifications or who has made "either a substantial beginning of their manufacture or commitments for their procurement" will not be stuck if the buyer repudiates, assuming that the goods are unsuitable for sale to others. <sup>[8]</sup>

### **The "Admission" Exception**

This exception arises—reasonably enough—when the party against whom enforcement is sought admits in testimony or legal papers that a contract was in fact made. <sup>[9]</sup> However, the admission will not permit enforcement of all claimed terms of the contract; enforcement is limited to the quantity of goods admitted.

### **The "Payment or Delivery and Acceptance" Exception**

The UCC provides that an oral contract for goods in excess of \$500 will be upheld if payment has already been made and accepted, or if the goods have been received and accepted. <sup>[10]</sup>

## **Sufficiency of the Required Writing**

### **At Common Law**

We have been careful not to say "the contract needs to be in writing." We have said, "a contractual intention must be evidenced by some writing, signed by the party to be bound." A signed contract is not required. What is required in most states, following the wording of the original statute, is that there be at least some memorandum or note concerning the agreement—a logical consequence of the statute's purpose to evidence the making of the contract. The words need not appear in a formal document; they are sufficient in any form in a will, or on a check or receipt, or in longhand on the back of an envelope—so long as the document is signed by the party to be charged (i.e., the party being sued on the contract).

Although the writing need not contain every term, it must recite the subject matter of the contract. It need not do so, however, in terms comprehensible to those who were not party to the negotiations; it is enough if it is understandable in context. A written agreement to buy a parcel of land is usually sufficiently definitive if it refers to the parcel in such a way that it could be mistaken for no other—for example, "seller's land in Tuscaloosa," assuming that the seller owned only one parcel there. Beyond the subject matter, the essential terms of promises to be performed must be written out; all details need not be. If an essential term is missing, it cannot

be enforced, unless it can be inferred or imposed by rule of law. A written contract for the sale of land containing every term but the time for payment, which the parties orally agreed would be upon delivery of the deed, is sufficient. (A contract that omitted the selling price would not be.) The parties must be named in the writing in a manner sufficient to identify them. Their whole names need not be given if initials or some other reference makes it inescapable that the writing does concern the actual parties. Reference to the agent of a party identifies the party. Possession of the writing may even be sufficient: if a seller gives a memorandum of an oral agreement for the sale of his land, stating all the terms, to the buyer, the latter may seek specific performance even though the writing omits to name or describe him or his agent. <sup>[11]</sup>

In a few states, consideration for the promise must be stated in writing, even if the consideration has already been given. Consequently, written contracts frequently contain such language as “for value received.” But in most states, failure to refer to consideration already given is unnecessary: “the prevailing view is that error or omission in the recital of past events does not affect the sufficiency of a memorandum.”<sup>[12]</sup> The situation is different, however, when the consideration is a return promise yet to be performed. Usually the return promise is an essential term of the agreement, and failure to state it will vitiate the writing.

### **Under the UCC**

In contracts for the sale of goods, the writing must be signed by the party to be charged, and the parties must be sufficiently identified. <sup>[13]</sup> But consideration, including the selling price, need not be set forth for the memorandum to meet the requirements of the UCC (“a writing is not insufficient because it omits or incorrectly states a term agreed upon”), though obviously it makes sense to do so whenever possible. By contrast, UCC Sections 1-206 and 3-319 concerning intangible personal property and investment securities require “a defined or stated price.”

### **Electronic Communications**

One of the primary purposes of the Electronic Signatures in Global and National Commerce Act, S. 761, popularly referred to as ESign, is to repeal state law requirements for written instruments as they apply to electronic agreements and to make almost anything reasonably indicative of a signature good enough electronically. <sup>[14]</sup> It provides the following:

*Notwithstanding any statute, regulation, or other rule of law [other than subsequent parts of this same statute], with respect to any transactions in or affecting interstate or foreign commerce—*

- 1. a signature, contract, or other record relating to such transaction may not be denied legal effect, validity or enforceability solely because it is in electronic form; and*
- 2. a contract relating to such transaction may not be denied legal effect, validity or enforceability solely because an electronic signature or electronic record was used in its formation....*

*The term “transaction” means an action or set of actions relating to the conduct of a business, consumer or commercial affairs between two or more persons, including any of the following types of conduct—*

- 1. the sale, lease, exchange, or other disposition of [personal property and intangibles]*
- 2. the sale, lease, exchange or other disposition of any interest in real property, or any combination thereof.*

*The term “electronic signature” means an electronic sound, symbol, or process, attached to or logically associated with a contract or other record and executed or adopted by a person with the intent to sign the record.*

## **Effect of Noncompliance and Exceptions; Oral Rescission**

The basic rule is that contracts governed by the Statute of Frauds are unenforceable if they are not sufficiently written down. If the agreement contains several promises, the unenforceability of one will generally render the others unenforceable also.

The Statute of Frauds can work injustices. In addition to the exceptions already noted, there are some general exceptions.

### **Full Performance**

First, certainly, if the contract has been performed fully by both sides, its unenforceability under the statute is moot. Having fulfilled its function (neither side having repudiated the contract), the agreement cannot be rescinded on the ground that it should have been, but was not, reduced to writing.

### **Detrimental Reliance**

Second, some relief may be granted to one who has relied on an oral contract to her detriment (similar to the part performance doctrine mentioned already). For a partially performed contract unenforceable under the Statute of Frauds, restitution may be available. Suppose George agrees orally to landscape Arthur's fifteen acres, in return for which George is to receive title to one acre at the far end of the lot. George is not entitled to the acre if Arthur defaults, but he may recover for the reasonable value of the services he has performed up to the time of repudiation. Somewhat related, if one side has reasonably and foreseeably relied upon a promise in such a way that injustice can only be avoided by enforcing it, some courts will use promissory estoppel to preclude the necessity of a writing, but the connection between the alleged oral contract and the detrimental reliance must be convincing.

### **Oral Rescission**

Third, most contracts required to be in writing may be rescinded orally. The new agreement is treated in effect as a modification of the old one, and since a complete rescission will not usually trigger any action the statute requires to be in writing, the rescission becomes effective in the absence of any signed memorandum.

Some agreements, however, may not be rescinded orally. Those that by their terms preclude oral rescission are an obvious class. Under the UCC, certain agreements for the sale of goods may not be orally rescinded, depending on the circumstances. For instance, if title has already passed to the buyer under a written agreement that satisfies the statute, the contract can be rescinded only by a writing. Contracts for the sale of land are another class of agreements that generally may not be orally rescinded. If title has already been transferred, or if there has been a material change of position in reliance on the contract, oral agreements to rescind are unenforceable. But a contract that remains wholly executory, even though enforceable because in writing, may be rescinded orally in most states.

### **Contract Modification**

Fourth, contracts governed by the Statute of Frauds may be modified orally if the resulting contract, taken as a whole, falls outside the statute. The same rule applies under the UCC. <sup>[15]</sup> Thus a written contract for the sale of a new bicycle worth \$1,200 may be orally

modified by substituting the sale of a used bicycle worth \$450, but not by substituting the sale of a used bike worth \$600. The modified contract effectively rescinds the original contract.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

The Statute of Frauds, an ancient legislative intrusion into common-law contracts, requires that certain contracts be evidenced by some writing, signed by the party to be bound, to be enforceable. Among those affected by the statute are contracts for an interest in real estate, contracts that by their terms cannot be performed within one year, contracts whereby one person agrees to pay the debt of another, contracts involving the exchange of consideration upon promise to marry (except mutual promises to marry), and, under the UCC, contracts in an amount greater than \$500. For each contract affected by the statute, there are various exceptions intended to prevent the statute from being used to avoid oral contracts when it is very likely such were in fact made.

The writing need not be a contract; anything in writing, signed by the person to be bound, showing adequate contractual intention will take the matter out of the statute and allow a party to attempt to show the existence of the oral contract.

There may be relief under restitution or promissory estoppel. Contracts affected by the statute can usually be orally rescinded. Any contract can be modified or rescinded; if the new oral contract as modified does not fall within the statute, the statute does not apply.

### EXERCISES

1. What is the purpose of the Statute of Frauds?
2. What common-law contracts are affected by it, and what are the exceptions?
3. How does the UCC deal with the Statute of Frauds?
4. How is the requirement of the statute satisfied?
5. Contracts can always be modified. How does the Statute of Frauds play with contract modification?

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[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Chapter 5, statutory note.

[2] Of course, if Jessica really *did* orally promise Miss Juliette’s to pay in case Lydia didn’t, it would be bad faith to lie about it. The proper course for Jessica is not to say, “Ha, ha, I promised, but it was only oral, so I’m not bound.” Jessica should say, “I raise the Statute of Frauds as a defense.”

[3] *Stuart Studio, Inc. v. National School of Heavy Equipment, Inc.*, 214 S.E.2d 192 (N.C. 1975).

[4] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 125.

[5] *In re Marriage of Rada*, 402, 869 P.2d 254 (Mont. 1994).

[6] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 8-319 and 1-206.

[7] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-201(2).

[8] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-201(3)(a).

[9] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-201(3)(b).

[10] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-201(3)(c).

[11] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 207(f).

[12] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 207(h).

[13] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-210(1).

[14] Electronic Signatures in Global and National Commerce Act, 15 U.S.C. § 96, 106th Congress (2000).

[15] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-209(3).

## 13.2 The Parol Evidence Rule

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the purpose and operation of the parol evidence rule, including when it applies and when it does not.
2. Know how the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) deals with evidence to show a contract’s meaning.

### The Purpose of the Rule

Unlike Minerva sprung forth whole from the brow of Zeus in Greek mythology, contracts do not appear at a stroke memorialized on paper. Almost invariably, negotiations of some sort precede the concluding of a deal. People write letters, talk by telephone, meet face-to-face, send e-mails, and exchange thoughts and views about what they want and how they will reciprocate. They may even lie and cajole in duplicitous ways, making promises they know they cannot or will not keep

in order not to kill the contract talks. In the course of these discussions, they may reach tentative agreements, some of which will ultimately be reflected in the final contract, some of which will be discarded along the way, and some of which perhaps will not be included in the final agreement but will nevertheless not be contradicted by it. Whether any weight should be given to these prior agreements is a problem that frequently arises.

## **Parol Evidence at Common-Law**

### **The Rule**

The rule at common law is this: a written contract intended to be the parties' complete understanding discharges all prior or contemporaneous promises, statements, or agreements that add to, vary, or conflict with it.

The parol evidence rule (*parol* means oral; it is related to *parliament* and *parly*—talking) is a substantive rule of law that operates to bar the introduction of evidence intended to show that the parties had agreed to something different from what they finally arrived at and wrote down. It applies to prior written as well as oral discussions that don't make it into the final written agreement. Though its many apparent exceptions make the rule seem difficult to apply, its purposes are simple: to give freedom to the parties to negotiate without fear of being held to the consequences of asserting preliminary positions, and to give finality to the contract.

The rule applies to all written contracts, whether or not the Statute of Frauds requires them to be in writing. The Statute of Frauds gets to whether there was a contract at all; the parol evidence rule says, granted there was a written contract, does it express the parties' understanding? But the rule is concerned only with events that transpired before the contract in dispute was signed. It has no bearing on agreements reached subsequently that may alter the terms of an existing contract.

### **The Exemptions and Exceptions**

Despite its apparent stringency, the parol evidence rule does not negate all prior agreements or statements, nor preclude their use as evidence. A number of situations fall outside the scope of the rule and hence are not technically exceptions to it, so they are better phrased as exemptions (something not within the scope of a rule).

#### **Not an Integrated Contract**



If the parties never intended the written contract to be their full understanding—if they intended it to be partly oral—then the rule does not apply. If the document is fully integrated, no extrinsic evidence will be permitted to modify the terms of the agreement, even if the modification is in addition to the existing terms, rather than a contradiction of them. If the contract is partially integrated, prior consistent additional terms may be shown. It is the duty of the party who wants to exclude the parol evidence to show the contract was intended to be integrated. That is not always an easy task. To prevent a party later from introducing extrinsic evidence to show that there were prior agreements, the contract itself can recite that there were none. Here, for example, is the final clause in the National Basketball Association Uniform Player Contract: “This agreement contains the entire agreement between the parties and there are no oral or written inducements, promises or agreements except as contained herein.” Such a clause is known as a merger clause.

### **Void or Voidable Contracts**

Parol evidence is admissible to show the existence of grounds that would cause the contract to be void. Such grounds include illegality, fraud, duress, mistake, and lack of consideration. And parol evidence is allowed to show evidence of lack of contractual capacity. Evidence of infancy, incompetency, and so on would not change the terms of the contract at all but would show it was voidable or void.

### **Contracts Subject to a Condition Precedent**

When the parties orally agree that a written contract is contingent on the occurrence of an event or some other condition (a condition precedent), the contract is not integrated and the oral agreement may be introduced. The classic case is that of an inventor who sells in a written contract an interest in his invention. Orally, the inventor and the buyer agree that the contract is to take effect only if the buyer’s engineer approves the invention. (The contract was signed in advance of approval so that the parties would not need to meet again.) The engineer did not approve it, and in a suit for performance, the court permitted the evidence of the oral agreement because it showed “that in fact there never was any agreement at all.”<sup>[1]</sup> Note that the oral condition does not contradict a term of the written contract; it negates it. The parol evidence

rule will not permit evidence of an oral agreement that is inconsistent with a written term, for as to that term the contract is integrated.

### **Untrue Recital or Errors**

The parol evidence rule does not prevent a showing that a fact stated in a contract is untrue. The rule deals with prior agreements; it cannot serve to choke off inquiry into the facts. Thus the parol evidence rule will not bar a showing that one of the parties is a minor, even if the contract recites that each party is over eighteen. Nor will it prevent a showing that a figure in the contract had a typographical error—for example, a recital that the rate charged will be the plumber’s “usual rate of \$3 per hour” when both parties understood that the usual rate was in fact \$30 per hour. A court would allow reformation (correction) of such errors.

### **Ambiguity**

To enforce a contract, its terms must be understood, so parol evidence would be allowed, but a claim of ambiguity cannot be used to alter, vary, or change the contract’s meaning.

### **Postcontract Modification**

Ordinarily, an additional consistent oral term may be shown only if the contract was partially integrated. The parol evidence rule bars evidence of such a term if the contract was fully integrated. However, when there is additional consideration for the term orally agreed, it lies outside the scope of the integrated contract and may be introduced. In effect, the law treats each separate consideration as creating a new contract; the integrated written document does not undercut the separate oral agreement, as long as they are consistent. Buyer purchases Seller’s business on a contract; as part of the agreement, Seller agrees to stay on for three weeks to help Buyer “learn the ropes.” Buyer realizes she is not yet prepared to go on her own. She and Seller then agree that Seller will stay on as a salaried employee for five more weeks. Buyer cannot use the parol evidence rule to preclude evidence of the new agreement: it is a postcontract modification supported by new consideration. Similarly, parties could choose to rescind a previously made contract, and the parol evidence rule would not bar evidence of that.

### **The UCC Approach**

Under Section 2-202 of the UCC, a course of dealing, a usage of trade, or a course of performance can be introduced as evidence to explain or supplement any written contract for

the sale of goods. A course of dealing is defined as “a sequence of previous conduct between the parties to a particular transaction which is fairly to be regarded as establishing a common basis of understanding for interpreting their expressions and other conduct.” A usage of trade is “any practice or method of dealing having such regularity of observance in a place, vocation or trade as to justify an expectation that it will be observed with respect to the transaction in question.” A course of performance is the conduct of a party in response to a contract that calls for repeated action (e.g., a purchase agreement for a factory’s monthly output, or an undertaking to wash a neighbor’s car weekly).

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The parol evidence rule is intended to preserve “the four corners” of the contract: it generally prohibits the introduction of contemporaneous oral or written elements of negotiation that did not get included in the written contract, subject to a number of exemptions.

The UCC allows evidence of course of dealing, course of performance, or usage of trade to give meaning to the contract.

#### EXERCISES

1. What is the purpose of the parol evidence rule?
2. How does it operate to crystallize the intention of the contracting parties?
3. To what kinds of contract issues does the rule not apply?
4. What “help” does the UCC give to fleshing out the parties’ contractual understanding?

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[1] *Pym v. Campbell*, 119 Eng. Rep. 903 (Q.B. 1856).

## 13.3 Interpretation of Agreements: Practicalities versus Legalities

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the purpose of contractual interpretation.
2. Know the tools courts use to interpret contracts.

3. Recognize that in everyday life, businesspeople tolerate oral contracts or poorly written ones, but a writing remains useful.

## The General Problem and the Purpose of Contractual Interpretation

### The General Problem

As any reader knows, the meaning of words depends in part on context and in part on the skill and care of the writer. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. once succinctly noted, “A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged; it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and the time in which it is used.”<sup>[1]</sup> Words and phrases can be ambiguous, either when they stand alone or when they take on a different coloration from words and phrases near them. A writer can be careless and contradict himself without intending to; people often read hurriedly and easily miss errors that a more deliberate perusal might catch. Interpretation difficulties can arise for any of a number of reasons: a form contract might contain language that is inconsistent with provisions specifically annexed; the parties might use jargon that is unclear; they might forget to incorporate a necessary term; assumptions about prior usage or performance, unknown to outsiders like judges, might color their understanding of the words they do use. Because ambiguities do arise, courts are frequently called on to give content to the words on paper.

### The Basic Rule of Interpretation

Courts attempt to give meaning to the parties’ understanding when they wrote the contract. The intention of the parties governs, and if their purpose in making the contract is known or can be ascertained from all the circumstances, it will be given great weight in determining the meaning of an obscure, murky, or ambiguous provision or a pattern of conduct. A father tells the college bookstore that in consideration of its supplying his daughter, a freshman, with books for the coming year, he will guarantee payment of up to \$350. His daughter purchases books totaling \$400 the first semester, and he pays the bill. Midway through the second semester, the bookstore presents him with a bill for an additional \$100, and he pays that. At the end of the year, he refuses to pay a third bill for \$150. A court could construe his conduct as indicating a purpose to ensure that his daughter had whatever books she needed, regardless of cost, and interpret the contract to hold him liable for the final bill.

## Tools of Interpretation

The policy of uncovering purpose has led to a number of tools of judicial interpretation:

- More specific terms or conduct are given more weight than general terms or unremarkable conduct. Thus a clause that is separately negotiated and added to a contract will be counted as more significant than a standard term in a form contract.
- A writing is interpreted as a whole, without undue attention to one clause.
- Common words and terms are given common meaning; technical terms are given their technical meaning.
- In the range of language and conduct that helps in interpretation, the courts prefer the following items in the order listed: express terms, course of performance, course of dealing, and usage of trade.
- If an amount is given in words and figures that differ, the words control.
- Writing controls over typing; typing controls over printed forms.
- Ambiguities are construed against the party that wrote the contract.

In this chapter, we have considered a set of generally technical legal rules that spell out the consequences of contracts that are wholly or partially oral or that, if written, are ambiguous or do not contain every term agreed upon. These rules fall within three general headings: the Statute of Frauds, the parol evidence rule, and the rules of interpretation. Obviously, the more attention paid to the contract before it is formally agreed to, the fewer the unforeseen consequences. In general, the conclusion is inescapable that a written contract will avoid a host of problems. Writing down an agreement is not always sensible or practical, but it can probably be done more often than it is. Writing almost fifty years ago—and it is still true—a law professor studying business practices noted the following:

*Businessmen often prefer to rely on “a man’s word” in a brief letter, a handshake or “common honesty and decency”—even when the transaction involves exposure to serious risks. Seven lawyers from law firms with business practices were interviewed. Five thought that businessmen often entered contracts with only a minimal degree of advanced planning. They complained that businessmen desire to “keep it simple and avoid red tape” even where large amounts of money and significant risks are*

*involved....Another said that businessmen when bargaining often talk only in pleasant generalities, think they have a contract, but fail to reach agreement on any of the hard, unpleasant questions until forced to do so by a lawyer.* <sup>[2]</sup>

Written contracts do not, to be sure, guarantee escape from disputes and litigation. Sometimes ambiguities are not seen; sometimes they are necessary if the parties are to reach an agreement at all. Rather than back out of the deal, it may be worth the risk to one or both parties deliberately to go along with an ambiguous provision and hope that it never arises to be tested in a dispute that winds up in court.

Nevertheless, it is generally true that a written contract has at least three benefits over oral ones, even those that by law are not required to be in writing. (1) The written contract usually avoids ambiguity. (2) It can serve both as a communications device and as a device for the allocation of power, especially within large companies. By alerting various divisions to its formal requirements, the contract requires the sales, design, quality-control, and financial departments to work together. By setting forth requirements that the company must meet, it can place the power to take certain actions in the hands of one division or another. (3) Finally, should a dispute later arise, the written contract can immeasurably add to proof both of the fact that a contract was agreed to and of what its terms were.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

It is not uncommon for the meaning of a contract to be less than entirely clear. When called upon to interpret the meaning of a contract, courts try to give it the meaning the parties intended when they made it. Various tools of interpretation are used.

Businesspeople usually do not like to seem overbearing; they do not wish to appear untrusting; they often dislike unpleasanties. Therefore it is not uncommon for even big deals to be sealed with a handshake. But it's a trade-off, because a written contract has obvious benefits, too.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why do courts fairly frequently have to interpret the meaning of contracts?
2. What is the purpose of contractual interpretation?
3. What tools do the courts use in interpreting contracts?

4. What is the social “cost” of insisting upon a written contract in a business setting? What are the benefits of the contract?

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[1] *Towne v. Eisner*, 245 US 418, 425 (1917).

[2] Stewart Macaulay, “Non-contractual Relations in Business: A Preliminary Study,” *American Sociological Review* 28, no. 1 (1963): 58–59.

## 13.4 Cases

### The Statute of Frauds’ Main Purpose Doctrine

*Wilson Floors Co. v. Sciota Park, Ltd., and Unit, Inc.*

377 N.E.2d 514 (1978)

Sweeny, J.

In December of 1971, Wilson Floors Company (hereinafter “Wilson”) entered into a contract with Unit, Inc. (hereinafter “Unit”), a Texas corporation to furnish and install flooring materials for “The Cliffs” project, a development consisting of new apartments and an office building to be located in Columbus, Ohio. Unit...was the general manager for the project. The Pittsburgh National Bank (hereinafter the bank), as the construction lender for the project, held mortgages on The Cliffs property security for construction loans which the bank had made to Unit.

As the work progressed on the project Unit fell behind in making payments to Wilson for its completed work in the spring of 1973. At that time, the project was approximately two-thirds completed, the first mortgage money of seven million dollars having been fully dispersed by the bank to Unit. Appellant [Wilson] thereupon stopped work in May of 1973 and informed Unit that it would not continue until payments were forthcoming. On May 15, 1973, the bank conducted a meeting with the subcontractors in The Cliffs project, including Wilson.

At the meeting, the bank sought to determine whether it would be beneficial at that stage of the project to lend more money to Unit, foreclose on the mortgage and hire a new contractor to complete the work, or do nothing. Subcontractors were requested to furnish the bank an

itemized account of what Unit owed them, and a cost estimate of future services necessary to complete their job contracts. Having reviewed the alternatives, the bank determined that it would be in its best interest to provide additional financing for the project. The bank reasoned that to foreclose on the mortgage and hire a new contractor at this stage of construction would result in higher costs.

There is conflicting testimony in regard to whether the bank made assurances to Wilson at this meeting that it would be paid for all work to be rendered on the project. However, after the May meeting, Wilson, along with the other subcontractors, did return to work.

Payments from Unit again were not forthcoming, resulting in a second work stoppage. The bank then arranged another meeting to be conducted on June 28, 1973.

At this second meeting, there is conflicting testimony concerning the import of the statements made by the bank representative to the subcontractors. The bank representative who spoke at the meeting testified at trial that he had merely advised the subcontractors that adequate funds would be available to complete the job. However, two representatives of Wilson, also in attendance at the meeting, testified that the bank representative had assured Wilson that if it returned to work, it would be paid.

After the meeting, Wilson returned to work and continued to submit its progress billings to Unit for payment. Upon completion of its portion of The Cliffs project, Wilson submitted its final invoice of \$15,584.50 to Unit. This amount was adjusted downward to \$15,443.06 upon agreement of Unit and Wilson. However, Wilson was not paid this amount.

As a result of nonpayment, Wilson filed suit...against Unit and the bank to recover the \$15,443.06 [about \$60,700 in 2010 dollars]. On September 26, 1975, Wilson and Unit stipulated that judgment for the sum of \$15,365.84, plus interest, be entered against Unit. When Unit failed to satisfy the judgment, appellant proceeded with its action against the bank. [The trial court decided in favor of Wilson, but the intermediate appellate court reversed the trial court decision.]...[The Ohio statute of frauds provides]:

*No action shall be brought whereby to charge the defendant, upon a special promise, to answer for the debt, default, or miscarriage of another person...unless the*



*agreement...or some memorandum thereof, is in writing and signed by the party to be charged...*

In paragraph one of *Crawford v. Edison* [an 1887 Ohio case], however, this court stated:

*When the leading object of the promisor is, not to answer for another, but to subserve some pecuniary or business purpose of his own, involving a benefit to himself...his promise is not within the statute of frauds, although it may be in form a promise to pay the debt of another and its performance may incidentally have the effect of extinguishing that liability...*

So long as the promisor undertakes to pay the subcontractor whatever his services are worth irrespective of what he may owe the general contractor and so long as the main purpose of the promisor is to further his own business or pecuniary interest, the promise is enforceable....

The facts in the instant case reflect that the bank made its guarantee to Wilson to subserve its own business interest of reducing costs to complete the project. Clearly, the bank induced Wilson to remain on the job and rely on its credit for future payments. To apply the statute of frauds and hold that the bank had no contractual duty to Wilson despite its oral guarantees would not prevent the wrong which the statute's enactment was to prevent, but would in reality effectuate a wrong.

Therefore, this court affirms the finding of the Court of Common Pleas that the verbal agreement made by the bank is enforceable by Wilson, and reverses the judgment of the Court of Appeals.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. The exception to the Statute of Frauds in issue here is the main purpose doctrine. How does this doctrine relate to the concept of promissory estoppel?
2. What was the main purpose behind the bank's purported promise?

### The Statute of Frauds' One-Year Rule

*Iacono v. Lyons*

*16 S.W.3d 92 (Texas Ct. App. 2000)*

O'Connor, J.

Mary Iacono, the plaintiff below and appellant here, appeals from a take-nothing summary judgment rendered in favor of Carolyn Lyons, the defendant below and appellee here. We reverse and remand.

The plaintiff [Iacono] and defendant [Lyons] had been friends for almost 35 years. In late 1996, the defendant invited the plaintiff to join her on a trip to Las Vegas, Nevada. There is no dispute that the defendant paid all the expenses for the trip, including providing money for gambling. The plaintiff contended she was invited to Las Vegas by the defendant because the defendant thought the plaintiff was lucky. Sometime before the trip, the plaintiff had a dream about winning on a Las Vegas slot machine. The plaintiff's dream convinced her to go to Las Vegas, and she accepted the defendant's offer to split "50-50" any gambling winnings.

In February 1997, the plaintiff and defendant went to Las Vegas. They started playing the slot machines at Caesar's Palace. The plaintiff contends that, after losing \$47, the defendant wanted to leave to see a show. The plaintiff begged the defendant to stay, and the defendant agreed on the condition that she (the defendant) put the coins into the machines because doing so took the plaintiff too long. (The plaintiff, who suffers from advanced rheumatoid arthritis, was in a wheelchair.) The plaintiff agreed, and took the defendant to a dollar slot machine that looked like the machine in her dream. The machine did not pay on the first try. The plaintiff then said, "Just one more time," and the defendant looked at the plaintiff and said, "This one's for you, Puddin."

The slot machine paid \$1,908,064. The defendant refused to share the winnings with the plaintiff, and denied they had an agreement to split any winnings. The defendant told Caesar's Palace she was the sole winner and to pay her all the winnings.

The plaintiff sued the defendant for breach of contract. The defendant moved for summary judgment on the grounds that any oral agreement was unenforceable under the statute of frauds or was voidable for lack of consideration. The trial court rendered summary judgment in favor of the defendant....

[Regarding the "consideration" argument:] The defendant asserted the agreement, if any, was voidable because there was no consideration. The defendant contended the plaintiff's only contribution was the plaintiff's dream of success in Las Vegas and her "luck." The plaintiff

asserted the defendant bargained with her to go to Las Vegas in return for intangibles that the defendant thought the plaintiff offered (good luck and the realization of the dream). The plaintiff said she gave up her right to remain in Houston in return for the agreement to split any winnings. The plaintiff also asserted the agreement was an exchange of promises.

...The plaintiff alleged she promised to share one-half of her winnings with the defendant in exchange for the defendant's promise to share one-half of her winnings with the plaintiff. These promises, if made, represent the respective benefits and detriments, or the bargained for exchange, necessary to satisfy the consideration requirement. *See* [Citation] (when no other consideration is shown, mutual obligations by the parties to the agreement will furnish sufficient consideration to constitute a binding contract)....[Regarding the Statute of Frauds argument:] The defendant asserted the agreement, if any, was unenforceable under the statute of frauds because it could not be performed within one year. There is no dispute that the winnings were to be paid over a period of 20 years....

[The statute] does not apply if the contract, from its terms, could possibly be performed within a year—however improbable performance within one year may be. [Citations] [It bars] only oral contracts that cannot be completed within one year. [Citation] (If the agreement, either by its terms or by the nature of the required acts, cannot be performed within one year, it falls within the statute of frauds and must be in writing).

To determine the applicability of the statute of frauds with indefinite contracts, this Court may use any reasonably clear method of ascertaining the intended length of performance. [Citation] The method is used to determine the parties' intentions at the time of contracting. The fact that the entire performance within one year is not required, or expected, will not bring an agreement within the statute. *See* [Citations].

Assuming without deciding that the parties agreed to share their gambling winnings, such an agreement possibly could have been performed within one year. For example, if the plaintiff and defendant had won \$200, they probably would have received all the money in one pay-out and could have split the winnings immediately. Therefore, the defendant was not entitled to summary judgment based on her affirmative defense of the statute of frauds.

We reverse the trial court's judgment and remand for further proceedings.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. The defendant contended there was no consideration to support her alleged promise to split the winnings fifty-fifty. What consideration did the court find here?
2. The defendant contended that the Statute of Frauds' one-year rule prohibited the plaintiff from attempting to prove the existence of the alleged oral contract to split the winnings. What reasoning did the court give here as to why the statute did not apply?
3. After this case, the court remanded the matter to the lower court. What has to happen there before plaintiff gets her money?

### The Parol Evidence Rule: Postcontract Modification

*Hampden Real Estate, Inc. v. Metropolitan Management Group, Inc.*

*142 Fed. Appx. 600 (Fed. Ct. App. Pa. 2005)*

Cowen, J.

*[The court has jurisdiction based on diversity of citizenship.]*

Hampden Real Estate sold Metropolitan Management a residential property pursuant to an Agreement of Sale (the "Sale Agreement"). The Sale Agreement provided that the property would be sold for \$3.7 million, that Metropolitan would assume Hampden's mortgage on the building, and that Hampden would receive a credit in the amount of \$120,549.78—the amount being held in escrow pursuant to the mortgage (the "Escrow Account Credit").

Between the execution of the Sale Agreement and the closing, the parties negotiated certain adjustments to the purchase price to compensate for required repairs. During these negotiations, the parties reviewed a draft and final Settlement Statement (the "Settlement Statement"), prepared by the closing agent, which did not list the Escrow Account Credit among the various debits and credits. A few weeks after the closing, Hampden demanded payment of the Escrow Account Credit.

Following Metropolitan's refusal to pay the Escrow Account Credit, Hampden filed a complaint claiming breach of contract, unjust enrichment, and conversion. Metropolitan brought counterclaims for breach of contract, unjust enrichment, and fraudulent or negligent misrepresentation. Hampden brought a partial motion for summary judgment as to the breach

of contract claim, which was granted and its unjust enrichment and conversion claims were dismissed as moot....

The District Court correctly determined that the threshold issue is the role of the Settlement Statement, “based on both the intent of the parties and the custom and usage of the document.” However, the Court refused to consider extrinsic or parol evidence to determine the intent of the parties, reasoning that the parol evidence rule precluded such consideration absent ambiguity in the written contract. We find that the District Court misapplied the rule. The parol evidence rule seeks to preserve the integrity of written agreements by precluding the introduction of contemporaneous or prior declarations to alter the meaning of written agreements. [Citation] The rule does not apply, however, where a party seeks to introduce evidence of subsequent oral modifications. See [Citation:] a “written agreement may be modified by a subsequent written or oral agreement and this modification may be shown by writings or by words or by conduct or by all three. In such a situation the parol evidence rule is inapplicable.” Here, the parol evidence rule does not preclude testimony regarding the parties’ intention to alter the final purchase price by executing a Settlement Statement, after the execution of the Sale Agreement, which omitted the Escrow Account Credit.

The cases cited by Hampden are not to the contrary as each involved the admissibility of prior negotiations to demonstrate misrepresentations made in the inducement of the contract. As example, the court in [Citation], held that “[i]f a party contends that a writing is not an accurate expression of the agreement between the parties, and that certain provisions were omitted therefrom, the parol evidence rule does not apply.” (Permitting the introduction of parol evidence to establish that the contract omitted provisions which appellees represented would be included in the writing)....

The District Court further held that the integration clause contained in the written contract supports the conclusion that the Settlement Statement, which mentioned neither the Escrow Account Credit nor that it was amending the Sale Agreement, is not a modification of the Sale Agreement. The Court explained that the outcome might be different if the Settlement Statement mentioned “the escrow credit but provided different details, but as the [Settlement Statement] in this case simply ignored the escrow credit, and both parties agree that there were

no oral discussions regarding the escrow credit, the [Settlement Statement] cannot be said to modify the escrow credit provision in the Agreement of Sale.” We disagree.

It is well-settled law in Pennsylvania that a “written contract which is not for the sale of goods may be modified orally, even when the contract provides that modifications may only be made in writing.” [Citation] “The modification may be accomplished either by words or conduct,” [Citation] demonstrating that the parties intended to waive the requirement that amendments be made in writing. [Citation] An oral modification of a written contract must be proven by “clear, precise and convincing evidence.” [Citation] Viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to Metropolitan, we find that the District Court erred in concluding that there was insufficient evidence in the record to raise a genuine issue of material fact as to whether the parties intended to orally modify the Sale Agreement. Metropolitan introduced a Settlement Statement which omitted the Escrow Account Credit, while listing all other debits and credits and submitted an affidavit from its President who “reviewed the Draft Settlement Statement and understood that the Escrow Account Credit had been omitted as part of the ongoing negotiations between the parties concerning the amount of the credit to which Metropolitan was entitled” due to the poor condition of the property.

Accordingly, the District Court erred in granting summary judgment in favor of Hampden. At a minimum, there was a triable issue of fact concerning whether the Settlement Statement was intended to modify the prior written Sale Agreement and serve as the final and binding manifestation of the purchase price. Specifically, whether the parties intended to exclude the Escrow Account Credit from the purchase price as part of the negotiations to address Hampden’s failure to maintain the property.

[Reversed and remanded.]

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. The contract had an integration clause. Why didn’t that bar admission of the subsequent oral modification to the contract?
2. What rule of law was the plaintiff relying on in support of its contention that the original agreement should stand?

3. What rule of law was the defendant relying on in support of its contention that the original agreement had been modified?
4. According to the defendant, how had the original agreement been modified, and why?

## 13.5 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

In an economic system mostly governed by contract, parties may not only make the kinds of deals they wish but may make them in any form they wish—with some significant exceptions. The most significant issue of form in contract law is whether the contract must be written or may be oral and still be enforceable. The question can be answered by paying close attention to the Statute of Frauds and court decisions interpreting it. In general, as we have seen, the following types of contracts must be in writing: interests in real property, promises to pay the debt of another, certain agreements of executors and administrators, performances that cannot be completed within one year, sale of goods for \$500 or more, and sale of securities. There are exceptions to all these rules.

Another significant rule that permeates contract law is the parol evidence rule: prior statements, agreements, or promises, whether oral or written, made during the negotiation process are often discharged by a subsequent written agreement. No matter what you were promised before you signed on the dotted line, you are stuck if you sign an integrated agreement without the promise. Again, of course, exceptions lie in wait for the unwary: Is the agreement only partially integrated? Are there grounds to invalidate the entire agreement? Is the contract subject to an oral condition? Is a fact recited in the contract untrue?

Contracts are not always clear and straightforward. Often they are murky and ambiguous. Interpreting them when the parties disagree is for the courts. To aid them in the task, the courts over the years have developed a series of guidelines such as these: Does the agreement have a plain meaning on its face? If there is an ambiguity, against whom should it be construed? Are there usages of trade or courses of dealing or performance that would help explain the terms?

### EXERCISES

1. Plaintiff's and Defendant's cars crashed. Plaintiff hired an attorney, who negotiated with Defendant's insurance adjuster. Plaintiff's attorney claimed he and the adjuster reached an

oral settlement, but the insurance company refused to honor it and filed for summary judgment, raising the Statute of Frauds' suretyship provision as a defense: a promise by one person (the insurance company here) to pay the debts of another (the insured) must be evidenced by some writing, and there was no writing. Is the defense good? Explain.

2. Plaintiff Irma Kozlowski cohabited with Defendant Thaddeus Kozlowski for fifteen years without marriage. She repeatedly asked him specifically about her financial situation should he predecease her, and he assured her—she said—that he would arrange to provide for her for the rest of her life. She had provided the necessary household services and emotional support to permit him to successfully pursue his business career; she had performed housekeeping, cleaning, and shopping services and had run the household and raised the children, her own as well as his. When they separated and she was “literally forced out of the house,” she was sixty-three years old and had no means or wherewithal for survival. When she sued, he raised the Statute of Frauds' one-year rule as a defense. Is the defense good? <sup>[1]</sup>
3. Carlson purchased a parcel of real estate that was landlocked. Carlson called his neighbor, Peterson, and asked if he could use an abandoned drive on Peterson's property to travel to his (Carlson's) property from the highway. Peterson said, “Sure, anytime.” Later the two became engaged in a dispute, and Peterson blocked the drive. May Carlson enforce Peterson's promise that he could use the drive “anytime”? Why?
4. Silverman, who was elderly and somewhat disabled, lived alone on a farm. Silverman called Burch and said, “Burch, if you will move in with me and help me take care of the farm, it will be yours when I die.” Burch did as Silverman requested and on Silverman's death two years later, claimed the farm on the basis of their oral agreement, but the estate resisted. Is Burch entitled to the farm? Why?
5. On February 12, Sally was hired to manage a company for a period of one year. She reported for work on February 26 but was fired two weeks later. She sued the owner of the company for breach of their one-year oral contract. May she recover? Why?
6. Baker entered into an oral contract to sell her car to Clyde for \$8,600. She delivered the car to Clyde; Clyde inspected it, found no problems, kept it for three days, but then refused to pay and now wants to return the car. Is the contract enforceable? Why?



7. Wayne, a building contractor, built a new house and offered it for sale. A young couple accepted the offer, and the parties entered into an oral agreement covering all the terms of sale. The couple later tried to back out of the agreement. Wayne filed suit, and during the trial, the couple admitted making the contract. Is the contract enforceable? Why?
8. Plaintiff leased commercial space from Defendant for a florist shop. After the lease was signed, Plaintiff learned that the county code allowed only one freestanding sign on the property, and one was already up, advertising Defendant's business. Plaintiff claimed Defendant breached the lease by not providing them space for a sign; Defendant pointed to the lease, paragraph 16 of which provided that "Tenant shall not erect or install any sign...without written consent of the Landlord." But Plaintiff claimed Defendant said during negotiations he could have a sign, evidence Defendant objected to based on the parol evidence rule. Defendant admitted that during negotiations he told Plaintiff that despite paragraph 16, he could have a sign (but not freestanding); that despite language in the lease requiring renovation plans to be in writing, they did not have to be. Defendant also testified that the written form lease he used was not drafted specifically for this property, and that although the lease required attachments of exhibits, there were no attachments. Is Plaintiff barred by the parol evidence rule from showing that Defendant said he could have a freestanding sign?
9. On March 1, 2010, Milton talked to Harriet and, as Harriet claimed, said, "I will hire you as sales manager for one year at a salary of \$57,000. You start next Monday, March 8." Harriet agreed. Four months later Milton discharged Harriet and she sued, claiming breach of employment contract. Is the alleged contract enforceable?
10. Al Booth's Inc. sued Boyd-Scarp (a contractor) and James Rathmann for nonpayment following delivery of various appliances to Rathmann's new home being built by Boyd-Scarp. Booth's was aware that Boyd-Scarp was having financial problems and allegedly contacted Rathmann prior to delivery, asking him to guarantee payment. Evidence was adduced that Rathmann orally promised to pay in the event the builder did not and that the goods were then delivered. Rathmann denied any such promise, raising the Statute of Frauds, and Al Booth's sued. Will Al Booth's prevail?

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. As a general rule

- a. contracts do not have to be in writing to be enforceable
- b. contracts that can be performed in one year must be in writing
- c. all oral contracts are unenforceable
- d. a suretyship agreement need not be in writing to be enforceable

An exception to the UCC Statute of Frauds provision is

- a. the one-year rule
- b. the reply doctrine
- c. executor agreements
- d. all of the above

Rules that require certain contracts to be in writing are found in

- a. state statutory law
- b. the UCC
- c. the Statute of Frauds
- d. all of the above

The parol evidence rule

- a. applies only when contracts must be in writing
- b. does not apply to real estate contracts
- c. states that a written contract discharges all prior or contemporaneous promises that add to, vary, or conflict with it
- d. is designed to hold parties to promises they made during negotiations

A merger clause

- a. is required when goods are sold for \$500 or more
- b. is used when two parcels of real estate are sold in the same contract
- c. invalidates a contract for the sale of securities
- d. evidences an intention that the written contract is the parties' full understanding

## SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. a
- 2. b

3. d
4. c
5. d

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[1] *Kozlowski v. Kozlowski*, 395 A.2d 913 (N.J. 1978).



# Chapter 14

## Third-Party Rights

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. How an assignment of contract rights is made and how it operates
2. What a delegation of duties is and how it operates
3. Under what circumstances a person not a party to a contract can enforce it

To this point, we have focused on the rights and duties of the two parties to the contract. In this chapter, we turn our attention to contracts in which outsiders acquire rights or duties or both.

Three types of outsiders merit examination:

1. Assignees (outsiders who acquire rights after the contract is made)
2. Delegates (outsiders who acquire duties after the contract is made)
3. Third-party beneficiaries (outsiders who acquire rights when the original contract is made)

## 14.1 Assignment of Contract Rights

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what an assignment is and how it is made.
2. Recognize the effect of the assignment.
3. Know when assignments are not allowed.
4. Understand the concept of assignor's warranties.

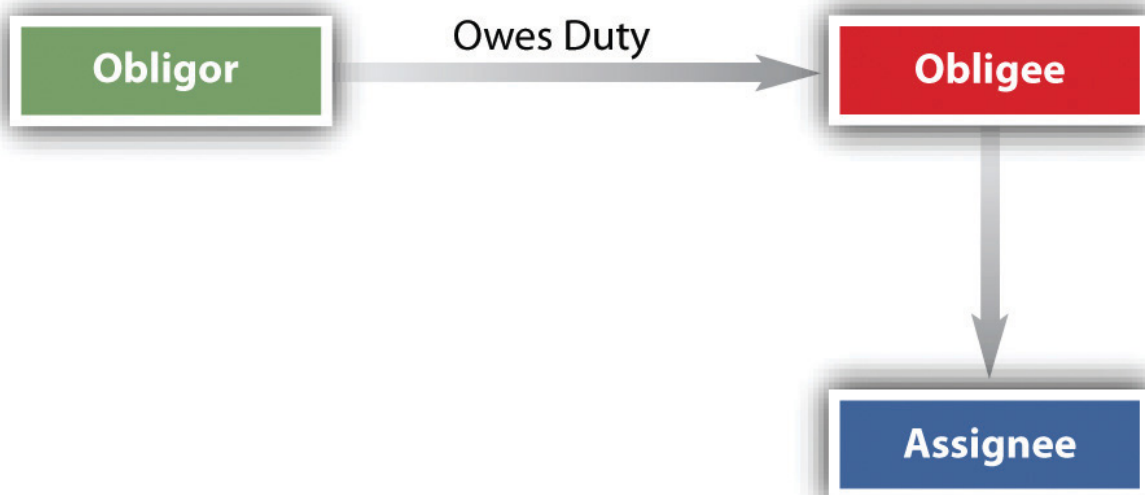
### The Concept of a Contract Assignment

Contracts create rights and duties. By an assignment, an obligee (one who has the right to receive a contract benefit) transfers a right to receive a contract benefit owed by the obligor (the one who has a duty to perform) to a third person (assignee); the obligee then becomes an assignor (one who makes an assignment).

The Restatement (Second) of Contracts defines an assignment of a right as “a manifestation of the assignor’s intention to transfer it by virtue of which the assignor’s right to performance by the obligor is extinguished in whole or in part and the assignee acquires the right to such

performance.”<sup>[4]</sup> The one who makes the assignment is both an obligee and a transferor. The assignee acquires the right to receive the contractual obligations of the promisor, who is referred to as the obligor (see [Figure 14.1 "Assignment of Rights"](#)). The assignor may assign any right unless (1) doing so would materially change the obligation of the obligor, materially burden him, increase his risk, or otherwise diminish the value to him of the original contract; (2) statute or public policy forbids the assignment; or (3) the contract itself precludes assignment. The common law of contracts and Articles 2 and 9 of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) govern assignments. Assignments are an important part of business financing, such as factoring. A factor is one who purchases the right to receive income from another.

*Figure 14.1 Assignment of Rights*



## Method of Assignment

### Manifesting Assent

To effect an assignment, the assignor must make known his intention to transfer the rights to the third person. The assignor’s intention must be that the assignment is effective without need of any further action or any further manifestation of intention to make the assignment. In other words, the assignor must intend and understand himself to be making the assignment then and there; he is not promising to make the assignment sometime in the future.

Under the UCC, any assignments of rights in excess of \$5,000 must be in writing, but otherwise, assignments can be oral and consideration is not required: the assignor could assign the right to the assignee for nothing (not likely in commercial transactions, of course). Mrs. Franklin has the right to receive \$750 a month from the sale of a house she formerly owned; she assigns the right to receive the money to her son Jason, as a gift. The assignment is good, though such a gratuitous assignment is usually revocable, which is not the case where consideration has been paid for an assignment.

### **Acceptance and Revocation**

For the assignment to become effective, the assignee must manifest his acceptance under most circumstances. This is done automatically when, as is usually the case, the assignee has given consideration for the assignment (i.e., there is a contract between the assignor and the assignee in which the assignment is the assignor's consideration), and then the assignment is not revocable without the assignee's consent. Problems of acceptance normally arise only when the assignor intends the assignment as a gift. Then, for the assignment to be irrevocable, either the assignee must manifest his acceptance or the assignor must notify the assignee in writing of the assignment.

### **Notice**

Notice to the obligor is not required, but an obligor who renders performance to the assignor without notice of the assignment (that performance of the contract is to be rendered now to the assignee) is discharged. Obviously, the assignor cannot then keep the consideration he has received; he owes it to the assignee. But if notice is given to the obligor and she performs to the assignor anyway, the assignee can recover from either the obligor or the assignee, so the obligor could have to perform twice, as in Exercise 2 at the chapter's end, *Aldana v. Colonial Palms Plaza*. Of course, an obligor who receives notice of the assignment from the assignee will want to be sure the assignment has really occurred. After all, anybody could waltz up to the obligor and say, "I'm the assignee of your contract with the bank. From now on, pay me the \$500 a month, not the bank." The obligor is entitled to verification of the assignment.

### **Effect of Assignment**

#### **General Rule**

An assignment of rights effectively makes the assignee stand in the shoes of the assignor. He gains all the rights against the obligor that the assignor had, but no more. An obligor who could avoid the assignor's attempt to enforce the rights could avoid a similar attempt by the assignee. Likewise, under UCC Section 9-318(1), the assignee of an account is subject to all terms of the contract between the debtor and the creditor-assignor. Suppose Dealer sells a car to Buyer on a contract where Buyer is to pay \$300 per month and the car is warranted for 50,000 miles. If the car goes on the fritz before then and Dealer won't fix it, Buyer could fix it for, say, \$250 and deduct that \$250 from the amount owed Dealer on the next installment (called a setoff). Now, if Dealer assigns the contract to Assignee, Assignee stands in Dealer's shoes, and Buyer could likewise deduct the \$250 from payment to Assignee.

### Exceptions

The "shoe rule" does not apply to two types of assignments. First, it is inapplicable to the sale of a negotiable instrument to a holder in due course. Second, the rule may be waived: under the UCC and at common law, the obligor may agree in the original contract not to raise defenses against the assignee that could have been raised against the assignor.<sup>[2]</sup> While a waiver of defenses makes the assignment more marketable from the assignee's point of view, it is a situation fraught with peril to an obligor, who may sign a contract without understanding the full import of the waiver. Under the waiver rule, for example, a farmer who buys a tractor on credit and discovers later that it does not work would still be required to pay a credit company that purchased the contract; his defense that the merchandise was shoddy would be unavailing (he would, as used to be said, be "having to pay on a dead horse").

For that reason, there are various rules that limit both the holder in due course and the waiver rule. Certain defenses, the so-called real defenses (infancy, duress, and fraud in the execution, among others), may always be asserted. Also, the waiver clause in the contract must have been presented in good faith, and if the assignee has actual notice of a defense that the buyer or lessee could raise, then the waiver is ineffective. Moreover, in consumer transactions, the UCC's rule is subject to state laws that protect consumers (people buying things used primarily for personal, family, or household purposes), and many states, by statute or court decision, have made waivers of defenses ineffective in such consumer transactions. Federal Trade Commission

regulations also affect the ability of many sellers to pass on rights to assignees free of defenses that buyers could raise against them. Because of these various limitations on the holder in due course and on waivers, the “shoe rule” will not govern in consumer transactions and, if there are real defenses or the assignee does not act in good faith, in business transactions as well.

### **When Assignments Are Not Allowed**

The general rule—as previously noted—is that most contract rights are assignable. But there are exceptions. Five of them are noted here.

#### **Material Change in Duties of the Obligor**

When an assignment has the effect of materially changing the duties that the obligor must perform, it is ineffective. Changing the party to whom the obligor must make a payment is not a material change of duty that will defeat an assignment, since that, of course, is the purpose behind most assignments. Nor will a minor change in the duties the obligor must perform defeat the assignment.

Several residents in the town of Centerville sign up on an annual basis with the Centerville *Times* to receive their morning paper. A customer who is moving out of town may assign his right to receive the paper to someone else within the delivery route. As long as the assignee pays for the paper, the assignment is effective; the only relationship the obligor has to the assignee is a routine delivery in exchange for payment. Obligor can consent in the original contract, however, to a subsequent assignment of duties. Here is a clause from the World Team Tennis League contract: “It is mutually agreed that the Club shall have the right to sell, assign, trade and transfer this contract to another Club in the League, and the Player agrees to accept and be bound by such sale, exchange, assignment or transfer and to faithfully perform and carry out his or her obligations under this contract as if it had been entered into by the Player and such other Club.” Consent is not necessary when the contract does not involve a personal relationship.

#### **Assignment of Personal Rights**

When it matters to the obligor who receives the benefit of his duty to perform under the contract, then the receipt of the benefit is a personal right that cannot be assigned. For example, a student seeking to earn pocket money during the school year signs up to do research work for



a professor she admires and with whom she is friendly. The professor assigns the contract to one of his colleagues with whom the student does not get along. The assignment is ineffective because it matters to the student (the obligor) who the person of the assignee is. An insurance company provides auto insurance covering Mohammed Kareem, a sixty-five-year-old man who drives very carefully. Kareem cannot assign the contract to his seventeen-year-old grandson because it matters to the insurance company who the person of its insured is. Tenants usually cannot assign (sublet) their tenancies without the landlord's permission because it matters to the landlord who the person of their tenant is. [Section 14.4.1 "Nonassignable Rights"](#), *Nassau Hotel Co. v. Barnett & Barse Corp.*, is an example of the nonassignability of a personal right.

### **Assignment Forbidden by Statute or Public Policy**

Various federal and state laws prohibit or regulate some contract assignment. The assignment of future wages is regulated by state and federal law to protect people from improvidently denying themselves future income because of immediate present financial difficulties. And even in the absence of statute, public policy might prohibit some assignments.

### **Contracts That Prohibit Assignment**

Assignability of contract rights is useful, and prohibitions against it are not generally favored. Many contracts contain general language that prohibits assignment of rights or of “the contract.” Both the Restatement and UCC Section 2-210(3) declare that in the absence of any contrary circumstances, a provision in the agreement that prohibits assigning “the contract” bars “only the delegation to the assignee of the assignor’s performance.”<sup>[3]</sup> In other words, unless the contract specifically prohibits assignment of any of its terms, a party is free to assign anything except his or her own duties.

Even if a contractual provision explicitly prohibits it, a right to damages for breach of the whole contract is assignable under UCC Section 2-210(2) in contracts for goods. Likewise, UCC Section 9-318(4) invalidates any contract provision that prohibits assigning sums already due or to become due. Indeed, in some states, at common law, a clause specifically prohibiting assignment will fail. For example, the buyer and the seller agree to the sale of land and to a provision barring assignment of the rights under the contract. The buyer pays the full price, but the seller refuses to convey. The buyer then assigns to her friend the right to obtain title to the land from the

seller. The latter's objection that the contract precludes such an assignment will fall on deaf ears in some states; the assignment is effective, and the friend may sue for the title.

### **Future Contracts**

The law distinguishes between assigning future rights under an existing contract and assigning rights that will arise from a future contract. Rights contingent on a future event can be assigned in exactly the same manner as existing rights, as long as the contingent rights are already incorporated in a contract. Ben has a long-standing deal with his neighbor, Mrs. Robinson, to keep the latter's walk clear of snow at twenty dollars a snowfall. Ben is saving his money for a new printer, but when he is eighty dollars shy of the purchase price, he becomes impatient and cajoles a friend into loaning him the balance. In return, Ben assigns his friend the earnings from the next four snowfalls. The assignment is effective. However, a right that will arise from a future contract cannot be the subject of a present assignment.

### **Partial Assignments**

An assignor may assign part of a contractual right, but only if the obligor can perform that part of his contractual obligation separately from the remainder of his obligation. Assignment of part of a payment due is always enforceable. However, if the obligor objects, neither the assignor nor the assignee may sue him unless both are party to the suit. Mrs. Robinson owes Ben one hundred dollars. Ben assigns fifty dollars of that sum to his friend. Mrs. Robinson is perplexed by this assignment and refuses to pay until the situation is explained to her satisfaction. The friend brings suit against Mrs. Robinson. The court cannot hear the case unless Ben is also a party to the suit. This ensures all parties to the dispute are present at once and avoids multiple lawsuits.

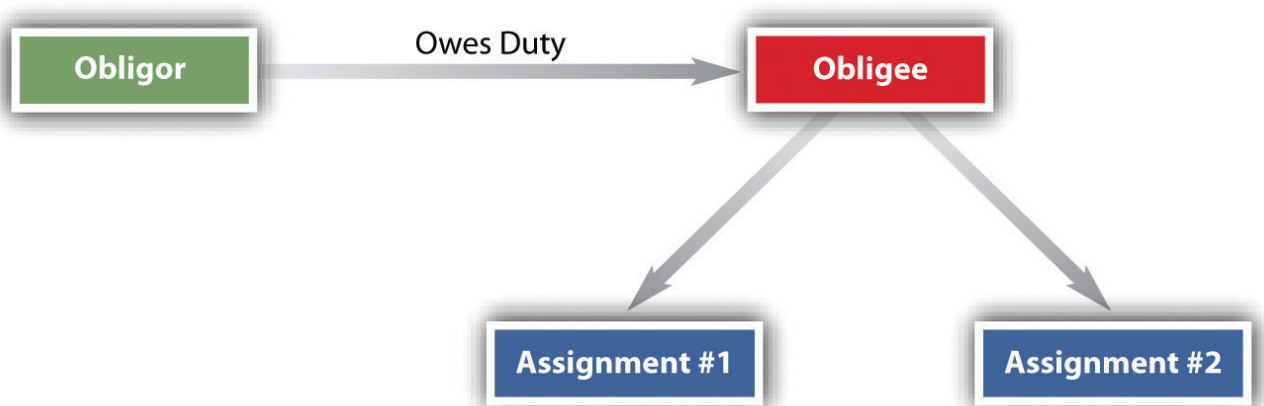
### **Successive Assignments**

It may happen that an assignor assigns the same interest twice (see [Figure 14.2 "Successive Assignments"](#)). With certain exceptions, the first assignee takes precedence over any subsequent assignee. One obvious exception is when the first assignment is ineffective or revocable. A subsequent assignment has the effect of revoking a prior assignment that is ineffective or revocable. Another exception: if in good faith the subsequent assignee gives consideration for the assignment and has no knowledge of the prior assignment, he takes precedence whenever he

obtains payment from, performance from, or a judgment against the obligor, or whenever he receives some tangible evidence from the assignor that the right has been assigned (e.g., a bank deposit book or an insurance policy).

Some states follow the different English rule: the first assignee to give notice to the obligor has priority, regardless of the order in which the assignments were made. Furthermore, if the assignment falls within the filing requirements of UCC Article 9, the first assignee to file will prevail.

*Figure 14.2 Successive Assignments*



### Assignor's Warranties

An assignor has legal responsibilities in making assignments. He cannot blithely assign the same interests pell-mell and escape liability. Unless the contract explicitly states to the contrary, a person who assigns a right for value makes certain assignor's warranties to the assignee: that he will not upset the assignment, that he has the right to make it, and that there are no defenses that will defeat it. However, the assignor does not guarantee payment; assignment does not by itself amount to a warranty that the obligor is solvent or will perform as agreed in the original contract. Mrs. Robinson owes Ben fifty dollars. Ben assigns this sum to his friend. Before the friend collects, Ben releases Mrs. Robinson from her obligation. The friend may sue Ben for the fifty dollars. Or again, if Ben represents to his friend that Mrs. Robinson owes him (Ben) fifty dollars and assigns his friend that amount, but in fact Mrs. Robinson does not owe Ben that

much, then Ben has breached his assignor's warranty. The assignor's warranties may be express or implied.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Generally, it is OK for an obligee to assign the right to receive contractual performance from the obligor to a third party. The effect of the assignment is to make the assignee stand in the shoes of the assignor, taking all the latter's rights and all the defenses against nonperformance that the obligor might raise against the assignor. But the obligor may agree in advance to waive defenses against the assignee, unless such waiver is prohibited by law. There are some exceptions to the rule that contract rights are assignable. Some, such as personal rights, are not circumstances where the obligor's duties would materially change, cases where assignability is forbidden by statute or public policy, or, with some limits, cases where the contract itself prohibits assignment. Partial assignments and successive assignments can happen, and rules govern the resolution of problems arising from them. When the assignor makes the assignment, that person makes certain warranties, express or implied, to the assignee, basically to the effect that the assignment is good and the assignor knows of no reason why the assignee will not get performance from the obligor.

### EXERCISES

1. If Able makes a valid assignment to Baker of his contract to receive monthly rental payments from Tenant, how is Baker's right different from what Able's was?
2. Able made a valid assignment to Baker of his contract to receive monthly purchase payments from Carr, who bought an automobile from Able. The car had a 180-day warranty, but the car malfunctioned within that time. Able had quit the auto business entirely. May Carr withhold payments from Baker to offset the cost of needed repairs?
3. Assume in the case in Exercise 2 that Baker knew Able was selling defective cars just before his (Able's) withdrawal from the auto business. How, if at all, does that change Baker's rights?
4. Why are leases generally not assignable? Why are insurance contracts not assignable?

[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 317(1).

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 9-206.

[3] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 322.

## 14.2 Delegation of Duties

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

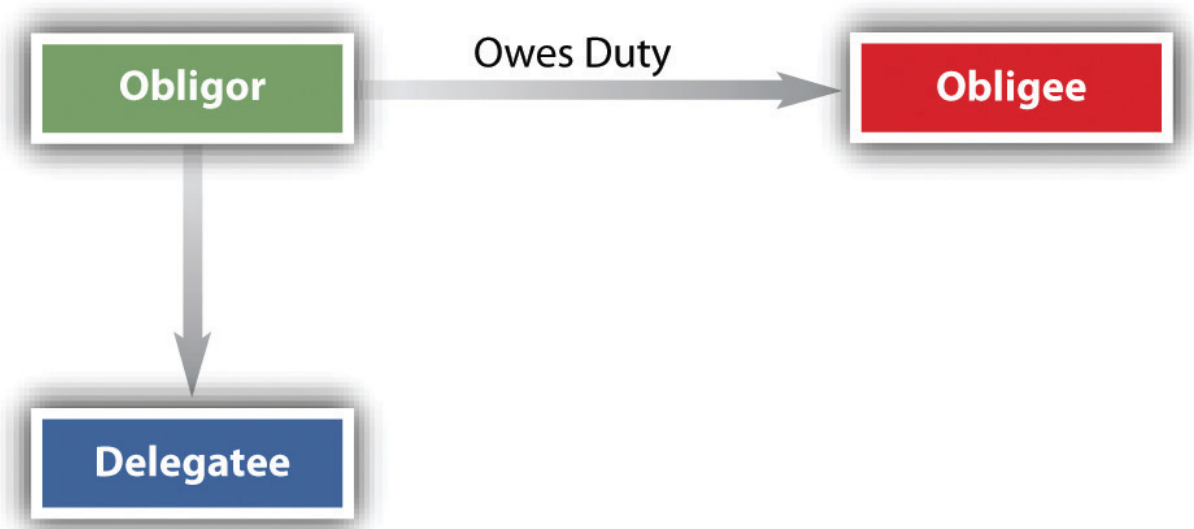
1. Know what a delegation of duty is.
2. Recognize how liability remains on the delegator following a delegation.
3. Understand what duties may not be delegated.

### Basic Rules Regarding Delegation

#### General Rule

To this point, we have been considering the assignment of the assignor's rights (usually, though not solely, to money payments). But in every contract, a right connotes a corresponding duty, and these may be delegated. A delegation is the transfer to a third party of the duty to perform under a contract. The one who delegates is the delegator. Because most obligees are also obligors, most assignments of rights will simultaneously carry with them the delegation of duties. Unless public policy or the contract itself bars the delegation, it is legally enforceable. In most states, at common law, duties must be expressly delegated. Under Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) Section 2-210(4) and in a minority of states at common law (as illustrated in [Section 14.4.2 "Assignment Includes Delegation"](#), *Rose v. Vulcan Materials Co.*), an assignment of "the contract" or of "all my rights under the contract" is not only an assignment of rights but also a delegation of duties to be performed; by accepting the assignment, the delegatee (one to whom the delegation is made) implies a promise to perform the duties. (See [Figure 14.3 "Delegation of Duties"](#))

Figure 14.3 *Delegation of Duties*



### Effect on Obligor

An obligor who delegates a duty (and becomes a delegator) does not thereby escape liability for performing the duty himself. The obligee of the duty may continue to look to the obligor for performance unless the original contract specifically provides for substitution by delegation. This is a big difference between assignment of contract rights and delegation of contract duties: in the former, the assignor is discharged (absent breach of assignor's warranties); in the latter, the delegator remains liable. The obligee (again, the one to whom the duty to perform flows) may also, in many cases, look to the delegatee, because the obligee becomes an intended beneficiary of the contract between the obligor and the delegatee, as discussed in [Section 14.3 "Third-Party Beneficiaries"](#). Of course, the obligee may subsequently agree to accept the delegatee and discharge the obligor from any further responsibility for performing the duty. A contract among three persons having this effect is called a novation; it is a new contract. Fred sells his house to Lisa, who assumes his mortgage. Fred, in other words, has delegated the duty to pay the bank to Lisa. If Lisa defaults, Fred continues to be liable to the bank, unless in the

original mortgage agreement a provision specifically permitted any purchaser to be substituted without recourse to Fred, or unless the bank subsequently accepts Lisa and discharges Fred.

## **Nondelegable Duties**

### **Personal Services**

Personal services are not delegable. If the contract is such that the promisee expects the obligor personally to perform the duty, the obligor may not delegate it. Suppose the Catskill Civic Opera Association hires a famous singer to sing in its production of *Carmen* and the singer delegates the job to her understudy. The delegation is ineffective, and performance by the understudy does not absolve the famous singer of liability for breach.

Many duties may be delegated, however. Indeed, if they could not be delegated, much of the world's work would not get done. If you hire a construction company and an architect to design and build your house to certain specifications, the contractor may in turn hire individual craftspeople—plumbers, electricians, and the like—to do these specialized jobs, and as long as they are performed to specification, the contract terms will have been met. If you hired an architecture firm, though, you might not be contracting for the specific services of a particular individual in that firm.

### **Public Policy**

Public policy may prohibit certain kinds of delegations. A public official, for example, may not delegate the duties of her office to private citizens, although various statutes generally permit the delegation of duties to her assistants and subordinates.

### **Delegations Barred by Contract**

As we have already noted, the contract itself may bar assignment. The law generally disfavors restricting the right to assign a benefit, but it will uphold a contract provision that prohibits delegation of a duty. Thus, as we have seen, UCC Section 2-210(3) states that in a contract for sale of goods, a provision against assigning “the contract” is to be construed only as a prohibition against delegating the duties.

## **KEY TAKEAWAY**

The duty to perform a contractual obligation may usually be delegated to a third party. Such delegation, however, does not discharge the delegator, who remains liable on the contract absent a novation.

Some duties may not be delegated: personal services cannot be, and public policy or the contract itself may bar delegation.

## EXERCISES

1. What is the difference between an assignment and a delegation?
2. Under what circumstances is the delegator discharged from liability on the contract?

## 14.3 Third-Party Beneficiaries

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know what a third-party beneficiary is, and what the types of such beneficiaries are.
2. Recognize the rights obtained by third-party beneficiaries.
3. Understand when the public might be a third-party beneficiary of government contracts.

The fundamental issue with third-party beneficiaries gets to this: can a person who is not a party to a contract sue to enforce its terms?

### The General Rule

The general rule is this: persons not a party to a contract cannot enforce its terms; they are said to lack privity, a private, face-to-face relationship with the contracting parties. But if the persons are intended to benefit from the performance of a contract between others, then they can enforce it: they are intended beneficiaries.

### Two Types of Third-Party Beneficiaries

In the vocabulary of the Restatement, a third person whom the parties to the contract intend to benefit is an intended beneficiary—that is, one who is entitled under the law of contracts to assert a right arising from a contract to which he or she is not a party. There are two types of intended beneficiaries.

#### Creditor Beneficiary

A creditor beneficiary is one to whom the promisor agrees to pay a debt of the promisee. For example, a father is bound by law to support his child. If the child's uncle (the promisor) contracts with the father (the promisee) to furnish support for the child, the child is a creditor



beneficiary and could sue the uncle. Or again, suppose Customer pays Ace Dealer for a new car, and Ace delegates the duty of delivery to Beta Dealer. Ace is now a debtor: he owes Customer something: a car. Customer is a creditor; she is owed something: a car. When Beta performs under his delegated contract with Ace, Beta is discharging the debt Ace owes to Customer. Customer is a creditor beneficiary of Dealers' contract and could sue either one for nondelivery. She could sue Ace because she made a contract with him, and she could sue Beta because—again—she was intended to benefit from the performance of Dealers' agreement.

### **Donee Beneficiary**

The second type of intended beneficiary is a donee beneficiary. When the promisee is not indebted to the third person but intends for him or her to have the benefit of the promisor's performance, the third person is a donee beneficiary (and the promise is sometimes called a gift promise). For example, an insurance company (the promisor) promises to its policyholder (the promisee), in return for a premium, to pay \$100,000 to his wife on his death; this makes the wife a donee beneficiary (see [Figure 14.1 "Assignment of Rights"](#)). The wife could sue to enforce the contract although she was not a party to it. Or if Able makes a contract with Woodsman for the latter to cut the trees in Able's backyard as a Christmas gift to Able's uphill Neighbor (so that Neighbor will have a view), Neighbor could sue Woodsman for breach of the contract.

If a person is not an intended beneficiary—not a creditor or donee beneficiary—then he or she is said to be only an incidental beneficiary, and that person has no rights. So if Able makes the contract with Woodsman not to benefit Neighbor but for Able's own benefit, the fact that the tree removal would benefit Neighbor does not make Neighbor an intended beneficiary.

The beneficiary's rights are always limited by the terms of the contract. A failure by the promisee to perform his part of the bargain will terminate the beneficiary's rights if the promisee's lapse terminates his own rights, absent language in the contract to the contrary. If Able makes the contract as a gift to Neighbor but doesn't make the required down payment to Woodsman, Neighbor's claim fails. In a suit by the beneficiary, the promisor may avail himself of any defense he could have asserted against the promisee. Woodsman may defend himself against Neighbor's claim that Woodsman did not do the whole job by showing that Able didn't make full payment for the work.

## Modification of the Beneficiary's Rights

Conferring rights on an intended beneficiary is relatively simple. Whether his rights can be modified or extinguished by subsequent agreement of the promisor and promisee is a more troublesome issue. The general rule is that the beneficiary's rights may be altered as long as there has been no vesting of rights (the rights have not taken effect). The time at which the beneficiary's rights vest differs among jurisdictions: some say immediately, some say when the beneficiary assents to the receipt of the contract right, some say the beneficiary's rights don't vest until she has detrimentally relied on the right. The Restatement says that unless the contract provides that its terms cannot be changed without the beneficiary's consent, the parties may change or rescind the benefit unless the beneficiary has sued on the promise, has detrimentally relied, or has assented to the promise at the request of one of the parties. <sup>[1]</sup> Some contracts provide that the benefit never vests; for example, standard insurance policies today reserve to the insured the right to substitute beneficiaries, to borrow against the policy, to assign it, and to surrender it for cash.

## Government Contracts

The general rule is that members of the public are only incidental beneficiaries of contracts made by the government with a contractor to do public works. It is not illogical to see a contract between the government and a company pledged to perform a service on behalf of the public as one creating rights in particular members of the public, but the consequences of such a view could be extremely costly because everyone has some interest in public works and government services.

A restaurant chain, hearing that the county was planning to build a bridge that would reroute commuter traffic, might decide to open a restaurant on one side of the bridge; if it let contracts for construction only to discover that the bridge was to be delayed or canceled, could it sue the county's contractor? In general, the answer is that it cannot. A promisor under contract to the government is not liable for the consequential damages to a member of the public arising from its failure to perform (or from a faulty performance) unless the agreement specifically calls for such liability or unless the promisee (the government) would itself be liable and a suit directly against the promisor would be consistent with the contract terms and public policy. When the

government retains control over litigation or settlement of claims, or when it is easy for the public to insure itself against loss, or when the number and amount of claims would be excessive, the courts are less likely to declare individuals to be intended beneficiaries. But the service to be provided can be so tailored to the needs of particular persons that it makes sense to view them as intended beneficiaries—in the case, for example, of a service station licensed to perform emergency road repairs, as in [Section 14.4.3 "Third party Beneficiaries and Foreseeable Damages"](#), *Kornblut v. Chevron Oil Co.*

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Generally, a person who is not a party to a contract cannot sue to enforce its terms. The exception is if the person is an intended beneficiary, either a creditor beneficiary or a donee beneficiary. Such third parties can enforce the contract made by others but only get such rights as the contract provides, and beneficiaries are subject to defenses that could be made against their benefactor.

The general rule is that members of the public are not intended beneficiaries of contracts made by the government, but only incidental beneficiaries.

#### EXERCISES

1. What are the two types of intended beneficiaries?
2. Smith contracted to deliver a truck on behalf of Truck Sales to Byers, who had purchased it from Truck Sales. Smith was entitled to payment by Byers for the delivery. The truck was defective. May Byers withhold payment from Smith to offset the repair costs?
3. Why is the public not usually considered an intended beneficiary of contracts made by the government?

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[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 311.

## 14.4 Cases

### Nonassignable Rights

*Nassau Hotel Co. v. Barnett & Barse Corporation*

*147 N.Y.S. 283 (1914)*

McLaughlin, J.

Plaintiff owns a hotel at Long Beach, L. I., and on the 21st of November, 1912, it entered into a written agreement with the individual defendants Barnett and Barse to conduct the same for a period of years....Shortly after this agreement was signed, Barnett and Barse organized the Barnett & Barse Corporation with a capital stock of \$10,000, and then assigned the agreement to it. Immediately following the assignment, the corporation went into possession and assumed to carry out its terms. The plaintiff thereupon brought this action to cancel the agreement and to recover possession of the hotel and furniture therein, on the ground that the agreement was not assignable. [Summary judgment in favor of the plaintiff, defendant corporation appeals.]

The only question presented is whether the agreement was assignable. It provided, according to the allegations of the complaint, that the plaintiff leased the property to Barnett and Barse with all its equipment and furniture for a period of three years, with a privilege of five successive renewals of three years each. It expressly provided:

‘That said lessees...become responsible for the operation of the said hotel and for the upkeep and maintenance thereof and of all its furniture and equipment in accordance with the terms of this agreement and the said lessees shall have the exclusive possession, control and management thereof. \* \* \* The said lessees hereby covenant and agree that they will operate the said hotel at all times in a first-class business-like manner, keep the same open for at least six (6) months of each year, \* \* \*’ and ‘in lieu of rental the lessor and lessees hereby covenant and agree that the gross receipts of such operation shall be, as received, divided between the parties hereto as follows: (a) Nineteen per cent. (19%) to the lessor. \* \* \* In the event of the failure of the lessees well and truly to perform the covenants and agreements herein contained,’ they should be liable in the sum of \$50,000 as liquidated damages. That ‘in consideration and upon condition that the said lessees shall well and faithfully perform all the covenants and agreements by them to be performed without evasion or delay the said lessor for itself and its successors, covenants and agrees that the said lessees, their legal representatives and assigns may at all times during said term and the renewals thereof peaceably have and enjoy the said demised premises.’ And that

‘this agreement shall inure to the benefit of and bind the respective parties hereto, their personal representatives, successors and assigns.’

The complaint further alleges that the agreement was entered into by plaintiff in reliance upon the financial responsibility of Barnett and Barse, their personal character, and especially the experience of Barnett in conducting hotels; that, though he at first held a controlling interest in the Barnett & Barse Corporation, he has since sold all his stock to the defendant Barse, and has no interest in the corporation and no longer devotes any time or attention to the management or operation of the hotel.

...[C]learly...the agreement in question was personal to Barnett and Barse and could not be assigned by them without the plaintiff’s consent. By its terms the plaintiff not only entrusted them with the care and management of the hotel and its furnishings—valued, according to the allegations of the complaint, at more than \$1,000,000—but agreed to accept as rental or compensation a percentage of the gross receipts. Obviously, the receipts depended to a large extent upon the management, and the care of the property upon the personal character and responsibility of the persons in possession. When the whole agreement is read, it is apparent that the plaintiff relied, in making it, upon the personal covenants of Barnett and Barse. They were financially responsible. As already said, Barnett had had a long and successful experience in managing hotels, which was undoubtedly an inducing cause for plaintiff’s making the agreement in question and for personally obligating them to carry out its terms.

It is suggested that because there is a clause in the agreement to the effect that it should ‘inure to the benefit of and bind the respective parties hereto, their personal representatives and assigns,’ that Barnett and Barse had a right to assign it to the corporation. But the intention of the parties is to be gathered, not from one clause, but from the entire instrument [Citation] and when it is thus read it clearly appears that Barnett and Barse were to personally carry out the terms of the agreement and did not have a right to assign it. This follows from the language used, which shows that a personal trust or confidence was reposed by the plaintiff in Barnett and Barse when the agreement was made.

In [Citation] it was said: “Rights arising out of contract cannot be transferred if they...involve a relation of personal confidence such that the party whose agreement conferred those rights must have intended them to be exercised only by him in whom he actually confided.”

This rule was applied in [Citation] the court holding that the plaintiff—the assignee—was not only technically, but substantially, a different entity from its predecessor, and that the defendant was not obliged to entrust its money collected on the sale of the presses to the responsibility of an entirely different corporation from that with which it had contracted, and that the contract could not be assigned to the plaintiff without the assent of the other party to it.

The reason which underlies the basis of the rule is that a party has the right to the benefit contemplated from the character, credit, and substance of him with whom he contracts, and in such case he is not bound to recognize...an assignment of the contract.

The order appealed from, therefore, is affirmed.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. The corporation created to operate the hotel was apparently owned and operated by the same two men the plaintiff leased the hotel to in the first place. What objection would the plaintiff have to the corporate entity—actually, of course, a legal fiction—owning and operating the hotel?
2. The defendants pointed to the clause about the contract inuring to the benefit of the parties “and assigns.” So the defendants assigned the contract. How could that not be allowed by the contract’s own terms?
3. What is the controlling rule of law upon which the outcome here depends?

#### Assignment Includes Delegation

*Rose v. Vulcan Materials Co.*

*194 S.E.2d 521 (N.C. 1973)*

Huskins, J.

...Plaintiff [Rose], after leasing his quarry to J. E. Dooley and Son, Inc., promised not to engage in the rock-crushing business within an eight-mile radius of [the city of] Elkin for a period of ten years. In return for this promise, J. E. Dooley and Son, Inc., promised, among other things, to

furnish plaintiff stone f.o.b. the quarry site at Cycle, North Carolina, at stipulated prices for ten years....

By a contract effective 23 April 1960, Vulcan Materials Company, a corporation..., purchased the stone quarry operations and the assets and obligations of J. E. Dooley and Son, Inc....[Vulcan sent Rose a letter, part of which read:]

*Mr. Dooley brought to us this morning the contracts between you and his companies, copies of which are attached. This is to advise that Vulcan Materials Company assumes all phases of these contracts and intends to carry out the conditions of these contracts as they are stated.*

In early 1961 Vulcan notified plaintiff that it would no longer sell stone to him at the prices set out in [the agreement between Rose and Dooley] and would thereafter charge plaintiff the same prices charged all of its other customers for stone. Commencing 11 May 1961, Vulcan raised stone prices to the plaintiff to a level in excess of the prices specified in [the Rose-Dooley agreement].

At the time Vulcan increased the prices of stone to amounts in excess of those specified in [the Rose-Dooley contract], plaintiff was engaged in his ready-mix cement business, using large quantities of stone, and had no other practical source of supply. Advising Vulcan that he intended to sue for breach of contract, he continued to purchase stone from Vulcan under protest....

The total of these amounts over and above the prices specified in [the Rose-Dooley contract] is \$25,231.57, [about \$152,000 in 2010 dollars] and plaintiff seeks to recover said amount in this action.

The [Rose-Dooley] agreement was an executory bilateral contract under which plaintiff's promise not to compete for ten years gained him a ten-year option to buy stone at specified prices. In most states, the assignee of an executory bilateral contract is not liable to anyone for the nonperformance of the assignor's duties thereunder unless he expressly promises his assignor or the other contracting party to perform, or 'assume,' such duties....These states refuse to imply a promise to perform the duties, but if the assignee expressly promises his assignor to perform, he is liable to the other contracting party on a third-party beneficiary theory. And, if

the assignee makes such a promise directly to the other contracting party upon a consideration, of course he is liable to him thereon. [Citation]

A minority of states holds that the assignee of an executory bilateral contract under a general assignment becomes not only assignee of the rights of the assignor but also delegatee of his duties; and that, absent a showing of contrary intent, the assignee impliedly promises the assignor that he will perform the duties so delegated. This rule is expressed in Restatement, Contracts, s 164 (1932) as follows:

*(1) Where a party under a bilateral contract which is at the time wholly or partially executory on both sides purports to assign the whole contract, his action is interpreted, in the absence of circumstances showing a contrary intention, as an assignment of the assignor's rights under the contract and a delegation of the performance of the assignor's duties.*

*(2) Acceptance by the assignee of such an assignment is interpreted, in the absence of circumstances showing a contrary intention, as both an assent to become an assignee of the assignor's rights and as **a promise to the assignor to assume the performance of the assignor's duties.**' (emphasis added)*

We...adopt the Restatement rule and expressly hold that the assignee under a general assignment of an executory bilateral contract, in the absence of circumstances showing a contrary intention, becomes the delegatee of his assignor's duties and impliedly promises his assignor that he will perform such duties.

The rule we adopt and reaffirm here is regarded as the more reasonable view by legal scholars and textwriters. Professor Grismore says:

*It is submitted that the acceptance of an assignment in this form does presumptively import a tacit promise on the part of the assignee to assume the burdens of the contract, and that this presumption should prevail in the absence of the clear showing of a contrary intention. The presumption seems reasonable in view of the evident expectation of the parties. The assignment on its face indicates an intent to do more than simply to transfer the benefits assured by the contract. It purports to transfer the contract as a whole, and since the contract is made up of both benefits and*



*burdens both must be intended to be included....Grismore, Is the Assignee of a Contract Liable for the Nonperformance of Delegated Duties? 18 Mich.L.Rev. 284 (1920).*

In addition, with respect to transactions governed by the Uniform Commercial Code, an assignment of a contract in general terms is a delegation of performance of the duties of the assignor, and its acceptance by the assignee constitutes a promise by him to perform those duties. Our holding in this case maintains a desirable uniformity in the field of contract liability. We further hold that the other party to the original contract may sue the assignee as a third-party beneficiary of his promise of performance which he impliedly makes to his assignor, under the rule above laid down, by accepting the general assignment. *Younce v. Lumber Co.*, [Citation] (1908), holds that where the assignee makes an express promise of performance to his assignor, the other contracting party may sue him for breach thereof. We see no reason why the same result should not obtain where the assignee breaches his promise of performance implied under the rule of Restatement s 164. 'That the assignee is liable at the suit of the third party where he expressly assumes and promises to perform delegated duties has already been decided in a few cases (citing *Younce*). If an express promise will support such an action it is difficult to see why a tacit promise should not have the same effect.' Grismore, *supra*. Parenthetically, we note that such is the rule under the Uniform Commercial Code, [2-210].

We now apply the foregoing principles to the case at hand. The contract of 23 April 1960, between defendant and J. E. Dooley and Son, Inc., under which, as stipulated by the parties, 'the defendant purchased the assets and obligations of J. E. Dooley and Son, Inc.,' was a general assignment of all the assets and obligations of J. E. Dooley and Son, Inc., including those under [the Rose-Dooley contract]. When defendant accepted such assignment it thereby became delegatee of its assignor's duties under it and impliedly promised to perform such duties. When defendant later failed to perform such duties by refusing to continue sales of stone to plaintiff at the prices specified in [the Rose-Dooley contract], it breached its implied promise of performance and plaintiff was entitled to bring suit thereon as a third-party beneficiary.

The decision...is reversed with directions that the case be certified to the Superior Court of Forsyth County for reinstatement of the judgment of the trial court in accordance with this opinion.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did Rose need the crushed rock from the quarry he originally leased to Dooley?
2. What argument did Vulcan make as to why it should not be liable to sell crushed rock to Rose at the price set out in the Rose-Dooley contract?
3. What rule did the court here announce in deciding that Vulcan was required to sell rock at the price set out in the Rose-Dooley contract? That is, what is the controlling rule of law in this case?

### Third party Beneficiaries and Foreseeable Damages

*Kornblut v. Chevron Oil Co.*

*62 A.D.2d 831 (N.Y. 1978)*

Hopkins, J.

The plaintiff-respondent has recovered a judgment after a jury trial in the sum of \$519,855.98 [about \$1.9 million in 2010 dollars] including interest, costs and disbursements, against Chevron Oil Company (Chevron) and Lawrence Ettinger, Inc. (Ettinger) (hereafter collectively referred to as defendants) for damages arising from the death and injuries suffered by Fred Kornblut, her husband. The case went to the jury on the theory that the decedent was the third-party beneficiary of a contract between Chevron and the New York State Thruway Authority and a contract between Chevron and Ettinger.

On the afternoon of an extremely warm day in early August, 1970 the decedent was driving northward on the New York State Thruway. Near Sloatsburg, New York, at about 3:00 p.m., his automobile sustained a flat tire. At the time the decedent was accompanied by his wife and 12-year-old son. The decedent waited for assistance in the 92 degree temperature.

After about an hour a State Trooper, finding the disabled car, stopped and talked to the decedent. The trooper radioed Ettinger, which had the exclusive right to render service on the Thruway under an assignment of a contract between Chevron and the Thruway Authority.

Thereafter, other State Troopers reported the disabled car and the decedent was told in each instance that he would receive assistance within 20 minutes.

Having not received any assistance by 6:00 p.m., the decedent attempted to change the tire himself. He finally succeeded, although he experienced difficulty and complained of chest pains to the point that his wife and son were compelled to lift the flat tire into the trunk of the automobile. The decedent drove the car to the next service area, where he was taken by ambulance to a hospital; his condition was later diagnosed as a myocardial infarction. He died 28 days later.

Plaintiff sued, *inter alia*, Chevron and Ettinger alleging in her complaint causes of action sounding in negligence and breach of contract. We need not consider the issue of negligence, since the Trial Judge instructed the jury only on the theory of breach of contract, and the plaintiff has recovered damages for wrongful death and the pain and suffering only on that theory.

We must look, then, to the terms of the contract sought to be enforced. Chevron agreed to provide “rapid and efficient roadside automotive service on a 24-hour basis from each gasoline service station facility for the areas...when informed by the authority or its police personnel of a disabled vehicle on the Thruway”. Chevron’s vehicles are required “to be used and operated in such a manner as will produce adequate service to the public, as determined in the authority’s sole judgment and discretion”. Chevron specifically covenanted that it would have “sufficient roadside automotive service vehicles, equipment and personnel to provide roadside automotive service to disabled vehicles within a maximum of thirty (30) minutes from the time a call is assigned to a service vehicle, subject to unavoidable delays due to extremely adverse weather conditions or traffic conditions.”...

In interpreting the contract, we must bear in mind the circumstances under which the parties bargained. The New York Thruway is a limited access toll highway, designed to move traffic at the highest legal speed, with the north and south lanes separated by green strips. Any disabled vehicle on the road impeding the flow of traffic may be a hazard and inconvenience to the other users. The income realized from tolls is generated from the expectation of the user that he will be able to travel swiftly and smoothly along the Thruway. Consequently, it is in the interest of

the authority that disabled vehicles will be repaired or removed quickly to the end that any hazard and inconvenience will be minimized. Moreover, the design and purpose of the highway make difficult, if not impossible, the summoning of aid from garages not located on the Thruway. The movement of a large number of vehicles at high speed creates a risk to the operator of a vehicle who attempts to make his own repairs, as well as to the other users. These considerations clearly prompted the making of contracts with service organizations which would be located at points near in distance and time on the Thruway for the relief of distressed vehicles.

Thus, it is obvious that, although the authority had an interest in making provision for roadside calls through a contract, there was also a personal interest of the user served by the contract. Indeed, the contract provisions regulating the charges for calls and commanding refunds be paid directly to the user for overcharges, evince a protection and benefit extended to the user only. Hence, in the event of an overcharge, the user would be enabled to sue on the contract to obtain a recovery....Here the contract contemplates an individual benefit for the breach running to the user....

By choosing the theory of recovery based on contract, it became incumbent on the plaintiff to show that the injury was one which the defendants had reason to foresee as a probable result of the breach, under the ancient doctrine of *Hadley v Baxendale* [Citation], and the cases following it...in distinction to the requirement of proximate cause in tort actions....

The death of the decedent on account of his exertion in the unusual heat of the midsummer day in changing the tire cannot be said to have been within the contemplation of the contracting parties as a reasonably foreseeable result of the failure of Chevron or its assignee to comply with the contract....

The case comes down to this, then, in our view: though the decedent was the intended beneficiary to sue under certain provisions of the contract—such as the rate specified for services to be rendered—he was not the intended beneficiary to sue for consequential damages arising from personal injury because of a failure to render service promptly. Under these circumstances, the judgment must be reversed and the complaint dismissed, without costs or disbursements.

[Martuscello, J., concurred in the result but opined that the travelling public was not an intended beneficiary of the contract.]

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Chevron made two arguments as to why it should not be liable for Mr. Kornblut's death. What were they?
2. Obviously, when Chevron made the contract with the New York State Thruway Authority, it did not know Mr. Kornblut was going to be using the highway. How could he, then, be an intended beneficiary of the contract?
3. Why was Chevron not found liable for Mr. Kornblut's death when, clearly, had it performed the contract properly, he would not have died?

## 14.5 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

The general rule that the promisee may assign any right has some exceptions—for example, when the promisor's obligation would be materially changed. Of course the contract itself may prohibit assignment, and sometimes statutes preclude it. Knowing how to make the assignment effective and what the consequences of the assignment are on others is worth mastering. When, for example, does the assignee not stand in the assignor's shoes? When may a future right be assigned?

Duties, as well as rights, may be transferred to third parties. Most rights (promises) contained in contracts have corresponding duties (also expressed as promises). Often when an entire contract is assigned, the duties go with it; the transferee is known, with respect to the duties, as the delegatee. The transferor himself does not necessarily escape the duty, however. Moreover, some duties are nondelegable, such as personal promises and those that public policy require to be carried out by a particular official. Without the ability to assign rights and duties, much of the modern economy would grind to a halt.

The parties to a contract are not necessarily the only people who acquire rights or duties under it. One major category of persons acquiring rights is third-party beneficiaries. Only intended beneficiaries acquire rights under the contract, and these are of two types: creditor and donee beneficiaries. The rules for determining whether rights have been conferred are rather

straightforward; determining whether rights can subsequently be modified or extinguished is more troublesome. Generally, as long as the contract does not prohibit change and as long as the beneficiary has not relied on the promise, the change may be made.

## EXERCISES

1. The Dayton Country Club offered its members various social activities. Some members were entitled, for additional payment, to use the golf course, a coveted amenity. Golfing memberships could not be transferred except upon death or divorce, and there was a long waiting list in this special category; if a person at the top of the list declined, the next in line was eligible. Golfing membership rules were drawn up by a membership committee. Magness and Redman were golfing members. They declared bankruptcy, and the bankruptcy trustee sought, in order to increase the value of their debtors' estates, to assume and sell the golfing memberships to members on the waiting list, other club members, or the general public, provided the persons joined the club. The club asserted that under relevant state law, it was "excused from rendering performance to an entity other than the debtor"—that is, it could not be forced to accept strangers as members. Can these memberships be assigned?
2. Tenant leased premises in Landlord's shopping center, agreeing in the lease "not to assign, mortgage, pledge, or encumber this lease in whole or in part." Under the lease, Tenant was entitled to a construction allowance of up to \$11,000 after Tenant made improvements for its uses. Prior to the completion of the improvements, Tenant assigned its right to receive the first \$8,000 of the construction allowance to Assignee, who, in turn, provided Tenant \$8,000 to finance the construction. Assignee notified Landlord of the assignment, but when the construction was complete, Landlord paid Tenant anyway; when Assignee complained, Landlord pointed to the nonassignment clause. Assignee sued Landlord. Who wins? <sup>[1]</sup>
3. Marian contracted to sell her restaurant to Billings for \$400,000. The contract provided that Billings would pay \$100,000 and sign a note for the remainder. Billings sold the restaurant to Alice, who agreed to assume responsibility for the balance due on the note held by Marian. But Alice had difficulties and declared bankruptcy. Is Billings still liable on the note to Marian?

4. Yellow Cab contracted with the Birmingham Board of Education to transport physically handicapped students. The contract provided, "Yellow Cab will transport the physically handicapped students of the School System...and furnish all necessary vehicles and personnel and will perform all maintenance and make all repairs to the equipment to keep it in a safe and efficient operating condition at all times."

Yellow Cab subcontracted with Metro Limousine to provide transportation in connection with its contract with the board. Thereafter, Metro purchased two buses from Yellow Cab to use in transporting the students. DuPont, a Metro employee, was injured when the brakes on the bus that he was driving failed, causing the bus to collide with a tree. DuPont sued Yellow Cab, alleging that under its contract with the board, Yellow Cab had a nondelegable duty to properly maintain the bus so as to keep it in a safe operating condition; that that duty flowed to him as an intended third-party beneficiary of the contract; and that Yellow Cab had breached the contract by failing to properly maintain the bus. Who wins? <sup>[2]</sup>

5. Joan hired Groom to attend to her herd of four horses at her summer place in the high desert. The job was too much for Groom, so he told Tony that he (Groom) would pay Tony, who claimed expertise in caring for horses, to take over the job. Tony neglected the horses in hot weather, and one of them needed veterinarian care for dehydration. Is Groom liable?
6. Rensselaer Water Company contracted with the city to provide water for business, domestic, and fire-hydrant purposes. While the contract was in effect, a building caught on fire; the fire spread to Plaintiff's (Moch Co.'s) warehouse, destroying it and its contents. The company knew of the fire but was unable to supply adequate water pressure to put it out. Is the owner of the warehouse able to maintain a claim against the company for the loss?
7. Rusty told Alice that he'd do the necessary overhaul on her classic car for \$5,000 during the month of May, and that when the job was done, she should send the money to his son, Jim, as a graduation present. He confirmed the agreement in writing and sent a copy to Jim. Subsequently, Rusty changed his mind. What right has Jim?

8. Fox Brothers agreed to convey to Clayton Canfield Lot 23 together with a one-year option to purchase Lot 24 in a subdivision known as Fox Estates. The agreement contained no prohibitions, restrictions, or limitations against assignments. Canfield paid the \$20,000 and took title to Lot 23 and the option to Lot 24. Canfield thereafter assigned his option rights in Lot 24 to the Scotts. When the Scotts wanted to exercise the option, Fox Brothers refused to convey the property to them. The Scotts then brought suit for specific performance. Who wins?
9. Rollins sold Byers, a businessperson, a flatbed truck on a contract; Rollins assigned the contract to Frost, and informed Byers of the assignment. Rollins knew the truck had problems, which he did not reveal to Byers. When the truck needed \$3,200 worth of repairs and Rollins couldn't be found, Byers wanted to deduct that amount from payments owed to Frost, but Frost insisted he had a right to payment. Upon investigation, Byers discovered that four other people in the state had experienced similar situations with Rollins and with Frost as Rollins's assignee. What recourse has Byers?
10. Merchants and resort owners in the San Juan Islands in Washington State stocked extra supplies, some perishable, in anticipation of the flood of tourists over Labor Day. They suffered inconvenience and monetary damage due to the union's Labor Day strike of the state ferry system, in violation of its collective bargaining agreement with the state and of a temporary restraining order. The owners sued the union for damages for lost profits, attorney fees, and costs, claiming the union should be liable for intentional interference with contractual relations (the owners' relations with their would-be customers). Do the owners have a cause of action?

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. A creditor beneficiary is
  - a. the same as a donee beneficiary
  - b. a third-party beneficiary
  - c. an incidental beneficiary
  - d. none of the above

Assignments are not allowed



- a. for rights that will arise from a future contract
- b. when they will materially change the duties that the obligor must perform
- c. where they are forbidden by public policy
- d. for any of the above

When an assignor assigns the same interest twice,

- a. the subsequent assignee generally takes precedence
- b. the first assignee generally takes precedence
- c. the first assignee always takes precedence
- d. the assignment violates public policy

Factoring

- a. is an example of delegation of duties
- b. involves using an account receivable as collateral for a loan
- c. involves the purchase of a right to receive income from another
- d. is all of the above

Personal promises

- a. are always delegable
- b. are generally not delegable
- c. are delegable if not prohibited by public policy
- d. are delegable if not barred by the contract

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. b
- 2. d
- 3. b
- 4. c
- 5. b

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[1] *Aldana v. Colonial Palms Plaza, Inc.*, 591 So.2d 953 (Fla. Ct. App., 1991).

[2] *DuPont v. Yellow Cab Co. of Birmingham, Inc.*, 565 So.2d 190 (Ala. 1990).



# Chapter 15

## Discharge of Obligations

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. What is meant by discharge of contract obligations
2. How contract obligations are discharged

## 15.1 Discharge of Contract Duties

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how performance, partial performance, or no performance may discharge contractual obligations.
2. Recognize what rights accrue to the nonbreaching party when the other side announces, before the time for performance, that performance will not be forthcoming—anticipatory breach.
3. Understand the concept of the right to adequate assurances, and the consequences if no such assurances are forthcoming.

A person is liable to perform agreed-to contract duties until or unless he or she is discharged. If the person fails to perform without being discharged, liability for damages arises. Here we deal with the second-to-the-last of the four broad themes of contract law: how contract duties are discharged.

### Discharge by Performance (or Nonperformance) of the Duty

A contract can be discharged by complete performance or material nonperformance of the contractual duty. Note, in passing, that the modern trend at common law (and explicit under the Uniform Commercial Code [UCC], Section 1-203) is that the parties have a good-faith duty to perform to each other. There is in every contract “an implied covenant of good faith” (honesty in fact in the transaction) that the parties will deal fairly, keep their promises, and not frustrate the other party’s reasonable expectations of what was given and what received.

### Full Performance

Full performance of the contractual obligation discharges the duty. If Ralph does a fine job of plumbing Betty's new bathroom, she pays him. Both are discharged.

### **Nonperformance, Material Breach**

If Ralph doesn't do any work at all on Betty's bathroom, or almost none, then Betty owes him nothing. She—the nonbreaching party—is discharged, and Ralph is liable for breach of contract. Under UCC Section 2-106(4), a party that ends a contract breached by the other party is said to have effected a cancellation. The cancelling party retains the right to seek a remedy for breach of the whole contract or any unperformed obligation. The UCC distinguishes cancellation from termination, which occurs when either party exercises a lawful right to end the contract other than for breach. When a contract is terminated, all executory duties are discharged on both sides, but if there has been a partial breach, the right to seek a remedy survives. <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Substantial Performance**

Logically, anything less than full performance, even a slight deviation from what is owed, is sufficient to prevent the duty from being discharged and can amount to a breach of contract. So if Ralph does all the plumbing for Betty's new bathroom *except* hook up the toilet feed, he has not really "plumbed the new bathroom." He has only plumbed part of it. At classic common law, that was it: either you did the thing you promised completely or you had materially breached. But under modern theories, an ameliorative doctrine has developed, called substantial performance: if one side has substantially, but not completely, performed, so that the other side has received a benefit, the nonbreaching party owes something for the value received. The Restatement (Second) of Contracts puts it this way: <sup>[2]</sup>

#### ***Substantial Performance.***

*In an important category of disputes over failure of performance, one party asserts the right to payment on the ground that he has completed his performance, while the other party refuses to pay on the ground that there is an uncured material failure of performance....In such cases it is common to state the issue...in terms of whether there has been substantial performance....If there has been substantial although not full performance, the building contractor has a claim for the unpaid balance and the owner has a claim only for damages. If there has not been substantial performance,*

*the building contractor has no claim for the unpaid balance, although he may have a claim in restitution.*

The contest here is between the one who claims discharge by the other's material breach and the one who asserts there has been substantial performance. What constitutes substantial performance is a question of fact, as illustrated in [Section 15.2.1 "Substantial Performance; Conditions Precedent"](#), *TA Operating Corp. v. Solar Applications Engineering, Inc.* The doctrine has no applicability where the breaching party willfully failed to follow the contract, as where a plumber substitutes a different faucet for the one ordered; installation of the incorrect faucet is a breach, even if it is of equal or greater value than the one ordered.

Under the UCC, there is no such thing as substantial performance. Section 2-601 requires that the goods delivered according to the contract be the exact things ordered—that there be a perfect tender (unless the parties agree otherwise).

### **Anticipatory Breach and Demand for Reasonable Assurances**

When a promisor announces before the time his performance is due that he will not perform, he is said to have committed an anticipatory breach (or repudiation). Of course a person cannot fail to perform a duty before performance is due, but the law allows the promisee to treat the situation as a material breach that gives rise to a claim for damages and discharges the obligee from performing duties required of him under the contract. The common-law rule was first recognized in the well-known 1853 British case *Hochster v. De La Tour*. In April, De La Tour hired Hochster as his courier, the job to commence in June. In May, De La Tour changed his mind and told Hochster not to bother to report for duty. Before June, Hochster secured an appointment as courier to Lord Ashburton, but that job was not to begin until July. Also in May, Hochster sued De La Tour, who argued that he should not have to pay Hochster because Hochster had not stood ready and willing to begin work in June, having already agreed to work for Lord Ashburton. The court ruled for the plaintiff Hochster:

*[I]t is surely much more rational, and more for the benefit of both parties, that, after the renunciation of the agreement by the defendant, the plaintiff should be at liberty to consider himself absolved from any future performance of it, retaining his right to sue for any damage he has suffered from the breach of it. Thus, instead of remaining*

*idle and laying out money in preparations which must be useless, he is at liberty to seek service under another employer, which would go in mitigation of the damages to which he would otherwise be entitled for a breach of the contract. It seems strange that the defendant, after renouncing the contract, and absolutely declaring that he will never act under it, should be permitted to object that faith is given to his assertion, and that an opportunity is not left to him of changing his mind.*<sup>[3]</sup>

Another type of anticipatory breach consists of any voluntary act by a party that destroys, or seriously impairs, that party's ability to perform the promise made to the other side. If a seller of land, having agreed to sell a lot to one person at a date certain, sells it instead to a third party before that time, there is an anticipatory breach. If Carpenter announces in May that instead of building Owner's deck in July, as agreed, he is going on a trip to Europe, there is an anticipatory breach. In the first instance, there would be no point to showing up at the lawyer's office when the date arrives to await the deed, so the law gives a right to sue when the land is sold to the other person. In the second instance, there would be no point to waiting until July, when indeed Carpenter does not do the job, so the law gives the right to sue when the future nonperformance is announced.

These same general rules prevail for contracts for the sale of goods under UCC Section 2-610. Related to the concept of anticipatory breach is the idea that the obligee has a right to demand reasonable assurances from the obligor that contractual duties will be performed. If the obligee makes such a demand for reasonable assurances and no adequate assurances are forthcoming, the obligee may assume that the obligor will commit an anticipatory breach, and consider it so. That is, after making the contract, the obligee may come upon the disquieting news that the obligor's ability to perform is shaky. A change in financial condition occurs, an unknown claimant to rights in land appears, a labor strike arises, or any of a number of situations may crop up that will interfere with the carrying out of contractual duties. Under such circumstances, the obligee has the right to a demand for reasonable assurance that the obligor will perform as contractually obligated. The general reason for such a rule is given in UCC Section 2-609(1), which states that a contract "imposes an obligation on each party that the other's expectation of receiving due performance will not be impaired." Moreover, an obligee would be foolish not to

make alternative arrangements, if possible, when it becomes obvious that his original obligor will be unable to perform. The obligee must have reasonable grounds to believe that the obligor will breach. The fear must be that of a failure of performance that would amount to a total breach; a minor defect that can be cured and that at most would give rise to an offset in price for damages will not generally support a demand for assurances.

Under UCC Section 2-609(1), the demand must be in writing, but at common law the demand may be oral if it is reasonable in view of the circumstances. If the obligor fails within a reasonable time to give adequate assurance, the obligee may treat the failure to do so as an anticipatory repudiation, or she may wait to see if the obligor might change his mind and perform.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Contracts can be discharged by performance: complete performance discharges both sides; material breach discharges the breaching party, who has a right to claim damages; substantial performance obligates the promisee to pay something for the benefit conferred but is a breach. A party may demand reasonable assurances of performance, which, if not forthcoming, may be treated as an anticipatory breach (or repudiation).

#### EXERCISES

1. What types of performance discharge a contractual obligation?
2. Under the UCC, what is the difference between cancellation and termination of a contract?
3. What is an anticipatory breach, and under what circumstances can a party claim it?

### Discharge by Conditions

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the concept of conditions in a contract.
2. Recognize that conditions can be classified on the basis of how they are created, their effect on the duty to perform, the essentialness of timely performance, or performance to someone's satisfaction.

Usually contracts consist of an exchange of promises—a pledge or commitment by each party that somebody will or will not do something. Andy's promise to cut Anne's lawn "over the weekend" in return for Anne's promise to pay twenty-five dollars is a commitment to have the lawn mowed by Sunday night or Monday morning. Andy's promise "not to tell anyone what I

saw you doing Saturday night” in return for Anne’s promise to pay one hundred dollars is a commitment that an event (the revealing of a secret) will not occur. These promises are known as independent or absolute or unconditional, because their performance does not depend on any outside event. Such promises, if contractually binding, create a present duty to perform (or a duty to perform at the time stated).

However, it is common that the obligation to perform a contract is conditioned (or conditional). A condition is an event the happening or nonhappening of which gives rise to a duty to perform (or discharges a duty to perform). Conditions may be express or implied; they may also be precedent, concurrent, subsequent, or to the satisfaction of a party.

### **Conditions Classified Based on How They Are Created**

Express conditions are stated in words in the contract, orally or written. Andy promises to mow Anne’s lawn “provided it doesn’t rain.” “Provided it doesn’t rain” is an express condition. If rain comes, there is no duty to cut the lawn, and Andy’s failure to do so is not a breach of promise. Express conditions are usually introduced by language such as “provided that,” “if,” “when,” “assuming that,” “as soon as,” “after,” and the like. Implied conditions are unexpressed but understood to be part of the contract. If Mr. Olson guarantees Jack’s used car for ninety days, it is implied that his obligation to fix any defects doesn’t arise until Jack lets him know the car is defective. If Ralph is hired to plumb Betty’s new bathroom, it is implied that Betty’s duty to pay is conditioned on Ralph’s completion of the job.

### **Conditions Classified Based on Their Effect on Duty to Perform**

A condition precedent is a term in a contract (express or implied) that requires performance only in the event something else happens first. Jack will buy a car from Mr. Olson if Jack gets financing. “If Jack gets financing” is a condition precedent. A concurrent condition arises when the duty to perform the contract is simultaneous: the promise of a landowner to transfer title to the purchaser and the purchaser to tender payment to the seller. The duty of each to perform is conditioned on the performance by the other. (As a practical matter, of course, somebody has to make the first move, proffering deed or tendering the check.) A condition that terminates an already existing duty of performance is known as a condition subsequent. Ralph agrees to do preventive plumbing maintenance on Deborah Dairy’s milking equipment for as long as David



Dairy, Deb's husband, is stationed overseas. When David returns, Ralph's obligation to do the maintenance (and Deb's duty to pay him) terminates.

### **Condition of Timeliness**

If, as often occurs, it does not matter a great deal whether a contract is performed exactly on time, failure to do so is not a material breach, and the promisee has to accept the performance and deduct any losses caused by the delay. If, though, it makes a difference to the promisee whether the promisor acts on time, then it is said that "time is of the essence." Time as a condition can be made explicit in a clause reciting that time is of the essence. If there is no express clause, the courts will read it in when the purpose of the contract was clearly to provide for performance at or by a certain time, and the promisee will gain little from late performance. But even express clauses are subject to a rule of reason, and if the promisor would suffer greatly by enforcement of the clause (and the promisee would suffer only slightly or not at all from a refusal to invoke it), the courts will generally excuse the untimely performance, as long as it was completed within a reasonable time. A builder's failure to finish a house by July 1 will not discharge the buyer's obligation to pay if the house is finished a week or even a month later, although the builder will be liable to the buyer for expenses incurred because of the lateness (storage charges for furniture, costs for housing during the interim, extra travel, and the like).

### **Condition That a Party Must Be Satisfied**

"You must be satisfied or your money back" is a common advertisement. A party to a contract can require that he need not pay or otherwise carry out his undertaking unless satisfied by the obligor's performance, or unless a third party is satisfied by the performance.

Parties may contract to perform to one side's personal satisfaction. Andy tells Anne, a prospective client, that he will cut her hair better than her regular hairdresser, and that if she is not satisfied, she need not pay him. Andy cuts her hair, but Anne frowns and says, "I don't like it." Assume that Andy's work is excellent. Whether Anne must pay depends on the standard for judging to be employed—a standard of objective or subjective satisfaction. The objective standard is that which would satisfy the reasonable purchaser. Most courts apply this standard when the contract involves the performance of a mechanical job or the sale of a machine whose performance is capable of objective measurement. So even if the obligee requires performance to

his “personal satisfaction,” the courts will hold that the obligor has performed if the service performed or the goods produced are in fact satisfactory. By contrast, if the goods or services contracted for involve personal judgment and taste, the duty to pay will be discharged if the obligee states personal (subjective) dissatisfaction. No reason at all need be given, but it must be for a good-faith reason, not just to escape payment.

The duty to make a contract payment may be conditioned on the satisfaction of a third party. Building contracts frequently make the purchaser’s duty to pay conditional on the builder’s receipt of an architect’s certificate of compliance with all contractual terms; road construction contracts often require that the work be done “to the satisfaction of the County Engineer.” These conditions can be onerous. The builder has already erected the structure and cannot “return” what he has done. Nevertheless, because the purchaser wants assurance that the building (obviously a major purchase) or road meets his specifications, the courts will hold the contractor to the condition unless it is impossible to provide a certificate (e.g., architect may have died) or the architect has acted in bad faith, or the purchaser has somehow prevented the certificate from issuing. The third party’s refusal to issue a certificate needs to be reasonable.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Parties may, expressly or implicitly, condition the requirement for contractual performance on the happening or nonhappening of an event, or on timeliness. They may condition performance on satisfaction to one of the parties to the contract or to the satisfaction of a third party; in any event, dissatisfaction must be in good faith.

#### EXERCISES

1. What is “conditioned” by a condition in a contract?
2. What conditions are based on how they are made?
3. What conditions are based on their effect on the duty of performance?
4. What typical situations involve performance to a party’s satisfaction?

### Discharge by Agreement of the Parties

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Recognize that there are various ways the parties may agree between themselves to terminate mutual obligations under the contract.

Parties are free to agree to almost any contract they want, and they are free to agree to end the contract whenever they want. There are several ways this is done.

### **Mutual Rescission**

The parties may agree to give up the duties to perform, called mutual rescission. This may be by a formal written release saying the obligor is discharged upon delivery of the writing or upon occurrence of a condition. Or an obligation may be discharged by a contract not to sue about it. The Restatement terms this an agreement of rescission. <sup>[4]</sup> An agreement to rescind will be given effect even though partial performance has been made or one or both parties have a claim for partial breach. The agreement need not be in writing or even expressed in words. By their actions, such as failure to take steps to perform or enforce, the parties may signal their mutual intent to rescind. Andy starts to mow Anne's lawn as they agreed. He begins the job, but it is unbearably hot. She sees how uncomfortable he is and readily agrees with him when he says, "Why don't we just forget the whole thing?" Andy's duty to finish mowing is discharged, as is Anne's duty to pay Andy, either for the whole job or for the part he has done.

Business executives live by contracts, but they do not necessarily die by them. A sociologist who studied business behavior under contract discovered a generation ago—and it is still valid—that in the great majority of cases in which one party wishes to "cancel an order," the other party permits it without renegotiation, even though the cancellation amounts to a repudiation of a contract. As one lawyer was quoted as saying,

*Often business[people] do not feel they have "a contract"—rather they have an "order." They speak of "cancelling the order" rather than "breaching our contract." When I began practice I referred to order cancellations as breaches of contract, but my clients objected since they do not think of cancellation as wrong. Most clients, in heavy industry at least, believe that there is a right to cancel as part of the buyer-seller relationship. There is a widespread attitude that one can back out of any deal within some very vague limits. Lawyers are often surprised by this attitude. <sup>[5]</sup>*

This attitude is understandable. People who depend for their economic survival on continuing relationships will be loath to react to every change in plans with a lawsuit. The legal consequences of most of these cancellations are an agreement of rescission. Under UCC Section

2-720, the use of a word like “cancellation” or “rescission” does not by itself amount to a renunciation of the right to sue for breach of a provision that occurred before the rescission. If the parties mean to discharge each other fully from all duties owed, they must say so explicitly. Actions continue to speak more loudly than words, however, and in law, so can inactions. Legal rights under contracts may be lost by both parties if they fail to act; by abandoning their claims, they can affect rescission.

### **Waiver**

A second means of discharge is by waiver, whereby a party voluntarily gives up a right she has under a contract but doesn't give up the entire right to performance by the other side. Tenant is supposed to pay rent on the first of the month, but because his employer pays on the tenth, Tenant pays Landlady on that day. If Landlady accepts the late payment without objection, she has waived her right to insist on payment by the first of the month, unless the lease provides that no waiver occurs from the acceptance of any late payments. See [Section 15.2.2 "Waiver of Contract Rights; Nonwaiver Provisions"](#), *Minor v. Chase Auto Finance Corporation*. A “waiver” is permission to deviate from the contract; a “release” means to let go of the whole thing.

### **Substituted Agreement**

Discharge by substituted agreement is a third way of mutual rescission. The parties may enter into a novation, either a new contract or one whereby a new person is substituted for the original obligor, and the latter is discharged. If Mr. Olson is obligated to deliver a car to Jack, Jack and Mr. Olson may agree that Dewey Dealer should deliver the car to Jack instead of Mr. Olson; the latter is discharged by this novation. A substituted agreement may also simply replace the original one between the original parties.

### **Accord and Satisfaction**

Discharge by accord and satisfaction is a fourth way of mutual rescission. Here the parties to a contract (usually a disputed one) agree to substitute some performance different from what was originally agreed, and once this new agreement is executed, the original contract (as well as the more recent accord) is satisfied. But before then, the original agreement is only suspended: if the obligor does not satisfy the accord, the other side can sue on the original obligation or on the accord.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

Parties to a contract may agree to give it up. This may be by mutual rescission, release, waiver, novation, substituted agreement, or accord and satisfaction.

## EXERCISES

1. How does mutual rescission discharge a common-law contract without apparent new consideration?
2. What is the difference between a substituted agreement and a novation?
3. What happens if the parties negotiate an accord and satisfaction and one side fails to perform it?
4. If an obligee accepts performance from the obligor that deviates from the contract, under what circumstances can the obligee nevertheless insist on strict compliance in the future?

## Discharge When Performance Becomes Impossible or Very Difficult

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Recognize that there are several circumstances when performance of the contract becomes variously impossible, very difficult, or useless, and that these may give rise to discharge.

There are at least five circumstances in which parties may be discharged from contractual obligations because performance is impossible, difficult, or useless.

### Overview

Every contract contains some element of risk: the buyer may run out of money before he can pay; the seller may run out of goods before he can deliver; the cost of raw materials may skyrocket, throwing off the manufacturer's fine financial calculations. Should the obligor's luck run out, he is stuck with the consequences—or, in the legal phrase, his liability is strict: he must either perform or risk paying damages for breach of contract, even if his failure is due to events beyond his control. Of course, an obligor can always limit his liability through the contract itself. Instead of obligating himself to deliver one million units, he can restrict his obligation to “one million units or factory output, whichever is less.” Instead of guaranteeing to finish a job by a certain date, he can agree to use his “best efforts” to do so. Similarly, damages in the event of breach can be limited. A party can even include a clause canceling the contract in the event of an untoward happening. But if these provisions are absent, the obligor is generally held to the terms of his bargain.

Exceptions include the concepts of impossibility, impracticability, and frustration of purpose.

### **Impossibility**

If performance is impossible, the duty is discharged. The categories here are death or incapacity of a personal services contractor, destruction of a thing necessary for performance, and performance prohibited by government order.

#### **Death or Incapacity of a Personal Services Contractor**

If Buyer makes a contract to purchase a car and dies before delivery, Buyer's estate could be held liable; it is not impossible (for the estate) to perform. The estate of a painter hired to do a portrait cannot be sued for damages because the painter died before she could complete the work.

#### **Destruction or Deterioration of a Thing Necessary for Performance**

When a specific object is necessary for the obligor's performance, its destruction or deterioration making its use impracticable (or its failure to come into existence) discharges the obligor's duty. Diane's Dyers contracts to buy the annual wool output of the Sheepish Ranch, but the sheep die of an epidemic disease before they can be shorn. Since the specific thing for which the contract was made has been destroyed, Sheepish is discharged from its duty to supply Diane's with wool, and Diane's has no claim against the Ranch. However, if the contract had called for a quantity of wool, without specifying that it was to be from Sheepish's flock, the duty would not be discharged; since wool is available on the open market, Sheepish could buy that and resell it to Diane's.

#### **Performance Prohibited by Government Regulation or Order**

When a government promulgates a rule after a contract is made, and the rule either bars performance or will make it impracticable, the obligor's duty is discharged. An obligor is not required to break the law and risk the consequences. Financier Bank contracts to sell World Mortgage Company certain collateralized loan instruments. The federal government, in a bank reform measure, prohibits such sales. The contract is discharged. If the Supreme Court later declared the prohibition unconstitutional, World Mortgage's duty to buy (or Financier Bank's to sell) would not revive.

### **Impracticability**

Less entirely undoable than impossibility, but still grounds for discharge, are common-law impracticability and its relative, commercial impracticability.

### **Common-Law Impracticability**

Impracticability is said to exist when there is a radical departure from the circumstances that the parties reasonably contemplated would exist at the time they entered into the contract; on such facts, the courts might grant relief. They will do so when extraordinary circumstances (often called “acts of God” or “force majeure”) make it unjust to hold a party liable for performance. Although the justification for judicial relief could be found in an implied condition in all contracts that extraordinary events shall not occur, the Restatement eschews so obvious a bootstrap logic and adopts the language of UCC Section 2-615(a), which states that the crux of the analysis is whether the nonoccurrence of the extraordinary circumstance was “a basic assumption on which the contract was made.”<sup>[6]</sup> If it was—if, that is, the parties assumed that the circumstance would not occur—then the duty is discharged if the circumstance later does occur.

In one well-known case, *Autry v. Republic Productions*, the famous cowboy movie star Gene Autry had a contract to perform to the defendant. He was drafted into the army in 1942; it was temporarily, at least, impossible for him to perform his movie contractual obligations incurred prior to his service. When he was discharged in 1945, he sued to be relieved of the prewar obligations. The court took notice that there had been a long interruption in Autry’s career and of “the great decrease in the purchasing power of the dollar”—postwar inflation—and determined that to require him to perform under the old contract’s terms would work a “substantial hardship” on him. A world war is an extraordinary circumstance. The temporary impossibility had transformed into impracticability.<sup>[7]</sup>

Impracticability refers to the performance, not to the party doing it. Only if the performance is impracticable is the obligor discharged. The distinction is between “the thing cannot be done” and “I cannot do it.” The former refers to that which is objectively impracticable, and the latter to that which is subjectively impracticable. That a duty is subjectively impracticable does not excuse it if the circumstances that made the duty difficult are not extraordinary. A buyer is liable for the purchase price of a house, and his inability to raise the money does not excuse him or

allow him to escape from a suit for damages when the seller tenders the deed. <sup>[8]</sup> If Andy promises to transport Anne to the football stadium for ten dollars, he cannot wriggle out of his agreement because someone smashed into his car (rendering it inoperable) a half hour before he was due to pick her up. He could rent a car or take her in a taxi, even though that will cost considerably more than the sum she agreed to pay him. But if the agreement was that he would transport her in his car, then the circumstances make his performance **objectively impracticable**—the equivalent of impossible—and he is excused.

### **Commercial Impracticability**

This common-law concept of impracticability has been adopted by the UCC. <sup>[9]</sup> When performance cannot be undertaken except with extreme difficulty or at highly unreasonable expense, it might be excused on the theory of commercial impracticability. However, “impracticable” (the action is impossible) is not the same as “impractical” (the action would yield an insufficient return or would have little practical value). The courts allow a considerable degree of fluctuation in market prices, inflation, weather, and other economic and natural conditions before holding that an extraordinary circumstance has occurred. A manufacturer that based its selling price on last year’s costs for raw materials could not avoid its contracts by claiming that inflation within the historical range had made it difficult or unprofitable to meet its commitments. Examples of circumstances that could excuse might be severe limitations of supply due to war, embargo, or a natural disaster. Thus a shipowner who contracted with a purchaser to carry goods to a foreign port would be excused if an earthquake destroyed the harbor or if war broke out and the military authorities threatened to sink all vessels that entered the harbor. But if the shipowner had planned to steam through a canal that is subsequently closed when a hostile government seizes it, his duty is not discharged if another route is available, even if the route is longer and consequently more expensive.

### **Frustration of Purpose**

If the parties made a basic assumption, express or implied, that certain circumstances would not arise, but they do arise, then a party is discharged from performing his duties if his principal purpose in making the contract has been “substantially frustrated.” This is not a rule of objective impossibility. It operates even though the parties easily might be able to carry out their



contractual duties. The frustration of purpose doctrine comes into play when circumstances make the value of one party's performance virtually worthless to the other. This rule does not permit one party to escape a contract simply because he will make less money than he had planned or because one potential benefit of the contract has disappeared. The purpose that is frustrated must be the core of the contract, known and understood by both parties, and the level of frustration must be severe; that is, the value of the contract to the party seeking to be discharged must be destroyed or nearly destroyed.

The classic illustration of frustration of purpose is the litigation that gave birth to the rule: the so-called coronation cases. In 1901, when King Edward VII was due to be crowned following the death of Queen Victoria, a parade route was announced for the coronation. Scores of people rented rooms in buildings that lined the streets of the route to watch the grand spectacle. But the king fell ill, and the procession was canceled. Many expectant viewers failed to pay, and the building owners took them to court; many lessees who had paid took the owners to court to seek refunds. The court declared that the lessees were not liable because the purpose of the contract had been frustrated by the king's illness.

Supervening government regulations (though here different from illegality), floods that destroy buildings in which an event was to take place, and business failures may all contribute to frustration of purpose. But there can be no general rule: the circumstances of each case are determinative. Suppose, for example, that a manufacturer agrees to supply a crucial circuit board to a computer maker who intends to sell his machine and software to the government for use in the international space station's ventilation systems. After the contract is made but before the circuit boards are delivered, the government decides to scrap that particular space station module. The computer manufacturer writes the circuit board maker, canceling the contract. Whether the manufacturer is discharged depends on the commercial prospects for the computer and the circuit board. If the circuit board can be used only in the particular computer, and it in turn is only of use on the space station, the duty to take the boards is discharged. But if the computer can be sold elsewhere, or the circuit boards can be used in other computers that the manufacturer makes, it is liable for breach of contract, since its principal purpose—selling computers—is not frustrated.

As before, the parties can provide in the contract that the duty is absolute and that no supervening event shall give rise to discharge by reason of frustration of purpose.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The obligations to perform under a contract cannot be dismissed lightly, but a person's duty to perform a contract duty may be discharged if it becomes impossible or very difficult to do it. This includes impossibility, common-law impracticability, commercial impracticability under the UCC, and frustration of purpose.

#### EXERCISES

1. If it is possible to perform a contract, why might a party be excused because of frustration of purpose?
2. What is the difference between impractical and impracticable?
3. How would supervening government regulation be different from supervening illegality?

### Other Methods of Discharge

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize when alteration, power of avoidance, the statute of limitations, and bankruptcy discharge parties from contracts.
2. In addition to performance (or lack of it), agreement of the parties, the happening or nonhappening of conditions, and variations on the theme of impossibility, there are several other ways contract duties may be discharged.

### Cancellation, Destruction, or Surrender

An obligee may unilaterally discharge the obligor's duty toward him by canceling, destroying, or surrendering the written document embodying the contract or other evidence of the duty. No consideration is necessary; in effect, the obligee is making a gift of the right that he possesses. No particular method of cancellation, destruction, or surrender is necessary, as long as the obligee manifests his intent that the effect of his act is to discharge the duty. The entire document can be handed over to the obligor with the words, "Here, you don't owe me anything." The obligee can tear the paper into pieces and tell the obligor that he has done so because he does not want anything more. Or he can mutilate the signatures or cross out the writing.

### Power of Avoidance

A contractual duty can be discharged if the obligor can avoid the contract. As discussed in [Chapter 10 "Real Assent"](#), a contract is either void or can be avoided if one of the parties lacked capacity (infancy, insanity); if there has been duress, undue influence, misrepresentation, or mistake; or the contract is determined to be unconscionable. Where a party has a power of avoidance and exercises it, that party is discharged from further obligation.

### **Statute of Limitations**

When an obligor has breached a contract, the obligee has the right to sue in court for a remedy. But that right does not last forever. Every state has statutes of limitations that establish time periods within which the suit must be brought (different time periods are spelled out for different types of legal wrongs: contract breach, various types of torts, and so on). The time period for contract actions under most statutes of limitations ranges between two and six years. The UCC has a four-year statute of limitations.<sup>[10]</sup> The period begins to run from the day on which the suit could have been filed in court—for example, from the moment of contract breach. An obligee who waits until after the statute has run—that is, does not seek legal relief within the period prescribed by the statute of limitations—is barred from going to court thereafter (unless she is under some incapacity like infancy), but the obligor is not thereby discharged. The effect is simply that the obligee has no legal remedy. If the parties have a continuing relationship, the obligee might be able to recoup—for example, by applying a payment for another debt to the one barred by the statute, or by offsetting a debt the obligee owes to the obligor.

### **Bankruptcy**

Under the federal bankruptcy laws certain obligations are discharged once a court declares a debtor to be bankrupt. The law spells out the particular types of debts that are canceled upon bankruptcy.

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Contract duties may be discharged by cancellation, destruction, or surrender of the written contract; by the running of the statute of limitations; or by bankruptcy.

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[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-106(3).

[2] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 237(d).

- [3] *Hochster v. De La Tour*, 2 Ellis & Blackburn 678 (Q.B. 1853).
- [4] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 283.
- [5] Stewart Macaulay, “Non-contractual Relations in Business: A Preliminary Study,” *American Sociological Review* 28, no. 1 (1963): 55, 61.
- [6] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 261.
- [7] *Autry v. Republic Productions*, 180 P.2d 144 (Calif. 1947).
- [8] *Christy v. Pilkinton*, 273 S.W.2d 533 (Ark. 1954).
- [9] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-615.
- [10] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-725.

## 15.2 Cases

### Substantial Performance; Conditions Precedent

*TA Operating Corp. v. Solar Applications Engineering, Inc.*  
*191 S.W.3d 173 (Tex. Ct. App. 2005)*

TA Operating Corporation, a truck stop travel center company, contracted with Solar Applications Engineering, Inc. to construct a prototype multi-use truck stop in San Antonio for a fixed price of \$3,543,233....

[When the project was near] completion, TA sent Solar a “punch list” of items that needed to be finished to complete the building. Solar disputed several items on the list and delivered a response to TA listing the items Solar would correct....Solar began work on the punch list items and filed a lien affidavit [a property that carries a lien can be forced into sale by the creditor in order to collect what is owed] against the project on October 2, 2000 in the amount of \$472,392.77. TA understood the lien affidavit to be a request for final payment.

On October 18, 2000, TA sent notice to Solar that Solar was in default for not completing the punch list items, and for failing to keep the project free of liens. TA stated in the letter that Solar was not entitled to final payment until it completed the remainder of the punch list items and provided documentation that liens filed against the project had been paid....Solar acknowledged at least two items on the punch list had not been completed, and submitted a final application for payment in the amount of \$472,148,77....TA refused to make final payment, however,

contending that Solar had not complied with section 14.07 of the contract, which expressly made submission of a [lien-release] affidavit a condition precedent to final payment:...

*The final Application for Payment shall be accompanied by:...complete and legally effective releases or waivers...of all lien rights arising out of or liens filed in connection with the work.*

Although Solar did not comply with this condition precedent to final payment, Solar sued TA for breach of contract under the theory of substantial performance....TA [asserts that] the doctrine of substantial performance does not excuse Solar's failure to comply with an express condition precedent to final payment....

The first issue we must resolve is whether the doctrine of substantial performance excuses the breach of an express condition precedent to final payment that is unrelated to completion of the building. TA acknowledges that Solar substantially performed its work on the project, but contends its duty to pay was not triggered until Solar pleaded or proved it provided TA with documentation of complete and legally effective releases or waivers of all liens filed against the project....TA contends that when the parties have expressly conditioned final payment on submission of [a liens-release] affidavit, the owner's duty to pay is not triggered until the contractor pleads or proves it complied with the condition precedent.

Solar contends that although it did not submit [a liens-release] affidavit in accordance with the contract, it may still recover under the contract pursuant to the substantial performance doctrine. Solar argues that to hold otherwise would bring back the common law tradition that the only way for a contractor to recover under a contract is full, literal performance of the contract's terms....

While the common law did at one time require strict compliance with the terms of a contract, this rule has been modified for building or construction contracts by the doctrine of substantial performance. "Substantial performance" was defined by the Texas [court] in [Citation]:

*To constitute substantial compliance the contractor must have in good faith intended to comply with the contract, and shall have substantially done so in the sense that the defects are not pervasive, do not constitute a deviation from the general plan contemplated for the work, and are not so essential that the object of the parties in*

*making the contract and its purpose cannot without difficulty, be accomplished by remedying them. Such performance permits only such omissions or deviation from the contract as are inadvertent and unintentional, are not due to bad faith, do not impair the structure as a whole, and are remediable without doing material damage to other parts of the building in tearing down and reconstructing.*

...The doctrine of substantial performance recognizes that the contractor has not completed construction, and therefore is in breach of the contract. Under the doctrine, however, the owner cannot use the contractor's failure to complete the work as an excuse for non-payment. "By reason of this rule a contractor who has in good faith substantially performed a building contract is permitted to sue under the contract, substantial performance being regarded as full performance, so far as a condition precedent to a right to recover thereunder is concerned." [Citation]...

Solar argues that by agreeing substantial performance occurred, TA acknowledged that Solar was in "full compliance" with the contract and any express conditions to final payment did not have to be met. [Citation]: "[a] finding that a contract has been substantially completed is the legal equivalent of full compliance, less any offsets for remediable defects." Solar argues that TA may not expressly provide for substantial performance in its contract and also insist on strict compliance with the conditions precedent to final payment. We disagree. While the substantial performance doctrine permits contractors to sue under the contract, it does not ordinarily excuse the non-occurrence of an express condition precedent:

*The general acceptance of the doctrine of substantial performance does not mean that the parties may not expressly contract for literal performance of the contract terms....Stated otherwise, if the terms of an agreement make full or strict performance an express condition precedent to recovery, then substantial performance will not be sufficient to enable recovery under the contract.*

15 Williston on Contracts § 44.53 (4th Ed.2000) (citing Restatement (Second) of Contracts, § 237, cmt. d (1981))....

TA, seeking protection from double liability and title problems, expressly conditioned final payment on Solar's submission of a [liens-release] affidavit. Solar did not dispute that it was

contractually obligated to submit the affidavit as a condition precedent to final payment, and it was undisputed at trial that \$246,627.82 in liens had been filed against the project. Though the doctrine of substantial performance permitted Solar to sue under the contract, Solar did not plead or prove that it complied with the express condition precedent to final payment. Had Solar done so, it would have been proper to award Solar the contract balance minus the cost of remediable defects. While we recognize the harsh results occasioned from Solar's failure to perform this express condition precedent, we recognize that parties are free to contract as they choose and may protect themselves from liability by requesting literal performance of their conditions for final payment....

[T]he trial court erred in awarding Solar the contract balance [as] damages, and we render judgment that Solar take nothing on its breach of contract claim.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did Solar believe it was entitled to the contract balance here?
2. Why did the court determine that Solar should not have been awarded the contract damages that it claimed, even though it substantially complied?
3. How has the common law changed in regard to demanding strict compliance with a contract?

### Waiver of Contract Rights; Nonwaiver Provisions

*Minor v. Chase Auto Finance Corporation*

—*S.W.3d*—, 2010 WL 2006401 (Ark. 2010)

Sheffield, J.

We have been asked to determine whether non-waiver and no-unwritten-modifications clauses in a [contract] preclude a creditor from waiving future strict compliance with the agreement by accepting late payments....

Appellant Mose Minor (Minor) entered into a Simple Interest Motor Vehicle Contract and Security Agreement with Appellee Chase Auto Finance Corporation (Chase) to finance the purchase of a 2003 Toyota Tundra. By the terms of the agreement, Minor was to make sixty-six payments of \$456.99 on the fourteenth of each month....The agreement also included the following relevant provisions:

*G. Default: If you...default in the performance of any promise you make in this contract or any other contract you have with us, including, but not limited to, failing to make any payments when due, or become insolvent, or file any proceeding under the U.S. Bankruptcy Code,...we may at our option and without notice or demand (1) declare all unpaid sums immediately due and payable subject to any right of reinstatement as required by law (2) file suit against you for all unpaid sums (3) take immediate possession of the vehicle (4) exercise any other legal or equitable remedy....Our remedies are cumulative and taking of any action shall not be a waiver or prohibit us from pursuing any other remedy. You agree that upon your default we shall be entitled to recover from you our reasonable collection costs, including, but not limited to, any attorney's fee. In addition, if we repossess the vehicle, you grant to us and our agents permission to enter upon any premises where the vehicle is located. Any repossession will be performed peacefully....*

*J. Other Agreements of Buyer:... (2) You agree that if we accept moneys in sums less than those due or make extensions of due dates of payments under this contract, doing so will not be a waiver of any later right to enforce the contract terms as written.... (12) All of the agreements between us and you are set forth in this contract and no modification of this contract shall be valid unless it is made in writing and signed by you and us....*

*K. Delay in Enforcement: We can delay or waive enforcement of any of our rights under this contract without losing them.*

Minor's first payment was late, as were several subsequent payments. At times he failed to make any payment for months. Chase charged a late fee for each late payment, and sent several letters requesting payment and offering to assist Minor with his account. Chase also warned Minor that continued failure to make payments would result in Chase exercising its legal options available under the agreement, including repossession of the vehicle....At one point, Minor fell so far behind in his payments that Chase was on the verge of repossessing the vehicle. However...the parties agreed to a two-month extension of the agreement....The extension agreement indicated that all other terms and conditions of the original contract would remain the same.



On November 2, 2004, Minor filed for [Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort Law"](#) bankruptcy [after which] Chase sent Minor a letter acknowledging that Minor's debt to Chase had been discharged in bankruptcy. The letter further stated that Chase still had a valid lien on the vehicle, and if Minor wished to keep the vehicle, he would have to continue to make payments to Chase. Otherwise, Chase would repossess the vehicle....

On September 28, 2006, a repossession agent...arrived at Minor's home some time in the afternoon to repossess the vehicle....[Notwithstanding Minor's insistence that the agent stop] the agent removed Minor's possessions from the vehicle and towed it away. Chase sold the vehicle. The amount of the purchase price was reflected on Minor's account....

On January 7, 2008, Minor filed a complaint against Chase [alleging] that, during the course of the contract, the parties had altered the provisions of the contract regarding Chase's right to repossess the vehicle and Chase had waived the right to strictly enforce the repossession clause. Minor further claimed that the repossession agent committed trespass and repossessed the vehicle forcibly, without Minor's permission, and through trickery and deceit, in violation of [state law]. Also, Minor asserted that he was not in default on his payments, pursuant to the repayment schedule, at the time Chase authorized repossession. Therefore, according to Minor, Chase committed conversion, and breached the Arkansas Deceptive Trade Practices Act [Citation], and enhanced by Arkansas Code Annotated section 4-88-202, because Minor is an elderly person. Minor sought compensatory and punitive damages....

After hearing these arguments, the circuit court ruled that Minor had presented no evidence that the conduct of Chase or the repossession agent constituted grounds for punitive damages; that by the express terms of the contract Chase's acceptance of late payments did not effect a waiver of its rights in the future; that at the time of repossession, Minor was behind in his payments and in breach of the contract; that Chase had the right under the contract to repossess the vehicle and did not commit conversion; and that there was no evidence to support a claim that Chase had violated the Arkansas Deceptive Trade Practices Act....

[W]e affirm our previous decisions that when a contract does not contain a non-waiver and a no-unwritten-modification provision and the creditor has established a course of dealing in accepting late payments from the debtor, the creditor waives its right to insist on strict

compliance with the contract and must give notice to the debtor that it will no longer accept late payments before it can declare default of the debt. However, we announce today that, if a contract includes non-waiver and no-unwritten-modification clauses, the creditor, in accepting late payments, does not waive its right under the contract to declare default of the debt, and need not give notice that it will enforce that right in the event of future late payments....

In arriving at this conclusion, we adhere to the principle that “a [contract] is effective according to its terms between the parties.”...We have long held that non-waiver clauses are legal and valid. See [Citations] Also, [the Arkansas UCC 2-209(2)] declares that no-unwritten-modification provisions are binding.

We acknowledge that there is a difference of opinion amongst the courts in other jurisdictions over the effect of non-waiver and no-unwritten-modification clauses....

We concur with the Supreme Court of Indiana’s decision in [Citation], that a rule providing that non-waiver clauses could themselves be waived by the acceptance of late payments is “illogical, since the very conduct which the [non-waiver] clause is designed to permit[,] acceptance of late payment[,] is turned around to constitute waiver of the clause permitting the conduct.” We also agree that the approach of jurisdictions that require creditors who have accepted late payments in the past to notify debtors that they expect strict compliance in the future, despite the existence of a non-waiver provision in the contract, is not “sound.” Such a rule, we recognize, “begs the question of validity of the non-waiver clause.” Finally, our holding is in line with the Indiana Supreme Court’s ruling that it would enforce the provisions of the contract, since the parties had agreed to them, and that it would not require the creditor to give notice, because the non-waiver clause placed the [creditor] in the same position as one who had never accepted a late payment. [Citations]...

Certified question answered; remanded to court of appeals.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What is a nonwaiver clause?
2. Why did Mose think his late payments were not grounds for repossession of his truck?
3. Why would a creditor accept late payments instead of immediately repossessing the collateral?

#### 4. Why did Mose lose?

### Impossibility as a Defense

*Parker v. Arthur Murray, Inc.*

*295 N.E.2d 487 (Ill. Ct. App. 1973)*

Stamos, J.

The operative facts are not in dispute. In November, 1959 plaintiff went to the Arthur Murray Studio in Oak Park to redeem a certificate entitling him to three free dancing lessons. At that time he was a 37 year-old college-educated bachelor who lived alone in a one-room attic apartment in Berwyn, Illinois. During the free lessons the instructor told plaintiff he had 'exceptional potential to be a fine and accomplished dancer' and generally encouraged further participation. Plaintiff thereupon signed a contract for 75 hours of lessons at a cost of \$1000. At the bottom of the contract were the bold-type words, 'NON-CANCELABLE, NEGOTIABLE CONTRACT.' This initial encounter set the pattern for the future relationship between the parties. Plaintiff attended lessons regularly. He was praised and encouraged regularly by the instructors, despite his lack of progress. Contract extensions and new contracts for additional instructional hours were executed. Each written extension contained the bold-type words, 'NON-CANCELABLE CONTRACT,' and each written contract contained the bold-type words, 'NON-CANCELABLE NEGOTIABLE CONTRACT.' Some of the agreements also contained the bold-type statement, 'I UNDERSTAND THAT NO REFUNDS WILL BE MADE UNDER THE TERMS OF THIS CONTRACT.'

On September 24, 1961 plaintiff was severely injured in an automobile collision, rendering him incapable of continuing his dancing lessons. At that time he had contracted for a total of 2734 hours of lessons, for which he had paid \$24,812.80 [about \$176,000 in 2010 dollars]. Despite written demand defendants refused to return any of the money, and this suit in equity ensued. At the close of plaintiff's case the trial judge dismissed the fraud count (Count II), describing the instructors' sales techniques as merely 'a matter of pumping salesmanship.' At the close of all the evidence a decree was entered under Count I in favor of plaintiff for all prepaid sums, plus interest, but minus stipulated sums attributable to completed lessons.

Plaintiff was granted rescission on the ground of impossibility of performance. The applicable legal doctrine is expressed in the Restatement of Contracts, s 459, as follows:

*A duty that requires for its performance action that can be rendered only by the promisor or some other particular person is discharged by his death or by such illness as makes the necessary action by him impossible or seriously injurious to his health, unless the contract indicates a contrary intention or there is contributing fault on the part of the person subject to the duty....*

Defendants do not deny that the doctrine of impossibility of performance is generally applicable to the case at bar. Rather they assert that certain contract provisions bring this case within the Restatement's limitation that the doctrine is inapplicable if 'the contract indicates a contrary intention.' It is contended that such bold type phrases as 'NON-CANCELABLE CONTRACT,' 'NON-CANCELABLE NEGOTIABLE CONTRACT' and 'I UNDERSTAND THAT NO REFUNDS WILL BE MADE UNDER THE TERMS OF THIS CONTRACT' manifested the parties' mutual intent to waive their respective rights to invoke the doctrine of impossibility. This is a construction which we find unacceptable. Courts engage in the construction and interpretation of contracts with the sole aim of determining the intention of the parties. We need rely on no construction aids to conclude that plaintiff never contemplated that by signing a contract with such terms as 'NON-CANCELABLE' and 'NO REFUNDS' he was waiving a remedy expressly recognized by Illinois courts. Were we also to refer to established tenets of contractual construction, this conclusion would be equally compelled. An ambiguous contract will be construed most strongly against the party who drafted it. [Citation] Exceptions or reservations in a contract will, in case of doubt or ambiguity, be construed least favorably to the party claiming the benefit of the exceptions or reservations. Although neither party to a contract should be relieved from performance on the ground that good business judgment was lacking, a court will not place upon language a ridiculous construction. We conclude that plaintiff did not waive his right to assert the doctrine of impossibility.

Plaintiff's Count II, which alleged fraud and sought punitive damages, was dismissed by the trial judge at the close of plaintiff's case. It is contended on appeal that representations to plaintiff that he had 'exceptional potential to be a fine and accomplished dancer,' that he had 'exceptional

potential' and that he was a 'natural born dancer' and a 'terrific dancer' fraudulently induced plaintiff to enter into the contracts for dance lessons.

Generally, a mere expression of opinion will not support an action for fraud. [Citation] In addition, misrepresentations, in order to constitute actionable fraud, must pertain to present or pre-existing facts, rather than to future or contingent events, expectations or probabilities.

[Citation] Whether particular language constitutes speculation, opinion or averment of fact depends upon all the attending facts and circumstances of the case. [Citation] Mindful of these rules, and after carefully considering the representations made to plaintiff, and taking into account the business relationship of the parties as well as the educational background of plaintiff, we conclude that the instructors' representations did not constitute fraud. The trial court correctly dismissed Count II. We affirm.

Affirmed.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why is it relevant that the plaintiff was "a bachelor who lived alone in a one-room attic apartment"?
2. The contract here contained a "no cancellation" clause; how did the court construe the contract to allow cancellation?
3. Plaintiff lost on his claim of fraud (unlike Mrs. Vokes in the similar case in [Chapter 10 "Real Assent"](#) against another franchisee of Arthur Murray, Inc.). What defense was successful?
4. What is the controlling rule of law here?

## 15.3 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

The law of contracts has various rules to determine whether obligations have been discharged. Of course, if both parties have fully performed the contract, duties will have terminated. But many duties are subject to conditions, including conditions precedent and subsequent, conditions requiring approval of the promisee or someone else, and clauses that recite time to be of the essence.

A contract obligation may be discharged if the promisor has not received the benefit of the promisee's obligation. In some cases, failure to carry out the duty completely will discharge the

corresponding obligation (material breach); in other cases, the substantial performance doctrine will require the other party to act.

A contract may have terminated because one of the parties tells the other in advance that he will not carry out his obligations; this is called anticipatory breach. The right to adequate assurance allows one party to determine whether the contract will be breached by the other party.

There are other events, too, that may excuse performance: impracticability (including the UCC rules governing impracticability in contracts for the sale of goods), death or incapacity of the obligor, destruction of the thing necessary for the performance, government prohibition, frustration of purpose, and power of avoidance.

Finally, note that not all obligations are created by contract, and the law has rules to deal with discharge of duties in general. Thus, in the appropriate cases, the obligee may cancel or surrender a written contract, may enter into an accord, may agree to rescind the agreement, or may release the obligor. Or the obligor may show a material alteration in the contract, may become bankrupt, or may plead the statute of limitations—that is, plead that the obligee waited too long to sue. Or the parties may, by word or deed, mutually abandon the agreement. In all these ways, duties may be discharged.

## EXERCISES

1. Theresa hired Contractor to construct a large office building. Theresa's duty to pay Contractor was conditioned on receipt of a statement from her architect that the building complied with the terms of the contract. Contractor completed the building but used the wrong color fixtures in the bathrooms. The architect refused to approve the work, but under state law, Contractor was considered to have substantially performed the contract. Is he entitled to payment, less damages for the improper fixtures? Explain.
2. In early 1987, Larry McLanahan submitted a claim to Farmers Insurance for theft of his 1985 Lamborghini while it was on consignment for sale in the Los Angeles area. The car had sustained extensive damage, which McLanahan had his mechanic document. The insurance policy contained this language: "Allow us to inspect and appraise the damaged vehicle before its repair or disposal." But after considerable delay by Farmers, McLanahan sold the car to a cash buyer without notifying Farmers. He then sued Farmers for its refusal to pay for

damages to his car. Upon what legal theory did Farmers get a summary judgment in its favor?

3. Plaintiff sold a tavern to Defendants. Several months later, Defendants began to experience severe problems with the septic tank system. They informed Plaintiff of the problem and demanded the return of their purchase money. Plaintiff refused. Defendants took no formal action against Plaintiff at that time, and they continued to operate the tavern and make their monthly payments under the contract. Some months later, Defendants met with state officials from the Departments of Environmental Quality, Health, and Liquor Control Commission. The officials warned Defendants that because of the health hazards posed by the septic tank problems, Defendants' licenses might not be renewed. As a result, Defendants decided to close the tavern and attempt to reopen when the septic tank was repaired. Defendants advertised a going-out-of-business sale. The purpose of the sale was to deplete the tavern's inventory before closing. Plaintiff learned about the sale and discovered that Defendants had removed certain personal property from the tavern. He sued the Defendants, claiming, among other things, that they had anticipatorily breached their contract with him, though he was receiving payments on time. Did the Defendants' actions amount to an anticipatory breach? <sup>[1]</sup>
4. Julius, a manufacturer of neckties, contracted to supply neckties to a wholesaler. When Julius's factory burned, he failed to supply any, and the wholesaler sued. Is Julius excused from performance by impossibility?
5. The Plaintiff (a development corporation) contracted to buy Defendant's property for \$1.8 million. A term in the contract read: "The sale...shall be closed at the office of Community Title Company on May 16th at 10:00 am....Time is of the essence in this contract." Defendant appeared at the office at 10:00 a.m. on the day designated, but the Plaintiff's agent was not there. Defendant waited for twenty minutes, then left. Plaintiff's agent arrived at 10:30 a.m. and announced that he would not have funds for payment until 1:30 p.m., but Defendant refused to return; she had already made other arrangements to finance her purchase of other real estate. Plaintiff sued Defendant for specific performance. Who wins, and why?

6. A contract between the Koles and Parker-Yale provided for completion of the Koles's condominium unit within 180 days. It also authorized the Koles to make written changes in the plans and specifications. Construction was not completed within the 180-day period, and the Koles, prior to completion, sent a letter to Parker-Yale rescinding the contract. Were the Koles within their rights to rescind the contract?
7. Plaintiff contracted to buy Defendant's commercial property for \$1,265,000. Under the terms of the agreement, Defendant paid \$126,000 as an earnest-money deposit, which would be retained by Plaintiff as liquidated damages if Defendant failed to close by the deadline. Tragically, Defendant's husband died four days before the closing deadline, and she was not able to close by the deadline. She was relying on her husband's business to assist her in obtaining the necessary financing to complete the purchase, and after his death, she was not able to obtain it. Plaintiff sued for the \$126,000; Defendant argued that the purpose of the contract was frustrated due to the untimely death of her husband. Is this a good argument?
8. Buyer contracted to buy Seller's house for \$290,000; the contract included a representation by Buyer "that he has sufficient cash available to complete this purchase." Buyer was a physician who practiced with his uncle. He had received assurances from his uncle of a loan of \$200,000 in order to finance the purchase. Shortly after the contract was executed, the uncle was examined by a cardiologist, who found his coronary arteries to be dangerously clogged. As a result, the uncle immediately had triple bypass surgery. After the operation, he told Buyer that his economic future was now uncertain and that therefore it was impossible for him to finance the house purchase. Meanwhile, Seller, who did not know of Buyer's problem, committed herself to buy a house in another state and accepted employment there as well. Buyer was unable to close; Seller sued. Buyer raised as a defense impossibility or impracticability of performance. Is the defense good?
9. Pursuant to a contract for the repair and renovation of a swimming pool owned by Defendant (City of Fort Lauderdale), Plaintiff commenced the work, which included resurfacing the inside of the pool, and had progressed almost to completion. Overnight, vandals damaged the work Plaintiff had done inside the pool, requiring that part of the work be redone. Plaintiff proceeded to redo the work and billed Defendant, who paid the contract



price but refused to pay for the additional work required to repair the damage. Did the damage constitute destruction of subject matter discharging Plaintiff from his obligation to complete the job without getting paid extra?

10. Apache Plaza (the landlord) leased space to Midwest Savings to construct a bank building in Apache's shopping mall, based on a prototype approved by Apache. Midwest constructed the building and used it for twelve years until it was destroyed by a tornado. Midwest submitted plans for a new building to Apache, but Apache rejected the plans because the new building was larger and had less glass than the old building or the prototype. Midwest built it anyway. Its architect claimed that certain changes in the structure of the new building were required by new regulations and building codes, but he admitted that a building of the stipulated size could have been constructed in compliance with the applicable codes. Apache claimed \$210,000 in damages over the term of the lease because the new building consumed more square feet of mall space and required more parking. Midwest claimed it had substantially complied with the lease requirements. Is this a good defense? <sup>[2]</sup>

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. A condition precedent

- a. is a condition that terminates a duty
- b. is always within the control of one of the parties
- c. is an event giving rise to performance
- d. is a condition that follows performance

If Al and Betty have an executory contract, and if Betty tells Al that she will not be fulfilling her side of the bargain,

- a. Al must wait until the date of performance to see if Betty in fact performs
- b. Al can sue immediately for full contract damages
- c. Al can never sue because the contract was executory when Betty notified him of nonperformance
- d. none of the above

Jack contracts with Anne to drive her to the airport Wednesday afternoon in his specially designed stretch limousine. On Wednesday morning Jack's

limousine is hit by a drunken driver, and Jack is unable to drive Anne. This is an example of

- a. impossibility of performance
- b. frustration of purpose
- c. discharge by merger
- d. none of the above

Jack is ready and willing to drive Anne to the airport. But Anne's flight is cancelled, and she refuses to pay. This is an example of

- a. impracticability of performance
- b. frustration of purpose
- c. discharge of merger
- d. none of the above

Rescission is

- a. the discharge of one party to a contract through substitution of a third person
- b. an agreement to settle for substitute performance
- c. a mutual agreement between parties to a contract to discharge each other's contractual duties
- d. none of the above

## SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. c
- 2. b
- 3. a
- 4. b
- 5. c

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[1] *Crum v. Grant*, 692 P.2d 147 (Or. App., 1984).

[2] *Apache Plaza, Ltd. v. Midwest Sav. Ass'n*, 456 N.W.2d 729 (Minn. App. 1990).

# Chapter 16

## Remedies

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. The basic theory of contract remedies, and why courts don't just order the promisor to perform as promised
2. The interests that are protected by contract remedies
3. The types of legal remedies
4. The types of equitable remedies
5. The limitations on remedies

We come at last to the question of remedies. A valid agreement has been made, the promisor's duties have not been discharged; he or she has breached the contract. When one party has failed to perform, what are the rights of the parties? Or when the contract has been avoided because of incapacity or misrepresentation and the like, what are the rights of the parties after disaffirmance? These questions form the focus of this chapter. Remedies for breach of contracts for the sale of goods will be considered separately, in [Chapter 18 "Title and Risk of Loss"](#).

## 16.1 Theory of Contract Remedies

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the basic purpose of remedies.
2. Recognize that there are two general categories of remedies: legal and equitable.
3. See that courts do not simply order obligors to keep their promise but instead allow them to breach and the nonbreaching party to have remedies for that breach.

### Purpose of Remedies

The fundamental purpose of remedies in noncriminal cases is not to punish the breaching party but—if possible—to put the nonbreaching party in the position he or she would have been in had there been no breach. Or, as is said, the purpose is to make the nonbreaching party whole.

There are two general categories of remedies—legal and equitable. In the category of legal remedies are damages. Damages are money paid by one party to another; there are several types of damages. In the category of equitable remedies are these three: specific performance, which

means a person is ordered to deliver a unique thing (land or a unique personal property, such as a painting or an antique car); injunction, a judicial order directing a person to stop doing what he or she should not do (such as competing with a former employer in violation of a noncompete agreement); and restitution, which means putting the parties back into the position they were in before the contract was made.

### **Parties Have the Power—but Not the Right—to Breach**

In view of the importance given to the intention of the parties in forming and interpreting contracts, it may seem surprising that the remedy for every breach is not a judicial order that the obligor carry out his or her undertakings. But it is not. Of course, some duties cannot be performed after a breach, because time and circumstances will have altered their purpose and rendered many worthless. Still, there are numerous occasions on which it would be theoretically possible for courts to order the parties to carry out their contracts, yet the courts will not do it. In 1897, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. declared in a famous line that “the duty to keep a contract at common law means a prediction that you must pay damages if you do not keep it.” By that, he meant simply that the common law looks more toward compensating the promisee for his or her loss than toward compelling the promisor to perform. Indeed, the law of remedies often provides the parties with an incentive to break the contract. In short, the promisor has a choice: perform or pay.

The logic of this position is clear in many typical cases. The computer manufacturer orders specially designed circuit boards, then discovers before the circuits are made that a competitor has built a better machine and destroyed his market. The manufacturer cancels the order. It would make little economic sense for the circuit board maker to fabricate the boards if they could not be used elsewhere. A damage remedy to compensate the maker for out-of-pocket loss or lost profits is sensible; a judicial decree forcing the computer manufacturer to pay for and take delivery of the boards would be wasteful.

In general and if possible, the fundamental purpose of contract remedies is to put the nonbreaching party in the position it would have been in had there been no breach.

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Remedies are intended to make the nonbreaching party whole. The two categories of remedies for breach of contract are legal and equitable. In the legal category are damages; in the equitable category are specific performance, injunctions, and restitution. The law does not force a party to perform; he or she always has the power (though not the right) to breach, and may do so if it is economically more advantageous to breach and suffer the consequence than to perform. Remedies, though, are not (usually) intended to punish the breaching party.

### EXERCISES

1. Remedies are not supposed to punish the breaching party, generally. In what circumstances might punishment be a remedy, and what is that called?
2. What is the difference between legal and equitable remedies?
3. Why shouldn't people be forced to perform as they contracted, instead of giving them the power to breach and then be required to pay damages?

## 16.2 Promisee's Interests Protected by Contract

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand that the nonbreaching party to a contract has certain expectations that contract remedies seek to fulfill to make the nonbreaching party whole.

Contract remedies serve to protect three different interests: an expectation interest, a reliance interest, and a restitution interest. A promisee will have one of these and may have two or all three.

An expectation interest is the benefit for which the promisee bargained, and the remedy is to put him in a position as good as that which he would have been in had the contract been performed.

A reliance interest is the loss suffered by relying on the contract and taking actions consistent with the expectation that the other party will abide by it; the remedy is reimbursement that restores the promisee to his position before the contract was made. A restitution interest is that which restores to the promisee any benefit he conferred on the promisor. These interests do not dictate the outcome according to a rigid formula; circumstances and the nature of the contract, as usual, will play a large role. But in general, specific performance is a remedy that addresses

the expectation interest, monetary damages address all three interests, and, not surprisingly, restitution addresses the restitution interest.

Consider some simple examples. A landowner repudiates an executory contract with a builder to construct a garage on her property for \$100,000. The builder had anticipated a \$10,000 profit (the garage would have cost him \$90,000 to build). What can he expect to recover in a lawsuit against the owner? The court will not order the garage to be built; such an order would be wasteful, since the owner no longer wants it and may not be able to pay for it. Instead, the court will look to the builder's three possible interests. Since the builder has not yet started his work, he has given the owner nothing, and therefore has no restitution interest. Nor has he any reliance interest, since we are assuming that he has not paid out any money for supplies, hired a work crew, or advanced money to subcontractors. But he anticipated a profit, and so he has an expectation interest of \$10,000.

Now suppose that the builder had dug out the foundation and poured concrete, at a cost of \$15,000. His expectation interest has become \$25,000 (the difference between \$100,000 and \$75,000, the money he will save by not having to finish the job). His reliance interest is \$15,000, because this is the amount he has already spent. He may also have a restitution interest, depending on how much the foundation of the house is worth to the owner. (The value could be more or less than the sum of money actually expended to produce the foundation; for example, the builder might have had to pay his subcontractors for a greater share of the job than they had completed, and those sums therefore would not be reflected in the worth of the foundation.)

Normally, the promisee will choose which of the three interests to pursue. As is to be expected, the choice hinges on the circumstances of the case, his feelings, and the amount at stake.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

A nonbreaching party might have one or more interests that the law seeks to realize: expectation, reliance, and restitution.

#### EXERCISES

1. What is the expectation interest? The reliance interest? The restitution interest?
2. How are these concepts useful in understanding contract remedies?

## 16.3 Legal Remedies: Damages

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what is meant when it is said that damages are a legal remedy (as opposed to an equitable remedy).
2. Understand the names and purposes of the six types of remedies.
3. Know when liquidated damages will be allowed.
4. Recognize the circumstances that might allow punitive damages.

### Overview

The promisee, whom we will hereafter refer to as the nonbreaching party, has the right to damages (a money award), if that is required to make her whole, whenever the other party has breached the contract, unless, of course, the contract itself or other circumstances suspend or discharge that right. **Damages** refers to money paid by one side to the other; it is a legal remedy. For historical and political reasons in the development of the English legal system, the courts of law were originally only able to grant monetary relief. If a petitioner wanted something other than money, recourse to a separate system of equity was required. The courtrooms and proceedings for each were separate. That actual separation is long gone, but the distinction is still recognized; a judge may be said to be “sitting in law” or “sitting in equity,” or a case may involve requests for both money and some action. We take up the legal remedies of damages first.

### Types of Damages

There are six different types of damages: compensatory, incidental, consequential, nominal, liquidated, and (sometimes) punitive.

#### Compensatory Damages

Damages paid to directly compensate the nonbreaching party for the value of what was not done or performed are compensatory damages. Sometimes calculating that value of the promisor’s performance is easy—for example, when the nonbreaching party has ascertainable costs and profits, as in the case of the builder who would have earned \$10,000 profit on a \$100,000 house. When the performance is a service, a useful measure of loss is what it would cost to substitute performance by someone else. But the calculation is frequently difficult, especially

when the performance is a service that is not easily duplicated. If Rembrandt breached a contract to paint your portrait, the loss could not be measured simply by inquiring how much Van Gogh would charge to do the same thing. Nevertheless, in theory, whatever net value would ultimately have been conferred on the nonbreaching party is the proper measure of compensatory damages. An author whose publisher breaches its contract to publish the book and who cannot find another publisher is entitled to lost royalties (if ascertainable) plus the value that would have accrued from her enhanced reputation.

Since the nonbreaching party usually has obligations under the contract also, a breach by the other party discharges his duty to perform and may result in savings. Or he may have made substitute arrangements and realized at least a partial profit on the substitution. Or, as in the case of the builder, he may have purchased goods intended for the job that can be used elsewhere. In all these situations, the losses he has avoided—savings, profits, or value of goods—are subtracted from the losses incurred to arrive at the net damages. The nonbreaching party may recover his actual losses, not more. Suppose an employer breaches a contract with a prospective employee who was to begin work for a year at a salary of \$35,000. The employee quickly finds other, similar work at a salary of \$30,000. Aside from whatever he might have had to spend searching for the job (incidental damages), his compensatory damages are limited to \$5,000, the difference between what he would have earned and what he is earning.

Lost volume can be a troublesome problem in calculating damages. This problem arises when the nonbreaching party, a supplier of goods or services, enters a second contract when the buyer repudiates. The question is whether the second contract is a substituted performance or an additional one. If it is substituted, damages may be little or nothing; if additional, the entire expectation interest may be recovered. An automobile dealer contracts to sell a car in his inventory. Shortly before the deal is closed, the buyer calls up and repudiates the contract. The dealer then sells the car to someone else. If the dealer can show that he could have sold an identical car to the second purchaser regardless of what the first purchaser did, then the second sale stands on its own and cannot be used to offset the net profit recoverable from the first purchaser. The factual inquiry in lost volume cases is whether the nonbreaching party would have engaged in the second transaction if the breach had never occurred.



## **Incidental Damages**

In addition to compensatory damages, the nonbreaching party may recover incidental damages. Incidental loss includes expenditures that the nonbreaching party incurs in attempting to minimize the loss that flows from the breach. To arrange for substitute goods or services, the nonbreaching party might have to pay a premium or special fees to locate another supplier or source of work.

## **Consequential Damages**

A consequential loss is addressed with consequential damages. These are damages incurred by the nonbreaching party without action on his part because of the breach. For example, if Ralph does a poor job of plumbing Betty's bathroom and the toilet leaks, damaging the floor, the downstairs ceiling, and the downstairs rug, Ralph would owe for those losses in consequential damages. Or, again, lost sales stemming from a failure to fix a manufacturer's machine in time or physical and property injury due to a defective machine sold by the promisor would be addressed with consequential damages. Note, however, that one obvious, and often large, expenditure occasioned by a breach—namely, legal expenses in bringing a lawsuit to remedy the particular breach—is not an element of damages, unless the contract explicitly states that it is, and cannot be charged to the defendant. There is one situation, however, in which legal costs can be added to damages: when the breach causes the nonbreaching party to be involved in a lawsuit with someone else. Consequential damages will not be allowed if those damages are not foreseeable. This issue is taken up in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch16\_s05.

## **Nominal Damages**

In the situation where there has been a breach but the nonbreaching party has really suffered no loss or cannot prove what his loss is, he is entitled to nominal damages. Ricardo contracts to buy a new car from a dealer; the dealer breaches the contract. Ricardo finds and buys the same car from another dealer at the same price that the first one was to sell it for. Ricardo has suffered nominal damages: five dollars, perhaps.

## **Liquidated Damages**

Precisely because damages are sometimes difficult to assess, the parties themselves may specify how much should be paid in the event of a breach. Courts will enforce

aliquidated damages provision as long as the actual amount of damages is difficult to ascertain (in which case proof of it is simply made at trial) and the sum is reasonable in light of the expected or actual harm. If the liquidated sum is unreasonably large, the excess is termed a penalty and is said to be against public policy and unenforceable. /6059 - mayer\_1.0-  
ch16\_s06\_s02, *Watson v. Ingram*, illustrates liquidated damages.

### **Punitive Damages**

Punitive damages are those awarded for the purpose of punishing a defendant in a civil action, in which criminal sanctions are of course unavailable. They are proper in cases in which the defendant has acted willfully and maliciously and are thought to deter others from acting similarly. Since the purpose of contract law is compensation, not punishment, punitive damages have not traditionally been awarded, with one exception—when the breach of contract is also a tort for which punitive damages may be recovered. Punitive damages are permitted in the law of torts (in all but four states) when the behavior is malicious or willful (reckless conduct causing physical harm, deliberate defamation of one’s character, a knowingly unlawful taking of someone’s property), and some kinds of contract breach are also tortious. For example, when a creditor holding collateral as security under a contract for a loan sells the collateral to a good-faith purchaser for value even though the debtor was not in default, he has breached the contract and committed the tort of conversion; punitive damages may be awarded, assuming the behavior was willful and not merely mistaken.

Punitive damages are not fixed by law. The judge or jury may award at its discretion whatever sum is believed necessary to redress the wrong or deter like conduct in the future. This means that a richer person may be slapped with much heavier punitive damages than a poorer one in the appropriate case. But the judge in all cases may remit (reduce) some or all of a punitive damage award if he or she considers it excessive.

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

As the purpose of contract remedies is, in general, to make the nonbreaching party whole, the law allows several types of damages (money paid) to reflect the losses suffered by the nonbreaching party. Compensatory damages compensate for the special loss suffered; consequential damages compensate for the foreseeable consequences of the breach;

incidental damages compensate for the costs of keeping any more damages from occurring; nominal damages are awarded if the actual amount cannot be shown or there are no actual damages; liquidated damages are agreed to in advance where the actual amount is difficult to ascertain, and they are allowed if not a penalty; and punitive damages may sometimes be allowed if the breaching party's behavior is an egregious tort, an outrage.

## EXERCISES

1. What is the difference between a legal remedy and an equitable remedy?
2. What types of remedies are there, and what purpose does each serve?
3. What must be shown if liquidated damages are to be allowed?
4. Under what circumstances may punitive damages be allowed?

## 16.4 Equitable Remedies

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know when equitable (as opposed to legal) remedies will be allowed.
2. Understand the different types of equitable remedies: specific performance, injunction, and restitution.

### Overview

Really the only explanation for the differences between law and equity is to be found in the history and politics of England dating to the twelfth century, but in practical terms, the distinctions are notable. First, juries are not used in equitable cases. Second, equity relies less on precedent and more on the sense that justice should be served. Third, and of most significance, where what is sought by the nonbreaching party is not money—that is, where there is no adequate legal remedy—equity may afford relief. In equity a person may get a judge to order the breaching party to deliver some actual property, or to stop doing something that he should not do, or to return the consideration the nonbreaching party gave so as to return the parties to the precontract status (specific performance, injunction, and restitution, respectively).

### Types of Remedies in Equity

There are three types of equitable remedies: specific performance, injunction, and restitution.

#### Specific Performance

**Specific performance** is a judicial order to the promisor that he undertake the performance to which he obligated himself in a contract. Specific performance is an alternative remedy to damages and may be issued at the discretion of the court, subject to a number of exceptions. Emily signs a contract to sell Charlotte a gold samovar, a Russian antique of great sentimental value because it once belonged to Charlotte's mother. Emily then repudiates the contract while still executory. A court may properly grant Charlotte an order of specific performance against Emily.

Once students understand the basic idea of specific performance, they often want to pounce upon it as the solution to almost any breach of contract. It seems reasonable that the nonbreaching party could ask a court to simply require the promisor to do what she promised she would. But specific performance is a very limited remedy: it is *only* available for breach of contract to sell a unique item, that is, a unique item of personal property (the samovar), or a parcel of real estate (all real estate is unique). But if the item is not unique, so that the nonbreaching party can go out and buy another one, then the legal remedy of money damages will solve the problem. And specific performance will never be used to force a person to perform services against his will, which would be involuntary servitude. A person may be forced to stop doing that which he should not do (injunction), but not forced to do what he will not do.

### **Injunction**

An **injunction** is the second type of equitable remedy available in contract (it is also available in tort). It is a court order directing a person to stop doing that which she should not do. For example, if an employer has a valid noncompete contract with an employee, and the employee, in breach of that contract, nevertheless undertakes to compete with his former employer, a court may enjoin (issue an order of injunction), directing the former employee to stop such competition. A promise by a person not to do something—in this example, not to compete—is called a **negative** covenant (a covenant is a promise in a contract, itself a contract). Or if Seller promises to give Buyer the right of first refusal on a parcel of real estate or a unique work of art, but Seller, in breach of a written promise, offers the thing to a third party, a court may enjoin Seller from selling it to the third party. If a person violates an injunction, he may be held in contempt of court and put in jail for a while. *Madison Square Garden v. Carnera*

*Corporation*, /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch16\_s06\_s03, is a classic case involving injunctions for breach of contract.

## Restitution

The third type of equitable relief is **restitution**. Restitution is a remedy applicable to several different types of cases: those in which the contract was avoided because of incapacity or misrepresentation, those in which the other party breached, and those in which the party seeking restitution breached. As the word implies, *restitution* is a restoring to one party of what he gave to the other. Therefore, only to the extent that the injured party conferred a benefit on the other party may the injured party be awarded restitution. The point is, a person who breaches a contract should not suffer a punishment, and the nonbreaching party should not be unjustly enriched.

### Total Nonperformance by Breaching Party

The nonbreaching party is always entitled to restitution in the event of total breach by nonperformance or repudiation, unless both parties have performed all duties except for payment by the other party of a definite sum of money for the injured party's performance. <sup>[1]</sup> Calhoun, a contractor, agrees to build \$3,000 worth of fences for only \$2,000 and completes the construction. Arlene, the landowner, refuses to pay. Calhoun's only right is to get the \$2,000; he does not have a restitution right to \$2,500, the market price of his services (or \$3,000, the amount by which her property increased in value); he is entitled, instead, only to \$2,000, his contract price. Had Arlene repudiated prior to completion, however, Calhoun would then have been entitled to restitution based either on the market price of the work or on the amount by which he enhanced her property. If the one party breaches, the nonbreaching party is generally entitled to restitution of property that can be returned. Arlene gives Calhoun a valuable Ming vase in return for his promise to construct the fences. Upon Calhoun's breach, Arlene is entitled to specific restitution of the vase.

Measuring restitution interest can be problematic. The courts have considerable discretion to award either what it would have cost to hire someone else to do the work that the nonbreaching party performed (generally, the market price of the service) or the value that was added to the property of the party in breach by virtue of the claimant's performance. Calhoun, the contractor,

agrees to construct ten fences around Arlene's acreage at the market price of \$25,000. After erecting three, Calhoun has performed services that would cost \$7,500, market value. Assume that he has increased the value of Arlene's grounds by \$8,000. If Arlene repudiated, there are two measures of Calhoun's restitution interest: \$8,000, the value by which the property was enhanced, or \$7,500, the amount it would have cost Arlene to hire someone else to do the work. Which measure to use depends on who repudiated the contract and for what reason. In some cases, the enhancement of property or wealth measurement could lead to an award vastly exceeding the market price for the service. In such cases, the smaller measure is used. For a doctor performing lifesaving operations on a patient, restitution would recover only the market value of the doctor's services—not the monetary value of the patient's life.

### **Part Performance and Then Breach**

A party who has substantially performed and then breached is entitled to restitution of a benefit conferred on the injured party, if the injured party has refused (even though justifiably) to complete his own performance owing to the other's breach. Since the party in breach is liable to the injured party for damages for loss, this rule comes into play only when the benefit conferred is greater than the amount the nonbreaching party has lost. Arlene agrees to sell her property to Calhoun for \$120,000, and Calhoun makes a partial payment of \$30,000. He then repudiates. Arlene turns around and sells the property to a third party for \$110,000. Calhoun—the breaching party—can get his money back, less the damages Arlene suffered as a result of his breach. He gets \$30,000 minus the \$10,000 loss Arlene incurred. He gets \$20,000 in restitution. Otherwise Arlene would be enriched by Calhoun's breach: she'd get \$140,000 in total for real estate worth \$120,000. But if he gets \$20,000 of his \$30,000 back, she receives \$110,000 from the third party and \$10,000 from Calhoun, so she gets \$120,000 total (plus, we hope, incidental damages, at least).

### **Restitution in Other Cases**

Upon repudiation of an oral contract governed by the Statute of Frauds, the nonbreaching party is not entitled to her expectation interest, but she may recover in restitution unless the purpose of the statute would be frustrated. When one party avoids a contract owing to lack of capacity, mistake, misrepresentation, duress, or the like, she is entitled to restitution for benefit conferred

on the other party. Restitution is also available if a contract duty is discharged or never arises because (1) performance was impracticable, (2) the purpose of the contract was frustrated, (3) a condition did not occur, or (4) a beneficiary disclaimed his benefit.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Equitable remedies for breach of contract are available when legal remedies won't make the nonbreaching party whole. The equitable remedies are specific performance (an order directing a person to deliver to the buyer the unique thing the seller contracted to sell), injunction (an order directing a person to stop doing that which he should not do), and restitution (the return by one party of the benefit conferred on him when the contract is not performed, to the extent necessary to avoid imposing a penalty on the breaching party).

#### EXERCISES

1. Buyer contracts to buy a 1941 four-door Cadillac convertible from Seller for \$75,000. Seller, having found a Third Party who will pay \$85,000 for the car, refuses to sell to Buyer. What is Buyer's remedy?
2. Assume Third Party had paid the \$85,000 and Seller was ordered to sell to Buyer. What is Third Party's remedy?
3. Professor Smith contracts to teach business law at State University for the academic year. After the first term is over, she quits. Can State University get an order of specific performance or an injunction requiring Professor Smith to return for the second term?
4. Now suppose that the reason Professor Smith quit work at State University is because she got a better job at Central University, fifteen miles away. Can State University get an injunction prohibiting her from teaching at Central University?

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[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 373.

## 16.5 Limitations on Contract Remedies

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand that there are various rules that limit recovery for the nonbreaching party in a contract case.
2. Know how these concepts serve to limit contract remedies: foreseeability, mitigation of damages, certainty of damages, loss of power of avoidance, election of remedies, and agreement of the parties.

## Overview

We have observed that the purpose of remedies in contract law is, where possible, to put the nonbreaching party in as good a position as he would have been in had there been no breach. There are, however, several limitations or restrictions affecting when a person can claim remedies, in both law (damages) and equity. Of course the contract itself may—if not unconscionable—limit remedies. Beyond that, the nonbreaching party must be able to articulate with some degree of certainty what her damages are; the damages must be foreseeable; the nonbreaching party must have made a reasonable effort to mitigate the damages; she must sometime elect to go with one remedy and forgo another; she cannot seek to avoid a contract if she has lost the power to do so. We turn to these points.

## Foreseeability

If the damages that flow from a breach of contract lack foreseeability, they will not be recoverable. Failures to act, like acts themselves, have consequences. As the old fable has it, “For want of a nail, the kingdom was lost.” To put a nonbreaching party in the position he would have been in had the contract been carried out could mean, in some cases, providing compensation for a long chain of events. In many cases, that would be unjust, because a person who does not anticipate a particular event when making a contract will not normally take steps to protect himself (either through limiting language in the contract or through insurance). The law is not so rigid; a loss is not compensable to the nonbreaching party unless the breaching party, at the time the contract was made, understood the loss was foreseeable as a probable result of his breach.

Of course, the loss of the contractual benefit in the event of breach is always foreseeable. A company that signs an employment contract with a prospective employee knows full well that if it breaches, the employee will have a legitimate claim to lost salary. But it might have no reason



to know that the employee's holding the job for a certain length of time was a condition of his grandfather's gift of \$1 million.

The leading case, perhaps the most studied case, in all the common law is *Hadley v. Baxendale*, decided in England in 1854. Joseph and Jonah Hadley were proprietors of a flour mill in Gloucester. In May 1853, the shaft of the milling engine broke, stopping all milling. An employee went to Pickford and Company, a common carrier, and asked that the shaft be sent as quickly as possible to a Greenwich foundry that would use the shaft as a model to construct a new one. The carrier's agent promised delivery within two days. But through an error, the shaft was shipped by canal rather than by rail and did not arrive in Greenwich for seven days. The Hadleys sued Joseph Baxendale, managing director of Pickford, for the profits they lost because of the delay. In ordering a new trial, the Court of Exchequer ruled that Baxendale was not liable because he had had no notice that the mill was stopped:

*Where two parties have made a contract which one of them has broken, the damages which the other party ought to receive in respect of such breach of contract should be such as may fairly and reasonably be considered either arising naturally, i.e., according to the usual course of things, from such breach of contract itself, or such as may reasonably be supposed to have been in the contemplation of both parties, at the time they made the contract, as the probable result of the breach of it.* <sup>[1]</sup>

Thus when the party in breach has not known and has had no reason to know that the contract entailed a special risk of loss, the burden must fall on the nonbreaching party. As we have seen, damages attributable to losses that flow from events that do not occur in the ordinary course of events are known as consequential or special damages. The exact amount of a loss need not be foreseeable; it is the nature of the event that distinguishes between claims for ordinary or consequential damages. A repair shop agrees to fix a machine that it knows is intended to be resold. Because it delays, the sale is lost. The repair shop, knowing why timeliness of performance was important, is liable for the lost profit, as long as it was reasonable. It would not be liable for an extraordinary profit that the seller could have made because of circumstances peculiar to the particular sale unless they were disclosed.

The special circumstances need not be recited in the contract. It is enough for the party in breach to have actual knowledge of the loss that would occur through his breach. Moreover, the parol evidence rule (/6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch13) does not bar introduction of evidence bearing on the party's knowledge before the contract was signed. So the lesson to a promisee is that the reason for the terms he bargains for should be explained to the promisor—although too much explanation could kill a contract. A messenger who is paid five dollars to deliver a letter across town is not likely to undertake the mission if he is told in advance that his failure for any reason to deliver the letter will cost the sender \$1 million, liability to be placed on the messenger. Actual knowledge is not the only criterion, because the standard of foreseeability is objective, not subjective. That means that if the party had reason to know—if a reasonable person would have understood—that a particular loss was probable should he breach, then he is liable for damages. What one has reason to know obviously depends on the circumstances of the case, the parties' prior dealings, and industry custom. A supplier selling to a middleman should know that the commodity will be resold and that delay or default may reduce profits, whereas delay in sale to an end user might not. If it was foreseeable that the breach might cause the nonbreaching party to be sued, the other party is liable for legal fees and a resulting judgment or the cost of a settlement.

Even though the breaching party may have knowledge, the courts will not always award full consequential damages. In the interests of fairness, they may impose limitations if such an award would be manifestly unfair. Such cases usually crop up when the parties have dealt informally and there is a considerable disproportion between the loss caused and the benefit the nonbreaching party had agreed to confer on the party who breached. The messenger may know that a huge sum of money rides on his prompt delivery of a letter across town, but unless he explicitly contracted to bear liability for failure to deliver, it is unlikely that the courts would force him to ante up \$1 million when his fee for the service was only five dollars.

*EBWS, LLC v. Britly Corp.*, /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch16\_s06\_s01, is a case that represents a modern application of the rule of *Hadley v. Baxendale* on the issue of foreseeability of consequential damages.

## Mitigation of Damages

Contract law encourages the nonbreaching party to avoid loss wherever possible; this is called mitigation of damages. The concept is a limitation on damages in law. So there can be no recovery if the nonbreaching party had an opportunity to avoid or limit losses and failed to take advantage of it. Such an opportunity exists as long as it does not impose, in the Restatement's words, an "undue risk, burden or humiliation." <sup>[2]</sup> The effort to mitigate need not be successful. As long as the nonbreaching party makes a reasonable, good-faith attempt to mitigate his losses, damages are recoverable.

Mitigation crops up in many circumstances. Thus a nonbreaching party who continues to perform after notice that the promisor has breached or will breach may not recover for expenses incurred in continuing to perform. And losses from the use of defective goods delivered in breach of contract are not compensable if the nonbreaching party knew before use that they were defective. Often the nonbreaching party can make substitute arrangements—find a new job or a new employee, buy substitute goods or sell them to another buyer—and his failure to do so will limit the amount of damages he will recover from the party who breaches. Under the general rule, failure to mitigate when possible permits the promisor to deduct from damages the amount of the loss that the nonbreaching party could have avoided. When there is a readily ascertainable market price for goods, damages are equal to the difference between the contract price and the market price.

A substitute transaction is not just any possible arrangement; it must be suitable under the circumstances. Factors to be considered include the similarity, time, and place of performance, and whether the difference between the contracted-for and substitute performances can be measured and compensated. A prospective employee who cannot find substitute work within her field need not mitigate by taking a job in a wholly different one. An advertising salesperson whose employment is repudiated need not mitigate by taking a job as a taxi driver. When the only difference between the original and the substitute performances is price, the nonbreaching party must mitigate, even if the substitute performer is the original promisor.

The nonbreaching party must mitigate in timely fashion, but each case is different. If it is clear that the promisor has unconditionally repudiated before performance is due, the nonbreaching

party must begin to mitigate as soon as practicable and should not wait until the day performance is due to look for an alternative.

As long as the nonbreaching party makes a reasonable effort to mitigate, the success of that effort is not an issue in assessing damages. If a film producer's original cameraman breaches the contract, and if the producer had diligently searched for a substitute cameraman, who cost \$150 extra per week and it later came to light that the producer could have hired a cameraman for \$100, the company is entitled nevertheless to damages based on the higher figure. *Shirley MacLaine v. Twentieth Century-Fox Corporation*, /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch16\_s06\_s04, is a well-known case involving mitigation of damages.

### **Certainty of Damages**

A party can recover only that amount of damage in law which can be proved with reasonable certainty. Especially troublesome in this regard are lost profits and loss of goodwill. Alf is convinced that next spring the American public will be receptive to polka-dotted belts with his name monogrammed in front. He arranges for a garment factory to produce 300,000 such belts, but the factory, which takes a large deposit from him in advance, misplaces the order and does not produce the belts in time for the selling season. When Alf discovers the failure, he cannot raise more money to go elsewhere, and his project fails. He cannot recover damages for lost profits because the number is entirely speculative; no one can prove how much he would have made, if anything. He can, instead, seek restitution of the monies advanced. If he had rented a warehouse to store the belts, he would also be able to recover his reliance interest.

Proof of lost profits is not always difficult: a seller can generally demonstrate the profit he would have made on the sale to the buyer who has breached. The problem is more difficult, as Alf's case demonstrates, when it is the seller who has breached. A buyer who contracts for but does not receive raw materials, supplies, and inventory cannot show definitively how much he would have netted from the use he planned to make of them. But he is permitted to prove how much money he has made in the past under similar circumstances, and he may proffer financial and market data, surveys, and expert testimony to support his claim. When proof of profits is

difficult or impossible, the courts may grant a nonmonetary award, such as specific performance.

## **Loss of Power of Avoidance**

You will recall that there are several circumstances when a person may avoid a contract: duress, undue influence, misrepresentation (fraudulent, negligent, or innocent), or mistake. But a party may lose the right to avoid, and thus the right to any remedy, in several ways.

### **Delay**

If a party is the victim of fraud, she must act promptly to rescind at common law, or she will lose the right and her remedy will be limited to damages in tort. (This is discussed a bit more in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch16\_s05\_s07.)

### **Affirmation**

An infant who waits too long to disaffirm (again, delay) will have ratified the contract, as will one who—notwithstanding being the victim of duress, undue influence, mistake, or any other grounds for avoidance—continues to operate under the contract with full knowledge of his right to avoid. Of course the disability that gave rise to the power of avoidance must have passed before affirmation works.

### **Rights of Third Parties**

The intervening rights of third parties may terminate the power to avoid. For example, Michelle, a minor, sells her watch to Betty Buyer. Up to and within a reasonable time after reaching majority, Michelle could avoid—disaffirm—the contract. But if, before that time, Betty sells the watch to a third party, Michelle cannot get it back from the third party. Similarly, Salvador Seller sells his car to Bill Buyer, who pays for it with a bad check. If the check bounces, Salvador can rescind the deal—Bill’s consideration (the money represented by the check) has failed: Salvador could return the check and get his car back. But if, before the check from Bill bounces, Bill in turn sells the car to Pat Purchaser, Salvador cannot avoid the contract. Pat gets to keep the car. There are some exceptions to this rule.

## **Agreement of the Parties Limiting Remedies**

Certainly it is the general rule that parties are free to enter into any kind of a contract they want, so long as it is not illegal or unconscionable. The inclusion into the contract of a liquidated

damages clause—mentioned previously—is one means by which the parties may make an agreement affecting damages. But beyond that, as we saw in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch12, it is very common for one side to limit its liability, or for one side to agree that it will pursue only limited remedies against the other in case of breach. Such agree-to limitations on the availability of remedies are generally OK provided they are conspicuous, bargained-for, and not unconscionable. In consumer transactions, courts are more likely to find a contracted-for limitation of remedies unconscionable than in commercial transactions, and under the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) there are further restrictions on contractual remedy limitations. For example, Juan buys ten bags of concrete to make a counter and stand for his expensive new barbecue. The bags have this wording in big print: “Attention. Our sole liability in case this product is defective will be to provide you with a like quantity of nondefective material. We will not be liable for any other damages, direct or indirect, express or implied.” That’s fine. If the concrete is defective, the concrete top breaks, and Juan’s new barbecue is damaged, he will get nothing but some new bags of good concrete. He could have shopped around to find somebody who would deliver concrete with no limitation on liability. As it is, his remedies are limited by the agreement he entered into.

## **Election of Remedies**

### **At Common Law**

Another limitation on remedies—at common law—is the concept of election of remedies. The nature of a loss resulting from a contract breach may be such as to entitle one party to a choice among two or more means to redress the grievance, where the choices are mutually exclusive. At classic common law, a person who was defrauded had an election of remedies: she could, immediately upon discovering the fraud, rescind, or she could retain the item (real estate or personal property) and attempt to remedy the fraudulently defective performance by suing for damages, but not both. Buyer purchases real estate from Seller for \$300,000 and shortly discovers that Seller fraudulently misrepresented the availability of water. Buyer spends \$60,000 trying to drill wells. Finally he gives up and sues Seller for fraud, seeking \$360,000. Traditionally at common law, he would not get it. He should have rescinded upon discovery of the fraud. Now he can only get \$60,000 in damages in tort. <sup>[3]</sup> The purpose of the election of

remedies doctrine is to prevent the victim of fraud from getting a double recovery, but it has come under increasing criticism. Here is one court's observation: "A host of commentators support elimination of the election of remedies doctrine. A common theme is that the doctrine substitutes labels and formalism for inquiry into whether double recovery results in fact. The rigid doctrine goes to the other extreme, actually resulting in the under compensation of fraud victims and the protection of undeserving wrongdoers." <sup>[4]</sup>

### **Under the UCC**

The doctrine of election of remedy has been rejected by the UCC, which means that the remedies are cumulative in nature. According to Section 2-703(1): "Whether the pursuit of one remedy bars another depends entirely on the facts of the individual case." UCC, Section 2-721, provides that neither demand for rescission of the contract in the case of misrepresentation or fraud, nor the return or rejection of goods, bars a claim for damages or any other remedy permitted under the UCC for nonfraudulent breach (we will examine remedies for breach of sales contracts in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch18).

### **Tort versus Contract**

Frequently a contract breach may also amount to tortious conduct. A physician warrants her treatment as perfectly safe but performs the operation negligently, scarring the patient for life. The patient could sue for malpractice (tort) or for breach of warranty (contract). The choice involves at least four considerations:

1. Statute of limitations. Most statutes of limitations prescribe longer periods for contract than for tort actions.
2. Allowable damages. Punitive damages are more often permitted in tort actions, and certain kinds of injuries are compensable in tort but not in contract suits—for example, pain and suffering.
3. Expert testimony. In most cases, the use of experts would be the same in either tort or contract suits, but in certain contract cases, the expert witness could be dispensed with, as, for example, in a contract case charging that the physician abandoned the patient.

4. Insurance coverage. Most policies do not cover intentional torts, so a contract theory that avoids the element of willfulness would provide the plaintiff with a surer chance of recovering money damages.

### Legal versus Extralegal Remedies

A party entitled to a legal remedy is not required to pursue it. Lawsuits are disruptive not merely to the individuals involved in the particular dispute but also to the ongoing relationships that may have grown up around the parties, especially if they are corporations or other business enterprises. Buyers must usually continue to rely on their suppliers, and sellers on their buyers. Not surprisingly, therefore, many businesspeople refuse to file suits even though they could, preferring to settle their disputes privately or even to ignore claims that they might easily press. Indeed, the decision whether or not to sue is not one for the lawyer but for the client, who must analyze a number of pros and cons, many of them not legal ones at all.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

There are several limitations on the right of an aggrieved party to get contract remedies for a breach besides any limitations fairly agreed to by the parties. The damages suffered by the nonbreaching party must be reasonably foreseeable. The nonbreaching party must make a reasonable effort to mitigate damages, or the amount awarded will be reduced by the damages that could have been avoided. The party seeking damages must be able to explain within reason how much loss he has suffered as a result of the breach. If he cannot articulate with any degree of certainty—if the damages are really speculative—he will be entitled to nominal damages and that's all. There are circumstances in which a party who could have got out of a contractual obligation—avoided it—loses the power to do so, and her remedy of avoidance is lost. Not infrequently, a person will enter into a contract for services or goods that contains a limitation on her right to damages in case the other side breaches. That's all right unless the limitation is unconscionable. Sometimes parties are required to make an election of remedies: to choose among two or more possible bases of recovery. If the remedies are really mutually exclusive and one is chosen, the aggrieved party loses the right to pursue the others. And of course a person is always free not to pursue any remedy at all



for breach of contract; that may be strategically or economically smart in some circumstances.

## EXERCISES

1. When one party to a contract breaches, what duty, if any, is then imposed on the other party?
2. A chef who has never owned her own restaurant sues a contractor who failed to finish building the chef's first restaurant on time. She presents evidence of the profits made by similar restaurants that have been in business for some time. Is this good evidence of the damages she has suffered by the delay? To what damages is she entitled?
3. Rebecca, seventeen years and ten months old, buys a party dress for \$300. She wears it to the junior prom but determines it doesn't look good on her. She puts it in her closet and forgets about it until six months later, when she decides to return it to the store. Is she now entitled to the remedy of rescission?
4. What is the difference between *rescission* and *restitution*?
5. Why are parties sometimes required to make an election of remedies?

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[1] *Hadley v. Baxendale* (1854), 9 Ex. 341, 354, 156 Eng.Rep. 145, 151.

[2] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 350.

[3] *Merritt v. Craig*, 746 A.2d 923 (Md. 2000).

[4] *Head & Seemann, Inc. v. Gregg*, 311 N.W.2d 667 (Wis. App. 1981).

## 16.6 Cases

### Consequential Damages

*EBWS, LLC v. Britly Corp.*

928 A.2d 497 (Vt. 2007)

Reiber, C.J.

The Ransom family owns Rock Bottom Farm in Strafford, Vermont, where Earl Ransom owns a dairy herd and operates an organic dairy farm. In 2000, the Ransoms decided to build a

creamery on-site to process their milk and formed EBWS, LLC to operate the dairy-processing plant and to market the plant's products. In July 2000, Earl Ransom, on behalf of EBWS, met with Britly's president to discuss building the creamery....In January 2001, EBWS and Britly entered into a contract requiring Britly to construct a creamery building for EBWS in exchange for \$160,318....The creamery was substantially completed by April 15, 2001, and EBWS moved in soon afterward. On June 5, 2001, EBWS notified Britly of alleged defects in construction. [EBWS continued to use the creamery pending the necessity to vacate it for three weeks when repairs were commenced].

On September 12, 2001, EBWS filed suit against Britly for damages resulting from defective design and construction....

Following a three-day trial, the jury found Britly had breached the contract and its express warranty, and awarded EBWS: (1) \$38,020 in direct damages, and (2) \$35,711 in consequential damages....

...The jury's award to EBWS included compensation for both direct and consequential damages that EBWS claimed it would incur while the facility closed for repairs. Direct damages [i.e., compensatory damages] are for "losses that naturally and usually flow from the breach itself," and it is not necessary that the parties actually considered these damages. [Citation]. In comparison, special or consequential damages "must pass the tests of causation, certainty and foreseeability, and, in addition, be reasonably supposed to have been in the contemplation of both parties at the time they made the contract."

...The court ruled that EBWS could not recover for lost profits because it was not a going concern at the time the contract was entered into, and profits were too speculative. The court concluded, however, that EBWS could submit evidence of other business losses, including future payment for unused milk and staff wages....

At trial, Huyffer, the CEO of EBWS, testified that during a repairs closure the creamery would be required to purchase milk from adjacent Rock Bottom Farm, even though it could not process this milk. She admitted that such a requirement was self-imposed as there was no written output contract between EBWS and the farm to buy milk. In addition, Huyffer testified that EBWS would pay its employees during the closure even though EBWS has no written contract to

pay its employees when they are not working. The trial court allowed these elements of damages to be submitted to the jury, and the jury awarded EBWS consequential damages for unused milk and staff wages.

On appeal, Britly contends that because there is no contractual or legal obligation for EBWS to purchase milk or pay its employees, these are not foreseeable damages. EBWS counters that it is common knowledge that cows continue to produce milk, even if the processing plant is not working, and thus it is foreseeable that this loss would occur. We conclude that these damages are not the foreseeable result of Britly's breach of the construction contract and reverse the award....

[W]e conclude that...it is not reasonable to expect Britly to foresee that its failure to perform under the contract would result in this type of damages. While we are sympathetic to EBWS's contention that the cows continue to produce milk, even when the plant is closed down, this fact alone is not enough to demonstrate that buying and dumping milk is a foreseeable result of Britly's breach of the construction contract. Here, the milk was produced by a separate and distinct entity, Rock Bottom Farm, which sold the milk to EBWS....

Similarly, EBWS maintained no employment agreements with its employees obligating it to pay wages during periods of closure for repairs, dips in market demand, or for any other reason. Any losses EBWS might suffer in the future because it chooses to pay its employees during a plant closure for repairs would be a voluntary expense and not in Britly's contemplation at the time it entered the construction contract. It is not reasonable to expect Britly to foresee losses incurred as a result of agreements that are informal in nature and carry no legal obligation on EBWS to perform. "[P]arties are not presumed to know the condition of each other's affairs nor to take into account contracts with a third party that is not communicated." [Citation] While it is true that EBWS may have business reasons to pay its employees even without a contractual obligation, for example, to ensure employee loyalty, no evidence was introduced at trial by EBWS to support a sound rationale for such considerations. Under these circumstances, this business decision is beyond the scope of what Britly could have reasonably foreseen as damages for its breach of contract....

In addition, the actual costs of the wages and milk are uncertain....[T]he the milk and wages here are future expenses, for which no legal obligation was assumed by EBWS, and which are separate from the terms of the parties' contract. We note that at the time of the construction contract EBWS had not yet begun to operate as a creamery and had no history of buying milk or paying employees. See [Citation] (explaining that profits for a new business are uncertain and speculative and not recoverable). Thus, both the cost of the milk and the number and amount of wages of future employees that EBWS might pay in the event of a plant closure for repairs are uncertain.

Award for consequential damages is reversed....

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why, according to EBWS's CEO, would EBWS be required to purchase milk from adjacent Rock Bottom Farm, even though it could not process this milk?
2. Surely it is well known in Vermont dairy country that dairy farmers can't simply stop milking cows when no processing plant is available to take the milk—the cows will soon stop producing. Why was EBWS then not entitled to those damages which it will certainly suffer when the creamery is down for repairs?
3. Britly (the contractor) must have known EBWS had employees that would be idled when the creamery shut down for repairs. Why was it not liable for their lost wages?
4. What could EBWS have done at the time of contracting to protect itself against the damages it would incur in the event the creamery suffered downtime due to faulty construction?

### Liquidated Damages

*Watson v. Ingram*

*881 P.2d 247 (Wash. 1994)*

Johnson, J.

...In the summer of 1990, Wayne Watson offered to buy James Ingram's Bellingham home for \$355,000, with a \$15,000 [about \$24,000 in 2010 dollars] earnest money deposit....

Under the agreement, the entire amount of the purchase price was due in cash on or before December 3, 1990....The agreement required Watson to pay a \$15,000 earnest money deposit into escrow at Kelstrup Realty, and provided that "[i]n the event of default by Buyer, earnest

money shall be forfeited to Seller as liquidated damages, unless Seller elects to seek actual damages or specific performance. Lastly, the agreement contained a provision entitled “BUYER’S REPRESENTATIONS,” which stated, “Buyer represents that buyer has sufficient funds available to close this sale in accordance with this agreement, and is not relying on any contingent source of funds unless otherwise set forth in this agreement”....

On November 10, 1990, Watson sent a written proposal to Ingram seeking to modify the original agreement. The proposed modification would have allowed Watson to defer paying \$54,000 of the \$355,000 sale price for between 6 and 12 months after the scheduled December closing date. In exchange, Ingram would receive a second lien position on certain real estate Watson owned. According to Ingram, the November 10 proposal was the first time he realized Watson did not have financing readily available for the purchase of the house. Ingram notified Watson on November 12, 1990, that he would not agree to modify the original agreement and intended to strictly enforce its terms. Ingram was involved in a child custody suit in California and wanted to move to that state as soon as possible....[Further efforts by Ingram to sell to third parties and by Watson to get an extension from Ingram failed.]

In September 1991, Ingram finally sold the house to a third party for \$355,000, the same price that Watson had agreed to pay in December 1990.

Ingram and Watson each sought to recover Watson’s \$15,000 earnest money held in escrow. On December 4, 1990, Ingram wrote to Kelstrup Realty, indicating he was entitled to the \$15,000 earnest money in escrow because Watson had defaulted. In January 1991, Watson filed this action to recover the earnest money, alleging it amounted to a penalty and Ingram had suffered no actual damages....

The trial court found the earnest money “was clearly intended by both parties to be non-refundable” if Watson defaulted and determined \$15,000 was “a reasonable forecast by [Ingram and Watson] of damages that would be incurred by [Ingram] if [Watson] failed to complete the purchase”. The court entered judgment in favor of Ingram for the amount of the earnest money plus interest. The court also awarded Ingram his attorney fees pursuant to the parties’ agreement. The Court of Appeals, Division One, affirmed. Watson now appeals to this court.

This case presents a single issue for review: whether the parties' contract provision requiring Watson to forfeit a \$15,000 nonrefundable earnest money deposit is enforceable as liquidated damages. Liquidated damages clauses are favored in Washington, and courts will uphold them if the sums involved do not amount to a penalty or are otherwise unlawful. [Citation] To determine whether liquidated damages clauses are enforceable, Washington courts have applied a 2-part test from the Restatement of Contracts....Liquidated damages clauses are upheld if the following two factors are satisfied:

*First, the amount fixed must be a reasonable forecast of just compensation for the harm that is caused by the breach. Second, the harm must be such that it is incapable or very difficult of ascertainment.*

The question before this court is whether this test is to be applied as of the time of contract formation (prospectively) or as of the time of trial (retrospectively). We have previously held, the “[r]easonableness of the forecast will be judged as of the time the contract was entered”.

[Citations]

In contrast, a prior Division One opinion relied upon by Petitioner held the reasonableness of the estimate of damages and the difficulty of ascertainment of harm should be measured as of the time of trial, and earnest money agreements should not be enforceable as liquidated damages if the nonbreaching party does not suffer actual damage. [Citations]

We...adopt the date of contract formation as the proper timeframe for evaluating the Restatement test. The prospective approach concentrates on whether the liquidated sum represents a reasonable prediction of the harm to the seller if the buyer breaches the agreement, and ignores actual damages except as evidence of the reasonableness of the estimate of potential damage.

We believe this approach better fulfills the underlying purposes of liquidated damages clauses and gives greater weight to the parties' expectations. Liquidated damages permit parties to allocate business and litigation risks. Even if the estimates of damages are not exact, parties can allocate and quantify those risks and can negotiate adjustments to the contract price in light of the allocated risks. Under the prospective approach, courts will enforce the parties' allocation of risk so long as the forecasts appear reasonable when made. [Citations]

In addition to permitting parties to allocate risks, liquidated damages provisions lend certainty to the parties' agreements and permit parties to resolve disputes efficiently in the event of a breach. Rather than litigating the amount of actual damages, the nonbreaching party must only establish the reasonableness of the agreement. The prospective approach permits parties to rely on their stipulated amounts without having to precisely establish damages at trial. In contrast, if the reasonableness of the amount is judged retrospectively, against the damage actually suffered, the "parties must fully litigate (at great expense and delay) that which they sought not to litigate." [Citation].

Petitioner argues the prospective approach treats buyers unfairly because it permits sellers to retain earnest money deposits even when the seller suffers no actual damage, and this violates the principle that contract damages should be compensatory only. He further contends that by evaluating parties' liquidated damages agreements against actual damages established at trial, courts can most effectively determine whether such agreements were reasonable and fair.

We disagree. As this court has previously explained, "[w]e are loath to interfere with the rights of parties to contract as they please between themselves [Citations] It is not the role of the court to enforce contracts so as to produce the most equitable result. The parties themselves know best what motivations and considerations influenced their bargaining, and, while, "[t]he bargain may be an unfortunate one for the delinquent party,...it is not the duty of courts of common law to relieve parties from the consequences of their own improvidence..." [Citations]

The retrospective approach fails to give proper weight to the parties' negotiations. At the time of contract formation, unpredictable market fluctuations and variations in possible breaches make it nearly impossible for contracting parties to predict "precisely or within a narrow range the amount of damages that would flow from breach." [Citations]. However, against this backdrop of uncertainty, the negotiated liquidated damages sum represents the parties' best estimate of the value of the breach and permits the parties to allocate and incorporate these risks in their negotiations. Under the prospective approach, a court will uphold the parties' agreed upon liquidated sum so long as the amount represents a reasonable attempt to compensate the nonbreaching party. On the other hand, if the reasonableness of a liquidated damages provision is evaluated under a retrospective approach, the parties cannot confidently rely on their

agreement because the liquidated sum will not be enforced if, at trial, it is not a close approximation of the damage suffered or if no actual damages are proved....

Having adopted the date of contract formation as the proper timeframe for evaluating the Restatement test, the Restatement's second requirement loses independent significance. The central inquiry is whether the specified liquidated damages were reasonable at the time of contract formation....

We also agree with the Court of Appeals that in the context of real estate agreements, a requirement that damages be difficult to prove at trial would undermine the very purposes of the liquidated damage provision: "certainty, assurance that the contract will be performed, and avoidance of litigation". [Citation] It would "encourage litigation in virtually every case in which the sale did not close, regardless of whether the earnest money deposit was a reasonable estimate of the seller's damages." [Citation]

In sum, so long as the agreed upon earnest money agreement, viewed prospectively, is a reasonable prediction of potential damage suffered by the seller, the agreement should be enforced "without regard to the retrospective calculation of actual damages or the ease with which they may be proved". The prospective difficulty of estimating potential damage is a factor to be used in assessing the reasonableness of the earnest money agreement...

The decision of the Court of Appeals is affirmed.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What does the court here mean when it says that liquidated damages clauses allow the parties to "allocate and incorporate the risks [of the transaction] in their negotiations"?
2. Why is it relevant that the plaintiff Ingram was engaged in a child-custody dispute and wanted to move to California as soon as possible?
3. What, in plain language, is the issue here?
4. How does the court's resolution of the issue seem to the court the better analysis?
5. Why did the plaintiff get to keep the \$15,000 when he really suffered no damages?
6. Express the controlling rule of law out of this case.

## Injunctions and Negative Covenants

*Madison Square Garden Corporation v. Carnera*



*52 F.2d 47 (2d Cir. Ct. App. 1931)*

Chase, J.

On January 13, 1931, the plaintiff and defendant by their duly authorized agents entered into the following agreement in writing:

*1. Carnera agrees that he will render services as a boxer in his next contest (which contest, hereinafter called the 'First Contest.'...*

*9. Carnera shall not, pending the holding of the First Contest, render services as a boxer in any major boxing contest, without the written permission of the Garden in each case had and obtained. A major contest is understood to be one with Sharkey, Baer, Campolo, Godfrey, or like grade heavyweights, or heavyweights who shall have beaten any of the above subsequent to the date hereof. If in any boxing contest engaged in by Carnera prior to the holding of the First Contest, he shall lose the same, the Garden shall at its option, to be exercised by a two weeks' notice to Carnera in writing, be without further liability under the terms of this agreement to Carnera. Carnera shall not render services during the continuance of the option referred to in paragraph 8 hereof for any person, firm or corporation other than the Garden. Carnera shall, however, at all times be permitted to engage in sparring exhibitions in which no decision is rendered and in which the heavy weight championship title is not at stake, and in which Carnera boxes not more than four rounds with any one opponent.'...*

Thereafter the defendant, without the permission of the plaintiff, written or otherwise, made a contract to engage in a boxing contest with the Sharkey mentioned in paragraph 9 of the agreement above quoted, and by the terms thereof the contest was to take place before the first contest mentioned in the defendant's contract with the plaintiff was to be held.

The plaintiff then brought this suit to restrain the defendant from carrying out his contract to box Sharkey, and obtained the preliminary injunction order, from which this appeal was taken. Jurisdiction is based on diversity of citizenship and the required amount is involved.

The District Court has found on affidavits which adequately show it that the defendant's services are unique and extraordinary. A negative covenant in a contract for such personal services is

enforceable by injunction where the damages for a breach are incapable of ascertainment.

[Citations]

The defendant points to what is claimed to be lack of consideration for his negative promise, in that the contract is inequitable and contains no agreement to employ him. It is true that there is no promise in so many words to employ the defendant to box in a contest with Stribling or Schmeling, but the agreement read as a whole binds the plaintiff to do just that, provided either Stribling or Schmeling becomes the contestant as the result of the match between them and can be induced to box the defendant. The defendant has agreed to 'render services as a boxer' for the plaintiff exclusively, and the plaintiff has agreed to pay him a definite percentage of the gate receipts as his compensation for so doing. The promise to employ the defendant to enable him to earn the compensation agreed upon is implied to the same force and effect as though expressly stated. [Citations] The fact that the plaintiff's implied promise is conditioned, with respect to the contest with the winner of the Stribling-Schmeling match, upon the consent of that performer, does not show any failure of consideration for the defendant's promise, [Citation].

As we have seen, the contract is valid and enforceable. It contains a restrictive covenant which may be given effect. Whether a preliminary injunction shall be issued under such circumstances rests in the sound discretion of the court. [Citation] The District Court, in its discretion, did issue the preliminary injunction....

Order affirmed.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the plaintiff not want the defendant to engage in any boxing matches until and except the ones arranged by the plaintiff?
2. What assertion did the defendant make as to why his promise was not enforceable? Why wasn't that argument accepted by the court?
3. If the defendant had refused to engage in a boxing match arranged by the plaintiff, would a court force him to do what he had promised?

#### Limitation on Damages: Mitigation of Damages

*Shirley MacLaine Parker v. Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation*

Burke, Justice.

Defendant Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation appeals from a summary judgment granting to plaintiff the recovery of agreed compensation under a written contract for her services as an actress in a motion picture. As will appear, we have concluded that the trial court correctly ruled in plaintiff's favor and that the judgment should be affirmed.

Plaintiff is well known as an actress...Under the contract, dated August 6, 1965, plaintiff was to play the female lead in defendant's contemplated production of a motion picture entitled "Bloomer Girl." The contract provided that defendant would pay plaintiff a minimum "guaranteed compensation" of \$53,571.42 per week for 14 weeks commencing May 23, 1966, for a total of \$750,000 [about \$5,048,000 in 2010 dollars]. Prior to May 1966 defendant decided not to produce the picture and by a letter dated April 4, 1966, it notified plaintiff of that decision and that it would not "comply with our obligations to you under" the written contract.

By the same letter and with the professed purpose "to avoid any damage to you," defendant instead offered to employ plaintiff as the leading actress in another film tentatively entitled "Big Country, Big Man" (hereinafter, "Big Country"). The compensation offered was identical, as were 31 of the 34 numbered provisions or articles of the original contract. Unlike "Bloomer Girl," however, which was to have been a musical production, "Big Country" was a dramatic "western type" movie. "Bloomer Girl" was to have been filmed in California; "Big Country" was to be produced in Australia. Also, certain terms in the proffered contract varied from those of the original. Plaintiff was given one week within which to accept; she did not and the offer lapsed. Plaintiff then commenced this action seeking recovery of the agreed guaranteed compensation.

The complaint sets forth two causes of action. The first is for money due under the contract; the second, based upon the same allegations as the first, is for damages resulting from defendant's breach of contract. Defendant in its answer admits the existence and validity of the contract, that plaintiff complied with all the conditions, covenants and promises and stood ready to complete the performance, and that defendant breached and "anticipatorily repudiated" the contract. It denies, however, that any money is due to plaintiff either under the contract or as a

result of its breach, and pleads as an affirmative defense to both causes of action plaintiff's allegedly deliberate failure to mitigate damages, asserting that she unreasonably refused to accept its offer of the leading role in "Big Country."

Plaintiff moved for summary judgment...[T]he motion was granted...for \$750,000 plus interest...in plaintiff's favor. This appeal by defendant followed....

The general rule is that the measure of recovery by a wrongfully discharged employee is the amount of salary agreed upon for the period of service, less the amount which the employer affirmatively proves the employee has earned or with reasonable effort might have earned from other employment. [Citation] However, before projected earnings from other employment opportunities not sought or accepted by the discharged employee can be applied in mitigation, the employer must show that the other employment was comparable, or substantially similar, to that of which the employee has been deprived; the employee's rejection of or failure to seek other available employment of a different or inferior kind may not be resorted to in order to mitigate damages. [Citations]

In the present case defendant has raised no issue of reasonableness of efforts by plaintiff to obtain other employment; the sole issue is whether plaintiff's refusal of defendant's substitute offer of "Big Country" may be used in mitigation. Nor, if the "Big Country" offer was of employment different or inferior when compared with the original "Bloomer Girl" employment, is there an issue as to whether or not plaintiff acted reasonably in refusing the substitute offer. Despite defendant's arguments to the contrary, no case cited or which our research has discovered holds or suggests that reasonableness is an element of a wrongfully discharged employee's option to reject, or fail to seek, different or inferior employment lest the possible earnings therefrom be charged against him in mitigation of damages.

Applying the foregoing rules to the record in the present case, with all intendments in favor of the party opposing the summary judgment motion—here, defendant—it is clear that the trial court correctly ruled that plaintiff's failure to accept defendant's tendered substitute employment could not be applied in mitigation of damages because the offer of the "Big Country" lead was of employment both different and inferior, and that no factual dispute was presented on that issue. The mere circumstance that "Bloomer Girl" was to be a musical review

calling upon plaintiff's talents as a dancer as well as an actress, and was to be produced in the City of Los Angeles, whereas "Big Country" was a straight dramatic role in a "Western Type" story taking place in an opal mine in Australia, demonstrates the difference in kind between the two employments; the female lead as a dramatic actress in a western style motion picture can by no stretch of imagination be considered the equivalent of or substantially similar to the lead in a song-and-dance production.

Additionally, the substitute "Big Country" offer proposed to eliminate or impair the director and screenplay approvals accorded to plaintiff under the original "Bloomer Girl" contract, and thus constituted an offer of inferior employment. No expertise or judicial notice is required in order to hold that the deprivation or infringement of an employee's rights held under an original employment contract converts the available "other employment" relied upon by the employer to mitigate damages, into inferior employment which the employee need not seek or accept.

[Citation]

In view of the determination that defendant failed to present any facts showing the existence of a factual issue with respect to its sole defense—plaintiff's rejection of its substitute employment offer in mitigation of damages—we need not consider plaintiff's further contention that for various reasons, including the provisions of the original contract set forth in footnote 1, Ante, plaintiff was excused from attempting to mitigate damages.

The judgment is affirmed.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did Ms. MacLaine refuse to accept the employment opportunity offered by the defendant?
2. Why did the defendant think it should not be liable for any damages as a result of its admitted breach of the original contract?
3. Who has the burden of proof on mitigation issues—who has to show that no mitigation occurred?
4. Express the controlling rule of law out of this case.

## 16.7 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Contract remedies serve to protect three different interests: an expectation interest (the benefit bargained for), a reliance interest (loss suffered by relying on the contract), and a restitution interest (benefit conferred on the promisor). In broad terms, specific performance addresses the expectation interest, monetary damages address all three, and restitution addresses the restitution interest.

The two general categories of remedies are legal and equitable. In the former category are compensatory, consequential, incidental, nominal, liquidated, and (rarely) punitive damages. In the latter category—if legal remedies are inadequate—are specific performance, injunction, and restitution.

There are some limitations or restrictions on the availability of damages: they must pass the tests of foreseeability and certainty. They must be reasonably mitigated, if possible. And liquidated damages must be reasonable—not a penalty. In some situations, a person can lose the remedy of rescission—the power to avoid a contract—when the rights of third parties intervene. In some cases a person is required to make an election of remedies: to choose one remedy among several, and when the one is chosen, the others are not available any more.

## EXERCISES

1. Owner of an auto repair shop hires Contractor to remodel his shop but does not mention that two days after the scheduled completion date, Owner is to receive five small US Army personnel carrier trucks for service, with a three-week deadline to finish the job and turn the trucks over to the army. The contract between Owner and the army has a liquidated damages clause calling for \$300 a day for every day trucks are not operable after the deadline. Contractor is five days late in finishing the remodel. Can Owner claim the \$1,500 as damages against Contractor as a consequence of the latter's tardy completion of the contract? Explain.
2. Inventor devised an electronic billiard table that looked like a regular billiard table, but when balls dropped into the pocket, various electronic lights and scorekeeping devices activated. Inventor contracted with Contractor to manufacture ten prototypes and paid him \$50,000 in advance, on a total owing of \$100,000 (\$10,000 for each completed table). After the tables were built to accommodate electronic fittings, Inventor repudiated the contract. Contractor

broke the ten tables up, salvaged \$1,000 of wood for other billiard tables, and used the rest for firewood. The ten intact tables, without electronics, could have been sold for \$500 each (\$5,000 total). Contractor then sued Inventor for the profit Contractor would have made had Inventor not breached. To what, if anything, is Contractor entitled by way of damages and why?

3. Calvin, a promising young basketball and baseball player, signed a multiyear contract with a professional basketball team after graduating from college. After playing basketball for one year, he decided he would rather play baseball and breached his contract with the basketball team. What remedy could the team seek?
4. Theresa leased a one-bedroom apartment from Landlady for one year at \$500 per month. After three months, she vacated the apartment. A family of five wanted to rent the apartment, but Landlady refused. Three months later—six months into what would have been Theresa’s term—Landlady managed to rent the apartment to Tenant for \$400 per month. How much does Theresa owe, and why?

5. Plaintiff, a grocery store, contracted with Defendant, a burglar alarm company, for Defendant to send guards to Plaintiff's premises and to notify the local police if the alarm was activated. The contract had this language: “It is agreed that the Contractor is not an insurer, that the payments here are based solely on the value of the service in the maintenance of the system described, that it is impracticable and extremely difficult to fix the actual damages, if any, which may proximately result from a failure to perform its services, and in case of failure to perform such services and a resulting loss, its liability shall be limited to \$500 as liquidated damages, and not as a penalty, and this liability shall be exclusive.”

A burglary took place and the alarm was activated, but Defendant failed to respond promptly. The burglars left with \$330,000. Is the liquidated damages clause—the limitation on Plaintiff’s right to recover—valid?

6. The decedent, father of the infant Plaintiff, was killed in a train accident. Testimony showed he was a good and reliable man. Through a representative, the decedent’s surviving child, age five, recovered judgment against the railroad (Defendant). Defendant objected to expert

testimony that inflation would probably continue at a minimum annual rate of 5 percent for the next thirteen years (until the boy attained his majority), which was used to calculate the loss in support money caused by the father's death. The calculations, Defendant said, were unreasonably speculative and uncertain, and damages must be proven with reasonable certainty. Is the testimony valid?

7. Plaintiff produced and directed a movie for Defendant, but contrary to their agreement, Plaintiff was not given screen credit in the edited film (his name was not shown). The film was screened successfully for nearly four years. Plaintiff then sued (1) for damages for loss of valuable publicity or advertising because his screen credits were omitted for the years and (2) for an injunction against future injuries. The jury awarded Plaintiff \$25,000 on the first count. On the second count, the court held Plaintiff should be able to "modify the prints in his personal possession to include his credits." But Plaintiff appealed, claiming that Defendant still had many unmodified prints in its possession and that showing those films would cause future damages. What remedy is available to Plaintiff? <sup>[1]</sup>
8. In 1929 Kerr Steamship Company, Inc. (Plaintiff), delivered to Defendant, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), a fairly long telegram—in code—to be transmitted to Manila, Philippine Islands, with instructions about loading one of Kerr's ships. By mistake, the telegram was mislaid and not delivered. As a result of the failure to transmit it, the cargo was not loaded and the freight was lost in an amount of \$6,675.29 [about \$84,000 in 2010 dollars], profit that would have been earned if the message had been carried. Plaintiff said that because the telegram was long and because the sender was a ship company, RCA personnel should have known it was important information dealing with shipping and therefore RCA should be liable for the consequential damages flowing from the failure to send it. Is RCA liable?
9. Defendant offered to buy a house from Plaintiff. She represented, verbally and in writing, that she had \$15,000 to \$20,000 of equity in another house and would pay this amount to Plaintiff after selling it. She knew, however, that she had no such equity. Relying on these intentionally fraudulent representations, Plaintiff accepted Defendant's offer to buy, and the parties entered into a land contract. After taking occupancy, Defendant failed to make any of



the contract payments. Plaintiff's investigation then revealed the fraud. Based on the fraud, Plaintiff sought rescission, ejectment, and recovery for five months of lost use of the property and out-of-pocket expenses. Defendant claimed that under the election of remedies doctrine, Plaintiff seller could not both rescind the contract and get damages for its breach. How should the court rule?

10. Buyers contracted to purchase a house being constructed by Contractor. The contract contained this clause: "Contractor shall pay to the owners or deduct from the total contract price \$100.00 per day as liquidated damages for each day after said date that the construction is not completed and accepted by the Owners and Owners shall not arbitrarily withhold acceptance." Testimony established the rental value of the home at \$400–\$415 per month. Is the clause enforceable?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Contract remedies protect

- a. a restitution interest
- b. a reliance interest
- c. an expectation interest
- d. all of the above

A restitution interest is

- a. the benefit for which the promisee bargained
- b. the loss suffered by relying on the contract
- c. that which restores any benefit one party conferred on the other
- d. none of the above

When breach of contract caused no monetary loss, the plaintiff is entitled to

- a. special damages
- b. nominal damages
- c. consequential damages
- d. no damages

Damages attributable to losses that flow from events that do not occur in the ordinary course of events are

- a. incidental damages
- b. liquidated damages
- c. consequential damages
- d. punitive damages

Restitution is available

- a. when the contract was avoided because of incapacity
- b. when the other party breached
- c. when the party seeking restitution breached
- d. all of the above

#### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. d
- 2. c
- 3. b
- 4. c
- 5. d

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[1] *Tamarind Lithography Workshop v. Sanders*, 193 Cal. Rptr. 409 (Calif. Ct. App., 1983).

# Chapter 17

## Introduction to Sales and Leases

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. Why the law of commercial transactions is separate from the common law
2. What is meant by “commercial transactions” and how the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) deals with them in general
3. The scope of Article 2, Article 2A, and the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods
4. What obligations similar to the common law’s are imposed on parties to a UCC contract, and what obligations different from the common law’s are imposed
5. The difference between a consumer lease and a finance lease

## 17.1 Commercial Transactions: the Uniform Commercial Code

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why there is a separate body of law governing commercial transactions.
2. Be aware of the scope of the Uniform Commercial Code.
3. Have a sense of this text’s presentation of the law of commercial transactions.

### History of the UCC

In [Chapter 8 "Introduction to Contract Law"](#) we introduced the Uniform Commercial Code. As we noted, the UCC has become a national law, adopted in every state—although Louisiana has not enacted Article 2, and differences in the law exist from state to state. Of all the uniform laws related to commercial transactions, the UCC is by far the most successful, and its history goes back to feudal times.

In a mostly agricultural, self-sufficient society there is little need for trade, and almost all law deals with things related to land (real estate): its sale, lease, and devising (transmission of ownership by inheritance); services performed on the land; and damages to the land or to things related to it or to its productive capacity (torts). Such trade as existed in England before the late

fourteenth century was dominated by foreigners. But after the pandemic of the Black Death in 1348–49 (when something like 30 percent to 40 percent of the English population died), the self-sufficient feudal manors began to break down. There was a shortage of labor. People could move off the manors to find better work, and no longer tied immediately to the old estates, they migrated to towns. Urban centers—cities—began to develop. Urbanization inevitably reached the point where citizens' needs could not be met locally. Enterprising people recognized that some places had a surplus of a product and that other places were in need of that surplus and had a surplus of their own to exchange for it. So then, by necessity, people developed the means to transport the surpluses. Enter ships, roads, some medium of exchange, standardized weights and measures, accountants, lawyers, and rules governing merchandising. And enter merchants.

*The power of merchants was expressed through franchises obtained from the government which entitled merchants to create their own rules of law and to enforce these rules through their own courts. Franchises to hold fairs [retail exchanges] were temporary; but the franchises of the staple cities, empowered to deal in certain basic commodities [and to have mercantile courts], were permanent.... Many trading towns had their own adaptations of commercial law.... The seventeenth century movement toward national governments resulted in a decline of separate mercantile franchises and their courts. The staple towns... had outlived their usefulness. When the law merchant became incorporated into a national system of laws enforced by national courts of general jurisdiction, the local codes were finally extinguished. But national systems of law necessarily depended upon the older codes for their stock of ideas and on the changing customs of merchants for new developments.*<sup>[1]</sup>

When the American colonies declared independence from Britain, they continued to use British law, including the laws related to commercial transactions. By the early twentieth century, the states had inconsistent rules, making interstate commerce difficult and problematic. Several uniform laws affecting commercial transactions were floated in the late nineteenth century, but few were widely adopted. In 1942, the American Law Institute (ALI)<sup>[2]</sup> hired staff to begin work on a rationalized, simplified, and harmonized national body of modern commercial law. The

ALI's first draft of the UCC was completed in 1951. The UCC was adopted by Pennsylvania two years later, and other states followed in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the leasing of personal property became a significant factor in commercial transactions, and although the UCC had some sections that were applicable to leases, the law regarding the sale of goods was inadequate to address leases. Article 2A governing the leasing of goods was approved by the ALI in 1987. It essentially repeats Article 2 but applies to leases instead of sales. In 2001, amendments to Article 1—which applies to the entire UCC—were proposed and subsequently have been adopted by over half the states. No state has yet adopted the modernizing amendments to Article 2 and 2A that the ALI proposed in 2003.

That's the short history of why the body of commercial transaction law is separate from the common law.

### **Scope of the UCC and This Text's Presentation of the UCC**

The UCC embraces the law of commercial transactions, a term of some ambiguity. A commercial transaction may seem to be a series of separate transactions; it may include, for example, the making of a contract for the sale of goods, the signing of a check, the endorsement of the check, the shipment of goods under a bill of lading, and so on. However, the UCC presupposes that each of these transactions is a facet of one single transaction: the lease or sale of, and payment for, goods. The code deals with phases of this transaction from start to finish. These phases are organized according to the following articles:

- Sales (Article 2)
- Leases (Article 2A)
- Commercial Paper (Article 3)
- Bank Deposits and Collections (Article 4)
- Funds Transfers (Article 4A)
- Letters of Credit (Article 5)
- Bulk Transfers (Article 6)
- Warehouse Receipts, Bills of Lading, and Other Documents of Title (Article 7)
- Investment Securities (Article 8)

- Secured Transactions; Sales of Accounts and Chattel Paper (Article 9)

Although the UCC comprehensively covers commercial transactions, it does not deal with every aspect of commercial law. Among the subjects not covered are the sale of real property, mortgages, insurance contracts, suretyship transactions (unless the surety is party to a negotiable instrument), and bankruptcy. Moreover, common-law principles of contract law that were examined in previous chapters continue to apply to many transactions covered in a particular way by the UCC. These principles include capacity to contract, misrepresentation, coercion, and mistake. Many federal laws supersede the UCC; these include the Bills of Lading Act, the Consumer Credit Protection Act, the warranty provisions of the Magnuson-Moss Act, and other regulatory statutes.

We follow the general outlines of the UCC in this chapter and in [Chapter 18 "Title and Risk of Loss"](#) and [Chapter 19 "Performance and Remedies"](#). In this chapter, we cover the law governing sales (Article 2) and make some reference to leases (Article 2A), though space constraints preclude an exhaustive analysis of leases. The use of documents of title to ship and store goods is closely related to sales, and so we cover documents of title (Article 7) as well as the law of bailments in [Chapter 21 "Bailments and the Storage, Shipment, and Leasing of Goods"](#).

We now turn our attention to the sale—the first facet, and the cornerstone, of the commercial transaction.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

In the development of the English legal system, commercial transactions were originally of such little importance that the rules governing them were left to the merchants themselves. They had their own courts and adopted their own rules based on their customary usage. By the 1700s, the separate courts had been absorbed into the English common law, but the distinct rules applicable to commercial transactions remained and have carried over to the modern UCC. The UCC treats commercial transactions in phases, and this text basically traces those phases.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why were medieval merchants compelled to develop their own rules about commercial transactions?
2. Why was the UCC developed, and when was the period of its initial adoption by states?

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[1] Frederick G. Kempin Jr., *Historical Introduction to Anglo-American Law* (Eagan, MN: West, 1973), 217–18, 219–20, 221.

[2] American Law Institute, “ALI Overview,” accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.ali.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=about.overview>.

## 17.2 Introduction to Sales and Lease Law, and the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand that the law of sales not only incorporates many aspects of common-law contract but also addresses some distinct issues that do not occur in contracts for the sale of real estate or services.
2. Understand the scope of Article 2 and the definitions of *sale* and *goods*.
3. Learn how courts deal with hybrid situations: mixtures of the sale of goods and of real estate, mixtures of goods and services.
4. Recognize the scope of Article 2A and the definitions of *lease*, *consumer lease*, and *finance lease*.
5. Learn about the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods and why it is relevant to our discussion of Article 2.

### Scope of Articles 2 and 2A and Definitions

In dealing with any statute, it is of course very important to understand the statute’s scope or coverage.

Article 2 does not govern all commercial transactions, only sales. It does not cover all sales, only the sale of goods. Article 2A governs leases, but only of personal property (goods), not real estate. The Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG)—kind of an international Article 2—“applies to contracts of sale of goods between parties whose places of business are in different States [i.e., countries]” (CISG, Article 1). So we need to consider the definitions of *sale*, *goods*, and *lease*.

## Definition of *Sale*

A sale “consists in the passing of title from the seller to the buyer for a price.” <sup>[1]</sup>

Sales are distinguished from gifts, bailments, leases, and secured transactions. Article 2 sales should be distinguished from gifts, bailments, leases, and secured transactions. A gift is the transfer of title without consideration, and a “contract” for a gift of goods is unenforceable under the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) or otherwise (with some exceptions). A bailment is the transfer of possession but not title or use; parking your car in a commercial garage often creates a bailment with the garage owner. A lease (see the formal definition later in this chapter) is a fixed-term arrangement for possession and use of something—computer equipment, for example—and does not transfer title. In a secured transaction, the owner-debtor gives a security interest in collateral to a creditor that allows the creditor to repossess the collateral if the owner defaults.

## Definition of *Goods*

Even if the transaction is considered a sale, the question still remains whether the contract concerns the sale of goods. Article 2 applies only to goods; sales of real estate and services are governed by non-UCC law. Section 2-105(1) of the UCC defines goods as “all things...which are movable at the time of identification to the contract for sale other than the money in which the price is to be paid.” Money can be considered goods subject to Article 2 if it is the object of the contract—for example, foreign currency.

In certain cases, the courts have difficulty applying this definition because the item in question can also be viewed as realty or service. Most borderline cases raise one of two general questions:

1. Is the contract for the sale of the real estate, or is it for the sale of goods?
2. Is the contract for the sale of goods, or is it for services?

## Real Estate versus Goods

The dilemma is this: A landowner enters into a contract to sell crops, timber, minerals, oil, or gas. If the items have already been detached from the land—for example, timber has been cut and the seller agrees to sell logs—they are goods, and the UCC governs the sale. But what if, at the time the contract is made, the items are still part of the land? Is a contract for the sale of uncut timber governed by the UCC or by real estate law?



The UCC governs under either of two circumstances: (1) if the contract calls for the seller to sever the items or (2) if the contract calls for the buyer to sever the items and if the goods can be severed without material harm to the real estate. <sup>[2]</sup> The second provision specifically includes growing crops and timber. By contrast, the law of real property governs if the buyer’s severance of the items will materially harm the real estate; for example, the removal of minerals, oil, gas, and structures by the buyer will cause the law of real property to govern. (See /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch17\_s02\_s01\_s02\_s01\_f01.)

*Figure 17.1 Governing Law*

UCC	Real Estate Law
1. Severed by buyer without material harm (for example, removal of crops and timber) 2. Severed by seller	Severed by buyer, causes material harm (for example, removal of minerals and structures)

### Goods versus Services

Distinguishing goods from services is the other major difficulty that arises in determining the nature of the object of a sales contract. The problem: how can goods and services be separated in contracts calling for the seller to deliver a combination of goods and services? That issue is examined in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch17\_s05\_s01 (*Pittsley v. Houser*), where the court applied the common “predominant factor” (also sometimes “predominate purpose” or “predominant thrust”) test—that is, it asked whether the transaction was predominantly a contract for goods or for services. However, the results of this analysis are not always consistent. Compare *Epstein v. Giannattasio*, in which the court held that no sale of goods had been made because the plaintiff received a treatment in which the cosmetics were only incidentally used, with *Newmark v. Gimble’s, Inc.*, in which the court said “[i]f the permanent wave lotion were sold...for home consumption...unquestionably an implied warranty of fitness for that purpose would have been an integral incident of the sale.” <sup>[3]</sup> The New Jersey court rejected the defendant’s argument that

by actually applying the lotion to the patron's head, the salon lessened the liability it otherwise would have had if it had simply sold her the lotion.

In two areas, state legislatures have taken the goods-versus-services issue out of the courts' hands and resolved the issue through legislation. Food sold in restaurants is a sale of goods, whether it is to be consumed on or off the premises. Blood transfusions (really the sale of blood) in hospitals have been legislatively declared a service, not a sale of goods, in more than forty states, thus relieving the suppliers and hospitals of an onerous burden for liability from selling blood tainted with the undetectable hepatitis virus.

### **Definition of *Lease***

Section 2A-103(j) of the UCC defines a lease as “a transfer of the right to possession and use of goods for a term in return for consideration.” The lessor is the one who transfers the right to possession to the lessee. If Alice rents a party canopy from Equipment Supply, Equipment Supply is the lessor and Alice is the lessee.

### **Two Types of Leases**

The UCC recognizes two kinds of leases: consumer leases and finance leases. A consumer lease is used when a lessor leases goods to “an individual...primarily for personal, family, or household purposes,” where total lease payments are less than \$25,000. <sup>[4]</sup> The UCC grants some special protections to consumer lessees. A finance lease is used when a lessor “acquires the goods or the right to [them]” and leases them to the lessee. <sup>[5]</sup> The person from whom the lessor acquires the goods is a supplier, and the lessor is simply financing the deal. Jack wants to lease a boom lift (personnel aerial lift, also known as a cherry picker) for a commercial roof renovation. First Bank agrees to buy (or itself lease) the machine from Equipment Supply and in turn lease it to Jack. First Bank is the lessor, Jack is the lessee, and Equipment Supply is the supplier.

### **International Sales of Goods**

The UCC is, of course, American law, adopted by the states of the United States. The reason it has been adopted is because of the inconvenience of doing interstate business when each state had a different law for the sale of goods. The same problem presents itself in international transactions. As a result, the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law developed an international equivalent of the UCC, the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale

of Goods (CISG), first mentioned in/6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch08. It was promulgated in Vienna in 1980. As of July 2010, the convention (a type of treaty) has been adopted by seventy-six countries, including the United States and all its major trading partners except the United Kingdom. One commentator opined on why the United Kingdom is an odd country out: it is “perhaps because of pride in its longstanding common law legal imperialism or in its long-treasured feeling of the superiority of English law to anything else that could even challenge it.” <sup>[6]</sup>

The CISG is interesting for two reasons. First, assuming globalization continues, the CISG will become increasingly important around the world as the law governing international sale contracts. Its preamble states, “The adoption of uniform rules which govern contracts for the international sale of goods and take into account the different social, economic and legal systems [will] contribute to the removal of legal barriers in international trade and promote the development of international trade.” Second, it is interesting to compare the legal culture informing the common law to that informing the CISG, which is not of the English common-law tradition. Throughout our discussion of Article 2, we will make reference to the CISG, the complete text of which is available online. <sup>[7]</sup> References to the CISG are in bold.

**As to the CISG’s scope, CISG Article 1 provides that it “applies to contracts of sale of goods between parties whose places of business are in different States [i.e., countries]; it “governs only the formation of the contract of sale and the rights and obligations of the seller and the buyer arising from such a contract,” and has nothing to do “with the validity of the contract or of any of its provisions or of any usage” (Article 4). It excludes sales (a) of goods bought for personal, family or household use, unless the seller, at any time before or at the conclusion of the contract, neither knew nor ought to have known that the goods were bought for any such use; (b) by auction; (c) on execution or otherwise by authority of law; (d) of stocks, shares, investment securities, negotiable instruments or money; (e) of ships, vessels, hovercraft or aircraft; (f) of electricity (Article 2).**

**Parties are free to exclude the application of the Convention or, with a limited exception, vary the effect of any of its provisions (Article 6).**

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Article 2 of the UCC deals with the sale of goods. *Sale* and *goods* have defined meanings. Article 2A of the UCC deals with the leasing of goods. *Lease* has a defined meaning, and the UCC recognizes two types of leases: consumer leases and finance leases. Similar in purpose to the UCC of the United States is the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods, which has been widely adopted around the world.

## EXERCISES

1. Why is there a separate body of statutory law governing contracts for the sale of goods as opposed to the common law, which governs contracts affecting real estate and services?
2. What is a consumer lease? A finance lease?
3. What is the Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods?

[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-106.

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-107.

[3] *Epstein v. Giannattasio* 197 A.2d 342 (Conn. 1963); *Newmark v. Gimble's, Inc.*, 258 A.2d 697 (N.J. 1969).

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2A-103(e).

[5] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2A-103(g).

[6] A. F. M. Maniruzzaman, quoted by Albert H. Kritzer, Pace Law School Institute of International Commercial Law, *CISG: Table of Contracting States*, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.cisg.law.pace.edu/cisg/countries/cntries.html>.

[7] Pace Law School, "United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (1980) [CISG]" *CISG Database*, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.cisg.law.pace.edu/cisg/text/treaty.html>.

## 17.3 Sales Law Compared with Common-Law Contracts and the CISG

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Recognize the differences and similarities among the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), common-law contracts, and the CISG as related to the following contract issues:

- Offer and acceptance
- Revocability
- Consideration
- The requirement of a writing and contractual interpretation (form and meaning)

Sales law deals with the sale of goods. Sales law is a special type of contract law, but the common law informs much of Article 2 of the UCC—with some differences, however. Some of the similarities and differences were discussed in previous chapters that covered common-law contracts, but a review here is appropriate, and we can refer briefly to the CISG’s treatment of similar issues.

## **Mutual Assent: Offer and Acceptance**

### **Definiteness of the Offer**

The common law requires more definiteness than the UCC. Under the UCC, a contractual obligation may arise even if the agreement has open terms. Under Section 2-204(3), such an agreement for sale is not voidable for indefiniteness, as in the common law, if the parties have intended to make a contract and the court can find a reasonably certain basis for giving an appropriate remedy. Perhaps the most important example is the open price term.

The open price term is covered in detail in Section 2-305. At common law, a contract that fails to specify price or a means of accurately ascertaining price will almost always fail. This is not so under the UCC provision regarding open price terms. If the contract says nothing about price, or if it permits the parties to agree on price but they fail to agree, or if it delegates the power to fix price to a third person who fails to do so, then Section 2-305(1) “plugs” the open term and decrees that the price to be awarded is a “reasonable price at the time for delivery.” When one party is permitted to fix the price, Section 2-305(2) requires that it be fixed in good faith.

However, if the parties *intend* not to be bound unless the price is first fixed or agreed on, and it is not fixed or agreed on, then no contract results. <sup>[1]</sup>

Another illustration of the open term is in regard to particulars of performance. Section 2-311(1) provides that a contract for sale of goods is not invalid just because it leaves to one of the parties the power to specify a particular means of performing. However, “any such specification must be

made in good faith and within limits set by commercial reasonableness.” (Performance will be covered in greater detail in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch18.)

The CISG (Article 14) provides the following: **“A proposal for concluding a contract addressed to one or more specific persons constitutes an offer if it is sufficiently definite and indicates the intention of the offeror to be bound in case of acceptance. A proposal is sufficiently definite if it indicates the goods and expressly or implicitly fixes or makes provision for determining the quantity and the price.”**

### Acceptance Varying from Offer: Battle of the Forms

The concepts of offer and acceptance are basic to any agreement, but the UCC makes a change from the common law in its treatment of an acceptance that varies from the offer (this was discussed in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch08). At common law, where the “mirror image rule” reigns, if the acceptance differs from the offer, no contract results. If that were the rule for sales contracts, with the pervasive use of form contracts—where each side’s form tends to favor that side—it would be very problematic.

Section 2-207 of the UCC attempts to resolve this “battle of the forms” by providing that additional terms or conditions in an acceptance operate as such unless the acceptance is conditioned on the offeror’s consent to the new or different terms. The new terms are construed as offers but are automatically incorporated in any contract between merchants for the sale of goods unless “(a) the offer expressly limits acceptance to the terms of the offer; (b) [the terms] materially alter it; or (c) notification of objection to them has already been given or is given within a reasonable time after notice of them is received.” In any case, Section 2-207 goes on like this: “Conduct by both parties which recognizes the existence of a contract is sufficient to establish a contract for sale although the writings of the parties do not otherwise establish a contract. In such case the terms of the particular contract consist of those terms on which the writings of the parties agree, together with any supplementary terms incorporated under any other provisions of this Act.” <sup>[2]</sup>

***As to international contracts, the CISG says this about an acceptance that varies from the offer (Article 19), and it's pretty much the same as the UCC:***

***(1) A reply to an offer which purports to be an acceptance but contains additions, limitations or other modifications is a rejection of the offer and constitutes a counter-offer.***

***(2) However, a reply to an offer which purports to be an acceptance but contains additional or different terms which do not materially alter the terms of the offer constitutes an acceptance, unless the offeror, without undue delay, objects orally to the discrepancy or dispatches a notice to that effect. If he does not so object, the terms of the contract are the terms of the offer with the modifications contained in the acceptance.***

***(3) Additional or different terms relating, among other things, to the price, payment, quality and quantity of the goods, place and time of delivery, extent of one party's liability to the other or the settlement of disputes are considered to alter the terms of the offer materially.***

### **Revocation of Offer**

Under both common law and the UCC, an offer can be revoked at any time prior to acceptance unless the offeror has given the offeree an option (supported by consideration); under the UCC, an offer can be revoked at any time prior to acceptance unless a merchant gives a “firm offer” (for which no consideration is needed). The CISG (Article 17) provides that an offer is revocable before it is accepted unless, however, “it indicates...that it is irrevocable” or if the offeree reasonably relied on its irrevocability.

### **Reality of Consent**

There is no particular difference between the common law and the UCC on issues of duress, misrepresentation, undue influence, or mistake. As for international sales contracts, the CISG provides (Article 4(a)) that it “governs only the formation of the contract of sale and the rights and obligations of the seller and the buyer arising from such a contract and is not concerned with the validity of the contract or of any of its provisions.”

## Consideration

### The UCC

The UCC requires no consideration for modification of a sales contract made in good faith; at common law, consideration is required to modify a contract. <sup>[3]</sup> The UCC requires no consideration if one party wants to forgive another's breach by written waiver or renunciation signed and delivered by the aggrieved party; under common law, consideration is required to discharge a breaching party. <sup>[4]</sup> The UCC requires no consideration for a "firm offer"—a writing signed by a merchant promising to hold an offer open for some period of time; at common law an option requires consideration. (Note, however, the person can give an option under either common law or the code.)

**Under the CISG (Article 29), "A contract may be modified or terminated by the mere agreement of the parties." No consideration is needed.**

### Form and Meaning

#### Requirement of a Writing

The common law has a Statute of Frauds, and so does the UCC. It requires a writing to enforce a contract for the sale of goods worth \$500 or more, with some exceptions, as discussed in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch13. <sup>[5]</sup>

**The CISG provides (Article 11), "A contract of sale need not be concluded in or evidenced by writing and is not subject to any other requirement as to form. It may be proved by any means, including witnesses." But Article 29 provides, "A contract in writing which contains a provision requiring any modification or termination by agreement to be in writing may not be otherwise modified or terminated by agreement."**

#### Parol Evidence

Section 2-202 of the UCC provides pretty much the same as the common law: if the parties have a writing intended to be their final agreement, it "may not be contradicted by evidence of any prior agreement or of a contemporaneous oral agreement." However, it may be explained by "course of dealing or usage of trade or by course of performance" and "by evidence of consistent additional terms."



The CISG provides (Article 8) the following: “In determining the intent of a party or the understanding a reasonable person would have had, due consideration is to be given to all relevant circumstances of the case including the negotiations, any practices which the parties have established between themselves, usages and any subsequent conduct of the parties.”

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The UCC modernizes and simplifies some common-law strictures. Under the UCC, the mirror image rule is abolished: an acceptance may sometimes differ from the offer, and the UCC can “plug” open terms in many cases. No consideration is required under the UCC to modify or terminate a contract or for a merchant’s “firm offer,” which makes the offer irrevocable according to its terms. The UCC has a Statute of Frauds analogous to the common law, and its parol evidence rule is similar as well. The CISG compares fairly closely to the UCC.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why does the UCC change the common-law mirror image rule, and how?
2. What is meant by “open terms,” and how does the UCC handle them?
3. The requirement for consideration is relaxed under the UCC compared with common law. In what circumstances is no consideration necessary under the UCC?
4. On issues so far discussed, is the CISG more aligned with the common law or with the UCC? Explain your answer.

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[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-305(4).

[2] This section of the UCC is one of the most confusing and fiercely litigated sections; Professor Grant Gilmore once called it a “miserable, bungled, patched-up job” and “arguably the greatest statutory mess of all time.” Mark E. Roszkowski, “Symposium on Revised Article 2 of the Uniform Commercial Code—Section-by-Section Analysis,” *SMU Law Review* 54 (Spring 2001): 927, 932, quoting Professor Grant Gilmore to Professor Robert Summers, Cornell University School of Law, September 10, 1980, in *Teaching Materials on Commercial and Consumer Law*, ed. Richard E. Speidel, Robert S Summers, and James J White, 3rd ed. (St. Paul, MN: West, 1981), pp. 54–55. In 2003 the UCC revisioners presented an amendment to this section in an attempt to fix Section 2-207, but no state has adopted this section’s

revision. See Commercial Law, “UCC Legislative Update,” March 2, 2010, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://ucclaw.blogspot.com/2010/03/ucc-legislative-update.html>.

[3] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-209(1).

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1–107.

[5] Proposed amendments by UCC revisioners presented in 2003 would have raised the amount of money—to take into account inflation since the mid-fifties—to \$5,000, but no state has yet adopted this amendment; Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-201.

## 17.4 General Obligations under UCC Article 2

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know that the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) imposes a general obligation to act in good faith and that it makes unconscionable contracts or parts of a contract unenforceable.
2. Recognize that though the UCC applies to all sales contracts, merchants have special obligations.
3. See that the UCC is the “default position”—that within limits, parties are free to put anything they want to in their contract.

Article 2 of the UCC of course has rules governing the obligations of parties specifically as to the offer, acceptance, performance of sales contracts, and so on. But it also imposes some general obligations on the parties. Two are called out here: one deals with unfair contract terms, and the second with obligations imposed on merchants.

### Obligation of Good-Faith Dealings in General

#### Under the UCC

Section 1-203 of the UCC provides, “Every contract or duty within this Act imposes an obligation of good faith in its performance or enforcement.” *Good faith* is defined at Section 2-103(j) as “honesty in fact and the observance of reasonable commercial standards of fair dealing.” This is pretty much the same as what is held by common law, which “imposes a duty of good faith and fair dealing upon the parties in performing and enforcing the contract.” <sup>[1]</sup>

The UCC’s good faith in “performance or enforcement” of the contract is one thing, but what if the terms of the contract itself are unfair? Under Section 2-302(1), the courts may tinker with a

contract if they determine that it is particularly unfair. The provision reads as follows: “If the court as a matter of law finds the contract or any clause of the contract to have been unconscionable at the time it was made the court may refuse to enforce the contract, or it may enforce the remainder of the contract without the unconscionable clause, or it may so limit the application of any unconscionable clause as to avoid any unconscionable result.”

The court thus has considerable flexibility. It may refuse to enforce the entire contract, strike a particular clause or set of clauses, or limit the application of a particular clause or set of clauses. And what does “unconscionable” mean? The UCC provides little guidance on this crucial question. According to Section 2-302(1), the test is “whether, in the light of the general commercial background and the commercial needs of the particular trade or case, the clauses involved are so one-sided as to be unconscionable under the circumstances existing at the time of the making of the contract....The principle is one of the prevention of oppression and unfair surprise and not of disturbance of allocation of risks because of superior bargaining power.”

The definition is somewhat circular. For the most part, judges have had to develop the concept with little help from the statutory language. Unconscionability is much like US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous statement about obscenity: “I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.” In the leading case, *Williams v. Walker-Thomas Furniture Co.* (Section 12.5.3 “Unconscionability”, set out in Chapter 12 “Legality”), Judge J. Skelly Wright attempted to develop a framework for analysis. He refined the meaning of unconscionability by focusing on “absence of meaningful choice” (often referred to as procedural unconscionability) and on terms that are “unreasonably favorable” (commonly referred to as substantive unconscionability). An example of procedural unconscionability is the salesperson who says, “Don’t worry about all that little type on the back of this form.” Substantive unconscionability is the harsh term—the provision that permits the “taking of a pound of flesh” if the contract is not honored.

Despite its fuzziness, the concept of unconscionability has had a dramatic impact on American law. In many cases, in fact, the traditional notion of *caveat emptor* (Latin for “buyer beware”) has changed to *caveat venditor* (“let the seller beware”). So important is this provision that courts in recent years have applied the doctrine in cases not involving the sale of goods.

**Under the CISG, Article 7: “Regard is to be had...to the observance of good faith in international trade.”**

## **Obligations Owed by Merchants**

### **“Merchant” Sellers**

Although the UCC applies to all sales of goods (even when you sell your used car to your neighbor), merchants often have special obligations or are governed by special rules.

### **As between Merchants**

The UCC assumes that merchants should be held to particular standards because they are more experienced and have or should have special knowledge. Rules applicable to professionals ought not apply to the casual or inexperienced buyer or seller. For example, we noted previously that the UCC relaxes the mirror image rule and provides that as “between merchants” additional terms in an acceptance become part of the contract, and we have discussed the “ten-day-reply doctrine” that says that, again “as between merchants,” a writing signed and sent to the other binds the recipient as an exception to the Statute of Frauds. <sup>[2]</sup> There are other sections of the UCC applicable “as between merchants,” too.

**Article 1 of the CISG abolishes any distinction between merchants and nonmerchants: “Neither the nationality of the parties nor the civil or commercial character of the parties or of the contract is to be taken into consideration in determining the application of this Convention.”**

### **Merchant to Nonmerchant**

In addition to duties imposed between merchants, the UCC imposes certain duties on a merchant when she sells to a nonmerchant. A merchant who sells her merchandise makes an important implied warranty of merchantability. That is, she promises that goods sold will be fit for the purpose for which such goods are normally intended. A nonmerchant makes no such promise, nor does a merchant who is not selling merchandise—for example, a supermarket selling a display case is not a “merchant” in display cases.

In *Sheeskin v. Giant Foods, Inc.*, the problem of whether a merchant made an implied warranty of merchantability was nicely presented. Mr. Seigel, the plaintiff, was carrying a six-pack carton of Coca-Cola from a display bin to his shopping cart when one or more of the bottles exploded.

He lost his footing and was injured. When he sued the supermarket and the bottler for breach of the implied warranty of fitness, the defendants denied there had been a sale: he never paid for the soda pop, thus no sale by a merchant and thus no warranty. The court said that Mr. Seigel's act of reaching for the soda to put it in his cart was a "reasonable manner of acceptance" (quoting UCC, Section 2-206(1)).<sup>[3]</sup>

### **Who Is a Merchant?**

Section 2-104(1) of the UCC defines a merchant as one "who deals in goods of the kind or otherwise by his occupation holds himself out as having knowledge or skill peculiar to the practices or goods involved in the transaction." A phrase that recurs throughout Article 2—"between merchants"—refers to any transaction in which both parties are chargeable with the knowledge or skill of merchants.<sup>[4]</sup> Not every businessperson is a merchant with respect to every possible transaction. But a person or institution normally not considered a merchant can be one under Article 2 if he employs an agent or broker who holds himself out as having such knowledge or skill. (Thus a university with a purchasing office can be a merchant with respect to transactions handled by that department.)

Determining whether a particular person operating a business is a merchant under Article 2-104 is a common problem for the courts. *Goldkist, Inc. v. Brownlee*, [Section 17.5.2 "Merchants under the UCC"](#), shows that making the determination is difficult and contentious, with significant public policy implications.

### **Obligations May Be Determined by Parties**

#### **Under the UCC**

Under the UCC, the parties to a contract are free to put into their contract pretty much anything they want. Article 1-102 states that "the effect of provisions of this Act may be varied by agreement...except that the obligations of good faith, diligence, reasonableness and care prescribed by this Act may not be disclaimed by agreement but the parties may by agreement determine the standards by which the performance of such obligations is to be measure if such standards are not manifestly unreasonable." Thus the UCC is the "default" position: if the parties want the contract to operate in a specific way, they can provide for that. If they don't put anything in their agreement about some aspect of their contract's operation, the UCC applies.

For example, if they do not state where “delivery” will occur, the UCC provides that term. (Section 2-308 says it would be at the “seller’s place of business or if he has none, his residence.”)

**Article 6 of the CISG similarly gives the parties freedom to contract. It provides, “The parties may exclude the application of this Convention or...vary the effect of any of its provisions.”**

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The UCC imposes some general obligations on parties to a sales contract. They must act in good faith, and unconscionable contracts or terms thereof will not be enforced. The UCC applies to any sale of goods, but sometimes special obligations are imposed on merchants. While the UCC imposes various general (and more specific) obligations on the parties, they are free, within limits, to make up their own contract terms and obligations; if they do not, the UCC applies. The CISG tends to follow the basic thrust of the UCC.

#### EXERCISES

1. What does the UCC say about the standard duty parties to a contract owe each other?
2. Why are merchants treated specially by the UCC in some circumstances?
3. Give an example of a merchant-to-merchant duty imposed by the UCC and of a merchant-to-nonmerchant duty.
4. What does it mean to say the UCC is the “default” contract term?

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[1] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 205.

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-205 and 2A-205.

[3] *Sheeskin v. Giant Food, Inc.*, 318 A.2d 874 (Md. Ct. App. 1974).

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-104(3).

## 17.5 Cases

### Mixed Goods and Services Contracts: The “Predominant Factor” Test

*Pittsley v. Houser*

*875 P.2d 232 (Idaho App. 1994)*

Swanstrom, J.

In September of 1988, Jane Pittsley contracted with Hilton Contract Carpet Co. (Hilton) for the installation of carpet in her home. The total contract price was \$4,402 [about \$7,900 in 2010 dollars]. Hilton paid the installers \$700 to put the carpet in Pittsley's home. Following installation, Pittsley complained to Hilton that some seams were visible, that gaps appeared, that the carpet did not lay flat in all areas, and that it failed to reach the wall in certain locations. Although Hilton made various attempts to fix the installation, by attempting to stretch the carpet and other methods, Pittsley was not satisfied with the work. Eventually, Pittsley refused any further efforts to fix the carpet. Pittsley initially paid Hilton \$3,500 on the contract, but refused to pay the remaining balance of \$902.

Pittsley later filed suit, seeking rescission of the contract, return of the \$3,500 and incidental damages. Hilton answered and counterclaimed for the balance remaining on the contract. The matter was heard by a magistrate sitting without a jury. The magistrate found that there were defects in the installation and that the carpet had been installed in an unworkmanlike manner. The magistrate also found that there was a lack of evidence on damages. The trial was continued to allow the parties to procure evidence on the amount of damages incurred by Pittsley. Following this continuance, Pittsley did not introduce any further evidence of damages, though witnesses for Hilton estimated repair costs at \$250.

Although Pittsley had asked for rescission of the contract and a refund of her money, the magistrate determined that rescission, as an equitable remedy, was only available when one party committed a breach so material that it destroyed the entire purpose of the contract. Because the only estimate of damages was for \$250, the magistrate ruled rescission would not be a proper remedy. Instead, the magistrate awarded Pittsley \$250 damages plus \$150 she expended in moving furniture prior to Hilton's attempt to repair the carpet. On the counterclaim, the magistrate awarded Hilton the \$902 remaining on the contract. Additionally, both parties had requested attorney fees in the action. The magistrate determined that both parties had prevailed and therefore awarded both parties their attorney fees.

Following this decision, Pittsley appealed to the district court, claiming that the transaction involved was governed by the Idaho Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), [Citation]. Pittsley

argued that if the UCC had been properly applied, a different result would have been reached. The district court agreed with Pittsley’s argument, reversing and remanding the case to the magistrate to make additional findings of fact and to apply the UCC to the transaction....

Hilton now appeals the decision of the district court. Hilton claims that Pittsley failed to allege or argue the UCC in either her pleadings or at trial. Even if application of the UCC was properly raised, Hilton argues that there were no defects in the goods that were the subject of the transaction, only in the installation, making application of the UCC inappropriate....

The single question upon which this appeal depends is whether the UCC is applicable to the subject transaction. If the underlying transaction involved the sale of “goods,” then the UCC would apply. If the transaction did not involve goods, but rather was for services, then application of the UCC would be erroneous.

Idaho Code § 28–2-105(1) defines “goods” as “all things (including specially manufactured goods) which are movable at the time of identification to the contract for sale....” Although there is little dispute that carpets are “goods,” the transaction in this case also involved installation, a service. Such hybrid transactions, involving both goods and services, raise difficult questions about the applicability of the UCC. Two lines of authority have emerged to deal with such situations.

The first line of authority, and the majority position, utilizes the “predominant factor” test. The Ninth Circuit, applying the Idaho Uniform Commercial Code to the subject transaction, restated the predominant factor test as:

*The test for inclusion or exclusion is not whether they are mixed, but, granting that they are mixed, whether their predominant factor, their thrust, their purpose, reasonably stated, is the rendition of service, with goods incidentally involved (e.g., contract with artist for painting) or is a transaction of sale, with labor incidentally involved (e.g., installation of a water heater in a bathroom).*

[Citations]. This test essentially involves consideration of the contract in its entirety, applying the UCC to the entire contract or not at all.

The second line of authority, which Hilton urges us to adopt, allows the contract to be severed into different parts, applying the UCC to the goods involved in the contract, but not to the non-



goods involved, including services as well as other non-goods assets and property. Thus, an action focusing on defects or problems with the goods themselves would be covered by the UCC, while a suit based on the service provided or some other non-goods aspect would not be covered by the UCC....

We believe the predominant factor test is the more prudent rule. Severing contracts into various parts, attempting to label each as goods or non-goods and applying different law to each separate part clearly contravenes the UCC's declared purpose "to simplify, clarify and modernize the law governing commercial transactions." I.C. § 28-1-102(2)(a). As the Supreme Court of Tennessee suggested in [Citation], such a rule would, in many contexts, present "difficult and in some instances insurmountable problems of proof in segregating assets and determining their respective values at the time of the original contract and at the time of resale, in order to apply two different measures of damages."

Applying the predominant factor test to the case before us, we conclude that the UCC was applicable to the subject transaction. The record indicates that the contract between the parties called for "175 yds Masterpiece # 2122-Installed" for a price of \$4319.50. There was an additional charge for removing the existing carpet. The record indicates that Hilton paid the installers \$700 for the work done in laying Pittsley's carpet. It appears that Pittsley entered into this contract for the purpose of obtaining carpet of a certain quality and color. It does not appear that the installation, either who would provide it or the nature of the work, was a factor in inducing Pittsley to choose Hilton as the carpet supplier. On these facts, we conclude that the sale of the carpet was the predominant factor in the contract, with the installation being merely incidental to the purchase. Therefore, in failing to consider the UCC, the magistrate did not apply the correct legal principles to the facts as found. We must therefore vacate the judgment and remand for further findings of fact and application of the UCC to the subject transaction.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. You may recall in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch15 the discussion of the "substantial performance" doctrine. It says that if a common-law contract is not completely, but still "substantially," performed, the nonbreaching party still owes something on the contract. And it was noted there that under the UCC, there is no such doctrine. Instead, the "perfect tender" rule

applies: the goods delivered by the seller must be exactly right. Does the distinction between the substantial performance doctrine and the perfect tender rule shed light on what difference applying the common law or the UCC would make in this case?

2. If Pittsley won on remand, what would she get?
3. In discussing the predominant factor test, the court here quotes from the Ninth Circuit, a *federal* court of appeals. What is a federal court doing making rules for a state court?

## “Merchants” under the UCC

*Goldkist, Inc. v. Brownlee*

*355 S.E.2d 773 (Ga. App. 1987)*

Beasley, J.

The question is whether the two defendant farmers, who as a partnership both grew and sold their crops, were established by the undisputed facts as not being “merchants” as a matter of law, according to the definition in [Georgia UCC 2-104(1)]....

Appellees admit that their crops are “goods” as defined in [2-105]. The record establishes the following facts. The partnership had been operating the row crop farming business for 14 years, producing peanuts, soybeans, corn, milo, and wheat on 1,350 acres, and selling the crops.

It is also established without dispute that Barney Brownlee, whose deposition was taken, was familiar with the marketing procedure of “booking” crops, which sometimes occurred over the phone between the farmer and the buyer, rather than in person, and a written contract would be signed later. He periodically called plaintiff’s agent to check the price, which fluctuated. If the price met his approval, he sold soybeans. At this time the partnership still had some of its 1982 crop in storage, and the price was rising slowly. Mr. Brownlee received a written confirmation in the mail concerning a sale of soybeans and did not contact plaintiff to contest it but simply did nothing. In addition to the agricultural business, Brownlee operated a gasoline service station....

In dispute are the facts with respect to whether or not an oral contract was made between Barney Brownlee for the partnership and agent Harrell for the buyer in a July 22 telephone conversation. The plaintiff’s evidence was that it occurred and that it was discussed soon thereafter with Brownlee at the service station on two different occasions, when he

acknowledged it, albeit reluctantly, because the market price of soybeans had risen. Mr. Brownlee denies booking the soybeans and denies the nature of the conversations at his service station with Harrell and the buyer's manager....

Whether or not the farmers in this case are "merchants" as a matter of law, which is not before us, the evidence does not demand a conclusion that they are outside of that category which is excepted from the requirement of a signed writing to bind a buyer and seller of goods....To allow a farmer who deals in crops of the kind at issue, or who otherwise comes within the definition of "merchant" in [UCC] 2-104(1), to renege on a confirmed oral booking for the sale of crops, would result in a fraud on the buyer. The farmer could abide by the booking if the price thereafter declined but reject it if the price rose; the buyer, on the other hand, would be forced to sell the crop following the booking at its peril, or wait until the farmer decides whether to honor the booking or not.

Defendants' narrow construction of "merchant" would, given the booking procedure used for the sale of farm products, thus guarantee to the farmers the best of both possible worlds (fulfill booking if price goes down after booking and reject it if price improves) and to the buyers the worst of both possible worlds. On the other hand, construing "merchants" in [UCC] 2-104(1) as not excluding as a matter of law farmers such as the ones in this case, protects them equally as well as the buyer. If the market price declines after the booking, they are assured of the higher booking price; the buyer cannot renege, as [UCC]2-201(2) would apply.

In giving this construction to the statute, we are persuaded by [Citation], supra, and the analyses provided in the following cases from other states: [Citations]. By the same token, we reject the narrow construction given in other states' cases: [Citations]. We believe this is the proper construction to give the two statutes, [UCC 2-104(1) and 2-201(2)], as taken together they are thus further branches stemming from the centuries-old simple legal idea *pacta servanda sunt*—agreements are to be kept. So construed, they evince the legislative intent to enforce the accepted practices of the marketplace among those who frequent it.

Judgment reversed. [Four justices concurred with Justice Beasley].

Benham, J., dissenting.

Because I cannot agree with the majority's conclusion that appellees are merchants, I must respectfully dissent.

...The validity of [plaintiff's] argument, that sending a confirmation within a reasonable time makes enforceable a contract even though the statute of frauds has not been satisfied, rests upon a showing that the contract was "[b]etween merchants." "Between merchants" is statutorily defined in the Uniform Commercial Code as meaning "any transaction with respect to which both parties are chargeable with the knowledge or skill of merchants" [2-104(3)]. "Merchant" means a person [1] who deals in goods of the kind or [2] otherwise by his occupation holds himself out as having knowledge or skill peculiar to the practices or goods involved in the transaction or [3] to whom such knowledge or skill may be attributed by his employment of an agent or broker or other intermediary who by his occupation holds himself out as having such knowledge or skill" [Citation]. Whether [plaintiff] is a merchant is not questioned here; the question is whether, under the facts in the record, [defendant]/farmers are merchants....

The Official Comment to § 2-104 of the U.C.C. (codified in Georgia)...states: "This Article assumes that transactions between professionals in a given field require special and clear rules which may not apply to a casual or inexperienced seller or buyer...This section lays the foundation of this policy by defining those who are to be regarded as professionals or 'merchants' and by stating when a transaction is deemed to be 'between merchants.' The term 'merchant' as defined here roots in the 'law merchant' concept of a professional in business." As noted by the Supreme Court of Kansas in [Citation] (1976): "The concept of professionalism is heavy in determining who is a merchant under the statute. The writers of the official UCC comment virtually equate professionals with merchants—the casual or inexperienced buyer or seller is not to be held to the standard set for the professional in business. The defined term 'between merchants,' used in the exception proviso to the statute of frauds, contemplates the knowledge and skill of professionals on each side of the transaction." The Supreme Court of Iowa [concurrs in cases cited]. Where, as here, the undisputed evidence is that the farmer's sole experience in the marketplace consists of selling the crops he has grown, the courts of several of our sister states have concluded that the farmer is not a merchant. [Citations]. Just because appellee Barney Brownlee kept "conversant with the current price of [soybeans] and planned to

market it to his advantage does not necessarily make him a ‘merchant.’ It is but natural for anyone who desires to sell anything he owns to negotiate and get the best price obtainable. If this would make one a ‘merchant,’ then practically anyone who sold anything would be deemed a merchant, hence would be an exception under the statute[,] and the need for a contract in writing could be eliminated in most any kind of a sale.” [Citation].

It is also my opinion that the record does not reflect that appellees “dealt” in soybeans, or that through their occupation, they held themselves out as having knowledge or skill peculiar to the practices or goods involved in the transaction. See [UCC] 2-104(1). “[A]lthough a farmer may well possess special knowledge or skill with respect to the production of a crop, the term ‘merchant,’ as used in the Uniform Commercial Code, contemplates special knowledge and skill associated with the marketplace. As to the area of farm crops, this special skill or knowledge means, for instance, special skill or knowledge associated with the operation of the commodities market. It is inconceivable that the drafters of the Uniform Commercial Code intended to place the average farmer, who merely grows his yearly crop and sells it to the local elevator, etc., on equal footing with the professional commodities dealer whose sole business is the buying and selling of farm commodities” [Citations]. If one who buys or sells something on an annual basis is a merchant, then the annual purchaser of a new automobile is a merchant who need not sign a contract for the purchase in order for the contract to be enforceable....

If these farmers are not merchants, a contract signed by both parties is necessary for enforcement. If the farmer signs a contract, he is liable for breach of contract if he fails to live up to its terms. If he does not sign the contract, he cannot seek enforcement of the terms of the purchaser’s offer to buy....

Because I find no evidence in the record that appellees meet the statutory qualifications as merchants, I would affirm the decision of the trial court. I am authorized to state that [three other justices] join in this dissent.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. How is the UCC’s ten-day-reply doctrine in issue here?
2. Five justices thought the farmers here should be classified as “merchants,” and four of them thought otherwise. What argument did the majority have against calling the farmers

“merchants”? What argument did the dissent have as to why they should not be called merchants?

3. Each side marshaled persuasive precedent from other jurisdictions to support its contention. As a matter of public policy, is one argument better than another?
4. What does the court mean when it says the defendants are not excluded from the definition of merchants “as a matter of law”?

## Unconscionability in Finance Lease Contracts

*Info. Leasing Corp. v. GDR Investments, Inc.*

*787 N.E.2d 652 (Ohio App. 2003)*

Gorman, J.

The plaintiff-appellant, Information Leasing Corporation (“ILC”), appeals from the order of the trial court rendering judgment in favor of the defendants-appellees...GDR Investments, Inc. [defendant Arora’s corporation], Pinnacle Exxon, and Avtar S. Arora, in an action to recover \$15,877.37 on a five-year commercial lease of an Automated Teller Machine (“ATM”)....

This is one of many cases involving ILC that have been recently before this court. ILC is an Ohio corporation wholly owned by the Provident Bank. ILC is in the business of leasing ATMs through a third party, or vendor. In all of these cases, the vendor has been...Credit Card Center (“CCC”). CCC was in the business of finding lessees for the machines and then providing the services necessary to operate them, offering the lessees attractive commissions. Essentially, CCC would find a customer, usually a small business interested in having an ATM available on its premises, arrange for its customer to sign a lease with ILC, and then agree to service the machine, keeping it stocked with cash and paying the customer a certain monthly commission. Usually, as in the case of [defendants], the owner of the business was required to sign as a personal guarantor of the lease. The twist in this story is that CCC soon went bankrupt, leaving its customers stuck with ATMs under the terms of leases with ILC but with no service provider. Rather than seeking to find another company to service the ATMs, many of CCC’s former customers, like [defendants], simply decided that they no longer wanted the ATMs and were no

longer going to make lease payments to ILC. The terms of each lease, however, prohibited cancellation. The pertinent section read,

*LEASE NON-CANCELABLE AND NO WARRANTY. THIS LEASE CANNOT BE CANCELED BY YOU FOR ANY REASON, INCLUDING EQUIPMENT FAILURE, LOSS OR DAMAGE. YOU MAY NOT REVOKE ACCEPTANCE OF THE EQUIPMENT. YOU, NOT WE, SELECTED THE EQUIPMENT AND THE VENDOR. WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR EQUIPMENT FAILURE OR THE VENDOR'S ACTS. YOU ARE LEASING THE EQUIPMENT 'AS IS', [sic] AND WE DISCLAIM ALL WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED. WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR SERVICE OR REPAIRS.*

Either out of a sense of fair play or a further desire to make enforcement of the lease ironclad, ILC put a notice on the top of the lease that stated,

*NOTICE: THIS IS A NON-CANCELABLE, BINDING CONTRACT. THIS CONTRACT WAS WRITTEN IN PLAIN LANGUAGE FOR YOUR BENEFIT. IT CONTAINS IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONDITIONS AND HAS LEGAL AND FINANCIAL CONSEQUENCES TO YOU. PLEASE READ IT CAREFULLY; FEEL FREE TO ASK QUESTIONS BEFORE SIGNING BY CALLING THE LEASING COMPANY AT 1-513-421-9191.*

Arora, the owner of [defendant corporation], was a resident alien with degrees in commerce and economics from the University of Delhi, India. Arora wished to have an ATM on the premises of his Exxon station in the hope of increasing business. He made the mistake of arranging acquisition of the ATM through CCC. According to his testimony, a representative of CCC showed up at the station one day and gave him “formality papers” to sign before the ATM could be delivered. Arora stated that he was busy with other customers when the CCC representative asked him to sign the papers. He testified that when he informed the CCC representative that he needed time to read the documents before signing them, he was told not to worry and...that the papers did not need his attention and that his signature was a mere formality. Arora signed the ILC lease, having never read it.

Within days, CCC went into bankruptcy. Arora found himself with an ATM that he no longer wanted....According to his testimony, he tried unsuccessfully to contact ILC to take back the

ATM. Soon Arora suffered a mild heart attack, the gas station went out of business, and the ATM, which had been in place for approximately eighteen days, was left sitting in the garage, no longer in use until ILC came and removed it several months later.

Unfortunately for Arora, the lease also had an acceleration clause that read,

*DEFAULT. If you fail to pay us or perform as agreed, we will have the right to (i) terminate this lease, (ii) sue you for all past due payment AND ALL FUTURE PAYMENTS UNDER THIS LEASE, plus the Residual Value we have placed on the equipment and other charges you owe us, (iii) repossess the equipment at your expense and (iv) exercise any other right or remedy which may be available under applicable law or proceed by court act.*

The trial court listened to the evidence in this case, which was awkwardly presented due in large part to Arora's decision to act as his own trial counsel. Obviously impressed with Arora's honesty and sympathetic to his situation, the trial court found that Arora owed ILC nothing. In so ruling, the court stated that ILC "ha[d] not complied with any of its contractual obligations and that [Arora] appropriately canceled any obligations by him, if there really were any." The court also found that ILC, "if they did have a contract, failed to mitigate any damages by timely picking up the machine after [Arora] gave them notice to pick up the machine."...

ILC contends, and we do not disagree, that the lease in question satisfied the definition of a "finance lease" under [UCC 2A-407]. A finance lease is considerably different from an ordinary lease in that it adds a third party, the equipment supplier or manufacturer (in this case, the now defunct CCC). As noted by White and Summers, "In effect, the finance lessee \* \* \* is relying upon the manufacturer \* \* \* to provide the promised goods and stand by its promises and warranties; the [lessee] does not look to the [lessor] for these. The [lessor] is only a finance lessor and deals largely in paper, rather than goods." [Citation].

One notorious feature of a finance lease is its typically noncancelable nature, which is specifically authorized by statute [UCC 2A-407]. [UCC 2A-407(1)] provides in the case of a finance lease that is not a consumer lease, "[T]he lessee's promises under the lease contract become irrevocable and independent upon the lessee's acceptance of the goods." The same statutory section also makes clear that the finance lease is "not subject to cancellation,



termination, modification, repudiation, excuse, or substitution without the consent of the party to whom it runs.” [Citation]

Because of their noncancelable nature, finance leases enjoy somewhat of a reputation. The titles of law review articles written about them reveal more than a little cynicism regarding their fairness: [Citations].

...As described by Professors White and Summers, “The parties can draft a lease agreement that carefully excludes warranty and promissory liability of the finance lessor to the lessee, and that sets out what is known in the trade as a ‘hell or high water clause,’ namely, a clause that requires the lessee to continue to make rent payments to the finance lessor even though the [equipment] is unsuitable, defective, or destroyed.”... “The lessor’s responsibility is merely to provide the money, not to instruct the lessee like a wayward child concerning a suitable purchase \* \* \* . Absent contrary agreement, even if [, for example, a finance-leased] Boeing 747 explodes into small pieces in flight and is completely uninsured, lessee’s obligation to pay continues.”

...Some people complain about being stuck with the bill; Arora’s complaint was that he was stuck with the ATM....

To begin the proper legal analysis, we note first that this was not a “consumer lease” expressly excepted from [UCC 2A-407]. A “consumer lease” is defined in [UCC 2A-103(e)] as one in which the lessee is “an individual and who takes under the lease primarily for a personal, family, or household purpose.” This would definitely not apply here, where the ATM was placed on the business premises of the Exxon station, and where the lessee was [Arora’s corporation] and not Arora individually. (Arora was liable individually as the personal guarantor of [his corporation]’s obligations under the lease.)...

Certain defenses do remain, however. First, the UCC expressly allows for the application of the doctrine of unconscionability to finance leases, both consumer and commercial. [Citation] authorizes the trial court to find “any clause of a lease contract to have been unconscionable at the time it was made \* \* \* .” If it so finds, the court is given the power to “refuse to enforce the lease contract, \* \* \* enforce the remainder of the lease contract without the unconscionable clause, or \* \* \* limit the application of the unconscionable clause as to avoid any unconscionable result.” [Citation]

In this case, the trial court made no findings as to whether the finance lease was unconscionable. The primary purpose of the doctrine of unconscionability is to prevent oppression and unfair surprise. [Citation] “Oppression” refers to substantive unconscionability and arises from overly burdensome or punitive terms of a contract, whereas “unfair surprise” refers to procedural unconscionability and is implicated in the formation of a contract, when one of the parties is either overborne by a lack of equal bargaining power or otherwise unfairly or unjustly drawn into a contract. [Citation]

It should be pointed that, although harsh, many characteristics of a finance lease are not inherently unconscionable and, as we have discussed, are specifically authorized by statute. Simply because a finance lease has a “hell or high water clause” does not make it unconscionable. As noted, a finance lease is a separate animal—it is supposed to secure minimal risk to the lessor. At least one court has rejected the argument that an acceleration clause in a commercial finance lease is punitive and unconscionable in the context of parties of relatively equal bargaining power. See [Citation]

At the heart of Arora’s defense in this case was his claim that he was misled into signing the finance lease by the CCC representative and was unfairly surprised to find himself the unwitting signatory of an oppressive lease. This is clearly an argument that implicated procedural unconscionability. His claim of being an unwitting signatory, however, must be carefully balanced against the law in Ohio that places upon a person a duty to read any contract before signing it, a duty that is not excused simply because a person willingly gives into the encouragement to “just go ahead and sign.” See [Citation]

Moreover, we note that courts have also recognized that the lessor may give, through word or conduct, the lessee consent to cancel an otherwise noncancelable lease. [UCC 2A-40792)(b)] makes a finance lease “not subject to cancellation, termination, modification, repudiation, excuse, or substitution *without the consent of the party to whom it runs.*” (Emphasis supplied.) As noted by the court in *Colonial Court*[Citation], the UCC does not say anything with respect to the form or content of the consent. The *Colonial Pacific* court concluded, therefore, “that the consent may be oral and may be established by conduct that reasonably manifests an intent. \* \*

\* Any manifestations that the obligation of the lessee will not be enforced independently of the

obligation that runs to the consenting party is sufficient.” The question whether consent has been given to a cancellation is a question of fact for the trier of fact.

We raise this point because the evidence indicates that there was some communication between Arora and ILC before ILC retrieved the ATM. It is unclear whether ILC removed the ATM at Arora’s request, or whether the company was forcibly repossessing the equipment pursuant to the default provision of the lease. In view of the murkiness of the testimony, it is unclear when the ATM was taken back and when the final lease payment was made. One interesting question that arises from ILC’s retrieval of the ATM, not addressed in the record, is what ILC did with the equipment afterward. Did ILC warehouse the equipment for the next four and one-half years (conduct that would appear unprofitable and therefore unlikely) or did the company then turn around and lease the ATM to someone else? If there was another lease, was ILC actually seeking a double recovery on the ATM’s rental value? In this regard, we note that the trial court ruled that ILC had failed to mitigate its damages, a finding that is not supported by the current record, but may well prove to be true upon further trial of the matter.

In sum, this is a case that requires a much more elaborate presentation of evidence by the parties, and much more detailed findings of fact and conclusions of law than those actually made by the trial court. We sustain ILC’s assignment of error upon the basis that the trial court did not apply the correct legal analysis, and that the evidence of record did not mandate a judgment in Arora’s favor. Because of the number of outstanding issues and unresolved factual questions, we reverse the trial court’s judgment and remand this case for a new trial consistent with the law set forth in this opinion.

**Judgment reversed and cause remanded.**

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why would a finance lease have such an iron-clad, “hell or high water” noncancellation clause as is apparently common and demonstrated here?
2. On what basis did the lower court rule in the defendant’s favor?
3. What is an acceleration clause?
4. What was Mr. Arora’s main defense? What concern did the court have with it?

5. The appeals court helpfully suggested several arguments the defendant might make on remand to be relieved of his contract obligations. What were they?

## 17.6 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Sales law is a special type of contract law, governed by Article 2 of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), adopted in every state but Louisiana. Article 2 governs the sale of goods only, defined as things movable at the time of identification to the contract for sale. Article 2A, a more recent offering, deals with the leasing of goods, including finance leases and consumer leases. The Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) is an international equivalent of Article 2.

Difficult questions sometimes arise when the subject of the contract is a hybrid of goods and real estate or goods and services. If the seller is called on to sever crops, timber, or minerals from the land, or the buyer is required to sever and can do so without material harm to the land, then the items are goods subject to Article 2. When the goods are “sold” incidental to a service, the “predominant factor” test is used, but with inconsistent results. For two categories of goods, legislation specifically answers the question: foodstuffs served by a restaurant are goods; blood supplied for transfusions is not.

Although they are kin, in some areas Article 2 differs from the common law. As regards mutual assent, the UCC abolishes the mirror image rule; it allows for more indefiniteness and open terms. The UCC does away with some requirements for consideration. It sometimes imposes special obligations on merchants (though defining a merchant is problematic), those who deal in goods of the kind, or who by their occupations hold themselves out as experts in the use of the goods as between other merchants and in selling to nonmerchants. Article 2 gives courts greater leeway than under the common law to modify contracts at the request of a party, if a clause is found to have been unconscionable at the time made.

### EXERCISES

1. Ben owns fifty acres of timberland. He enters into a contract with Bunyan under which Bunyan is to cut and remove the timber from Ben’s land. Bunyan enters into a contract to sell

the logs to Log Cabin, Inc., a homebuilder. Are these two contracts governed by the UCC? Why?

2. Clarence agreed to sell his farm to Jud in exchange for five antique cars owned by Jud. Is this contract governed by the UCC? Why?
3. Professor Byte enters into a contract to purchase a laptop computer from Ultra-Intelligence Inc. He also enters into a contract with a graduate student, who is to write programs that will be run on the computer. Are these two contracts governed by the UCC? Why?
4. Pat had a skin problem and went to Dr. Pore, a dermatologist, for treatment. Dr. Pore applied a salve obtained from a pharmaceutical supplier, which made the problem worse. Is Dr. Pore liable under Article 2 of the UCC? Why?
5. Zanae visited the Bonita Burrito restaurant and became seriously ill after eating tainted food. She was rushed to a local hospital, where she was given a blood transfusion. Zanae developed hepatitis as a result of the transfusion. When she sued the restaurant and the hospital, claiming remedies under the UCC, both defended the suit by arguing that they were providing services, not goods. Are they correct? Why?
6. Bill, the owner of Bill's Used Books, decided to go out of business. He sold two of his bookcases to Ned. Ned later discovered that the bookcases were defective and sued Bill on the theory that, as a merchant, he warranted that the bookcases were of fair, average quality. Will Ned prevail on this theory? Why?
7. Rufus visited a supermarket to purchase groceries. As he moved past a display of soda pop and perhaps lightly brushed it, a bottle exploded. Rufus sustained injury and sued the supermarket, claiming breach of warranty under the UCC. Will Rufus win? Why?
8. Carpet Mart bought carpet from Collins & Aikman (Defendant) represented to be 100 percent polyester fiber. When Carpet Mart discovered in fact the carpet purchased was composed of cheaper, inferior fiber, it sued for compensatory and punitive damages. Defendant moved for a stay pending arbitration, pointing to the language of its acceptance form: "The acceptance of your order is subject to all the terms and conditions on the face and reverse side hereof, including arbitration, all of which are accepted by buyer; it supersedes buyer's order form."

The small print on the reverse side of the form provided, among other things, that all claims arising out of the contract would be submitted to arbitration in New York City. The lower court held that Carpet Mart was not bound by the arbitration agreement appearing on the back of Collins & Aikman's acknowledgment form, and Defendant appealed. How should the appeals court rule?

9. Plaintiff shipped to Defendant—Pizza Pride Inc. of Jamestown, North Carolina—an order of mozzarella cheese totaling \$11,000. That same day, Plaintiff mailed Defendant an invoice for the order, based on Plaintiff's understanding that an oral contract existed between the parties whereby Defendant had agreed to pay for the cheese. Defendant was engaged in the real estate business at this time and had earlier been approached by Pizza Pride Inc. to discuss that company's real estate investment potential. Defendant denied ever guaranteeing payment for the cheese and raised the UCC's Statute of Frauds, Section 2-201, as an affirmative defense. The Plaintiff contended that because Defendant was in the business of buying and selling real estate, she possessed knowledge or skill peculiar to the practices involved in the transaction here. After hearing the evidence, the court concluded as a matter of law that Defendant did agree to pay for the cheese and was liable to Plaintiff in the amount of \$11,000. Defendant appealed. How should the appeals court rule?
10. Seller offered to sell to Buyer goods at an agreed price "to be shipped to Buyer by UPS." Buyer accepted on a form that included this term: "goods to be shipped FedEx, Buyer to pay freight." Seller then determined not to carry on with the contract as the price of the goods had increased, and Seller asserted that because the acceptance was different from the offer, there was no contract. Is this correct?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Among subjects the UCC does not cover are
- letters of credit
  - service contracts
  - sale of goods
  - bank collections

When a contract is unconscionable, a court may

- a. refuse to enforce the contract
- b. strike the unconscionable clause
- c. limit the application of the unconscionable clause
- d. take any of the above approaches

Under the UCC, the definition of *merchant* is limited to

- a. manufacturers
- b. retailers
- c. wholesalers
- d. none of the above

For the purpose of sales law, *goods*

- a. always include items sold incidental to a service
- b. include things movable at the time of identification to the contract
- c. include blood supplied for transfusions
- d. include all of the above

Article 2 differs from the common law of contracts

- a. in no substantial way
- b. by disallowing parties to create agreements with open terms
- c. by obligating courts to respect all terms of the contract
- d. by imposing special obligations on merchants

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. a
- 2. d
- 3. d
- 4. b
- 5. d

# Chapter 18

## Title and Risk of Loss

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. Why title is important and at what point in the contracting relationship the buyer acquires title
2. Why risk of loss is important, when risk of loss passes to the buyer, and when the buyer acquires an insurable interest
3. Under what circumstances the buyer can obtain title when a nonowner sells the goods

Parties to a sales contract will usually agree on the obvious details of a sales transaction—the nature of goods, the price, and the delivery time, as discussed in the next chapter. But there are two other issues of importance lurking in the background of every sale:

1. When does the title pass to the buyer? This question arises more in cases involving third parties, such as creditors and tax collectors. For instance, a creditor of the seller will not be allowed to take possession of goods in the seller's warehouse if the title has already passed to the buyer.
2. If goods are damaged or destroyed, who must bear the loss? The answer has obvious financial significance to both parties. If the seller must bear the loss, then in most cases he must pay damages or send the buyer another shipment of goods. A buyer who bears the loss must pay for the goods even though they are unusable. In the absence of a prior agreement, loss can trigger litigation between the parties.

## 18.1 Transfer of Title

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why it is important to know who has title in a sales transaction.
2. Be able to explain when title shifts.
3. Understand when a person who has no title can nevertheless pass good title on to a buyer.

### Why It Is Important When Title Shifts



There are three reasons why it is important when title shifts from seller to buyer—that is, when the buyer gets title.

### **It Affects Whether a Sale Has Occurred**

First, a sale cannot occur without a shift in title. You will recall that a sale is defined by the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) as a “transfer of title from seller to buyer for a price.” Thus if there is no shift of title, there is no sale. And there are several consequences to there being no sale, one of which is—concerning a merchant-seller—that no implied warranty of merchantability arises. (Again, as discussed in the previous chapter, an implied warranty provides that when a merchant-seller sells goods, the goods are suitable for the ordinary purpose for which such goods are used.) In a lease, of course, title remains with the lessor.

### **Creditors’ Rights**

Second, title is important because it determines whether creditors may take the goods. If a creditor has a right to seize Debtor’s goods to satisfy a judgment or because the parties have a security agreement (giving the creditor the right to repossess Debtor’s goods), obviously it won’t do at all for the creditor to seize goods when the debtor doesn’t have title to them—they are somebody else’s goods, and seizing them would be conversion, a tort (the civil equivalent of a theft offense).

### **Insurable Interest**

Third, title is related to who has an **insurable interest**. A buyer cannot legally obtain insurance unless he has an insurable interest in the goods. Without an insurable interest, the insurance contract would be an illegal gambling contract. For example, if you attempt to take out insurance on a ship with which you have no connection, hoping to recover a large sum if it sinks, the courts will construe the contract as a wager you have made with the insurance company that the ship is not seaworthy, and they will refuse to enforce it if the ship should sink and you try to collect. Thus this question arises: under the UCC, at what point does the buyer acquire an insurable interest in the goods? Certainly a person has insurable interest if she has title, but the UCC allows a person to have insurable interest with less than full title. The argument here is often between two insurance companies, each *denying* that its insured had insurable interest as to make it liable.

## Goods Identified to the Contract

### The Identification Issue

The UCC at Section 2-401 provides that “title to goods cannot pass under a contract for sale prior to their identification to the contract.” (In a lease, of course, title to the leased goods does not pass at all, only the right to possession and use for some time in return for consideration. <sup>[1]</sup>)

So identification to the contract has to happen before title can shift. Identification to the contract here means that the seller in one way or another picks the goods to be sold out of the mass of inventory so that they can be delivered or held for the buyer.

**Article 67 of the CISG says the same thing: “[T]he risk does not pass to the buyer until the goods are clearly identified to the contract, whether by markings on the goods, by shipping documents, by notice given to the buyer or otherwise.”**

When are goods “identified”? There are two possibilities as to when identification happens.

### Parties May Agree

Section 2-501(1) of the UCC says “identification can be made at any time and in any manner explicated agreed to by the parties.”

### UCC Default Position

If the parties do not agree on when identification happens, the UCC default kicks in. Section 2-501(1) of the UCC says identification occurs

- a. when the contract is made if it is for the sale of goods already existing and identified;
- b. if the contract is for the sale of future goods other than those described in paragraph c., when goods are shipped, marked, or otherwise identified by the seller as goods to which the contract refers;
- c. when crops are planted or otherwise become growing crops or the young are conceived if the contract is for the sale of unborn young to be born within twelve months after contract or for the sale of corps to be harvested within twelve months or the next normal harvest seasons after contracting, whichever is longer.

Thus if Very Fast Food Inc.’s purchasing agent looks at a new type of industrial sponge on Delta Sponge Makers’ store shelf for restaurant supplies, points to it, and says, “I’ll take it,” identification happens then, when the contract is made. But if the purchasing agent wants to

purchase sponges for her fast-food restaurants, sees a sample on the shelf, and says, “I want a gross of those”—they come in boxes of one hundred each—identification won’t happen until one or the other of them chooses the gross of boxes of sponges out of the warehouse inventory.

## **When Title Shifts**

### **Parties May Agree**

Assuming identification is done, when does title shift? The law begins with the premise that the agreement of the parties governs. Section 2-401(1) of the UCC says that, in general, “title to goods passes from the seller to the buyer in any manner and on any conditions explicitly agreed on by the parties.” Many companies specify in their written agreements at what moment the title will pass; here, for example, is a clause that appears in sales contracts of Dow Chemical Company: “Title and risk of loss in all goods sold hereunder shall pass to Buyer upon Seller’s delivery to carrier at shipping point.” Thus Dow retains title to its goods only until it takes them to the carrier for transportation to the buyer.

Because the UCC’s default position (further discussed later in this chapter) is that title shifts when the seller has completed delivery obligations, and because the parties may agree on delivery terms, they also may, by choosing those terms, effectively agree when title shifts (again, they also can agree using any other language they want). So it is appropriate to examine some delivery terms at this juncture. There are three possibilities: shipment contracts, destination contracts, and contracts where the goods are not to be moved.

### **Shipment Contracts**

In a shipment contract, the seller’s obligation is to send the goods to the buyer, but not to a particular destination. The typical choices are set out in the UCC at Section 2-319:

- F.O.B. [place of shipment] (the place from which the goods are to be shipped goes in the brackets, as in “F.O.B. Seattle”). F.O.B. means “free on board”; the seller’s obligation, according to Section 2-504 of the UCC, is to put the goods into the possession of a carrier and make a reasonable contract for their transportation, to deliver any necessary documents so the buyer can take possession, and promptly notify the buyer of the shipment.
- F.A.S. [named port] (the name of the seaport from which the ship is carrying the goods goes in the brackets, as in “F.A.S. Long Beach”). F.A.S means “free alongside ship”; the seller’s

obligation is to at his “expense and risk deliver the goods alongside the vessel in the manner usual in that port” and to provide the buyer with pickup instructions. <sup>[2]</sup>

- C.I.F. and C. & F. These are actually not abbreviations for delivery terms, but rather they describe who pays insurance and freight. “C.I.F” means “cost, insurance, and freight”—if this term is used, it means that the contract price “includes in a lump sum the cost of the goods and the insurance and freight to the named destination.” <sup>[3]</sup> “C. & F.” means that “the price so includes cost and freight to the named destination.” <sup>[4]</sup>

### **Destination Contracts**

In a destination contract, the seller’s obligation is to see to it that the goods actually arrive at the destination. Here again, the parties may employ the use of abbreviations that indicate the seller’s duties. See the following from the UCC, Section 2-319:

- F.O.B. [destination] means the seller’s obligation is to “at his own expense and risk transport the goods to that place and there tender delivery of them” with appropriate pickup instructions to the buyer.
- Ex-ship “is the reverse of the F.A.S. term.” <sup>[5]</sup> It means “from the carrying vessel”—the seller’s obligation is to make sure the freight bills are paid and that “the goods leave the ship’s tackle or are otherwise properly unloaded.”
- No arrival, no sale means the “seller must properly ship conforming goods and if they arrive by any means he must tender them on arrival but he assumes no obligation that the goods will arrive unless he has caused the non-arrival.” <sup>[6]</sup> If the goods don’t arrive, or if they are damaged or deteriorated through no fault of the seller, the buyer can either treat the contract as avoided, or pay a reduced amount for the damaged goods, with no further recourse against the seller. <sup>[7]</sup>

### **Goods Not to Be Moved**

It is not uncommon for contracting parties to sell and buy goods stored in a grain elevator or warehouse without physical movement of the goods. There are two possibilities:

1. Goods with documents of title. A first possibility is that the ownership of the goods is manifested by a document of title—“bill of lading, dock warrant, dock receipt, warehouse receipt or order for the delivery of goods, and also any other document which in the regular course of business or financing is treated as adequately evidencing that the person in possession of it is entitled to

receive, hold and dispose of the document and the goods it covers.”<sup>[8]</sup> In that case, the UCC, Section 2-401(3)(a), says that title passes “at the time when and the place where” the documents are delivered to the buyer.

2. Goods without documents of title. If there is no physical transfer of the goods and no documents to exchange, then UCC, Section 2-401(3)(b), provides that “title passes at the time and place of contracting.”

Here are examples showing how these concepts work.

Suppose the contract calls for Delta Sponge Makers to “ship the entire lot of industrial grade Sponge No. 2 by truck or rail” and that is all that the contract says about shipment. That’s a “shipment contract,” and the UCC, Section 2-401(2)(a), says that title passes to Very Fast Foods at the “time and place of shipment.” At the moment that Delta turns over the 144 cartons of 1,000 sponges each to a trucker—perhaps Easy Rider Trucking comes to pick them up at Delta’s own factory—title has passed to Very Fast Foods.

Suppose the contract calls for Delta to “deliver the sponges on June 10 at the Maple Street warehouse of Very Fast Foods Inc.” This is a destination contract, and the seller “completes his performance with respect to the physical delivery of the goods” when it pulls up to the door of the warehouse and tenders the cartons.<sup>[9]</sup> “Tender” means that the party—here Delta Sponge Makers—is ready, able, and willing to perform and has notified its obligor of its readiness. When the driver of the delivery truck knocks on the warehouse door, announces that the gross of industrial grade Sponge No. 2 is ready for unloading, and asks where the warehouse foreman wants it, Delta has tendered delivery, and title passes to Very Fast Foods.

Suppose Very Fast Foods fears that the price of industrial sponges is about to soar; it wishes to acquire a large quantity long before it can use them all or even store them all. Delta does not store all of its sponges in its own plant, keeping some of them instead at Central Warehousing. Central is a bailee, one who has rightful possession but not title. (A parking garage often is a bailee of its customers’ cars; so is a carrier carrying a customer’s goods.) Now assume that Central has issued a warehouse receipt (a document of title that provides proof of ownership of goods stored in a warehouse) to Delta and that Delta’s contract with Very Fast Foods calls for Delta to deliver “document of title at the office of First Bank” on a particular day. When the

goods are not to be physically moved, that title passes to Very Fast Foods “at the time when and the place where” Delta delivers the document.

Suppose the contract did not specify physical transfer or exchange of documents for the purchase price. Instead, it said, “Seller agrees to sell all sponges stored on the north wall of its Orange Street warehouse, namely, the gross of industrial Sponge No. 2, in cartons marked B300–B444, to Buyer for a total purchase price of \$14,000, payable in twelve equal monthly installments, beginning on the first of the month beginning after the signing of this agreement.” Then title passes at the time and place of contracting—that is, when Delta Sponge Makers and Very Fast Foods sign the contract.

So, as always under the UCC, the parties may agree on the terms they want when title shifts. They can do that directly by just saying when—as in the Dow Chemical example—or they can indirectly agree when title shifts by stipulating delivery terms: shipment, destination, goods not to be moved. If they don’t stipulate, the UCC default kicks in.

### **UCC Default Provision**

If the parties do not stipulate by any means when title shifts, Section 2-401(2) of the UCC provides that “title passes to the buyer at the time and place at which seller completes his performance with reference to the physical delivery of the goods.” And if the parties have no term in their contract about delivery, the UCC’s default delivery term controls. It says “the place for delivery is the seller’s place of business or if he has none his residence,” and delivery is accomplished at the place when the seller “put[s] and hold[s] conforming goods at the buyer’s disposition and give[s] the buyer any notification reasonably necessary to enable him to take delivery.” <sup>[10]</sup>

### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Title is important for three reasons: it determines whether a sale has occurred, it determines rights of creditors, and it affects who has an insurable interest. Parties may explicitly agree when title shifts, or they may agree indirectly by settling on delivery terms (because absent explicit agreement, delivery controls title passage). Delivery terms to choose from include shipment contracts, destination contracts, and delivery without the goods being moved (with or without documents of title). If nothing is said about when title shifts, and the parties have

not indirectly agreed by choosing a delivery term, then title shifts when delivery obligations under the contract are complete, and if there are no delivery terms, delivery happens when the seller makes the goods available at seller's place of business (or if seller has no place of business, goods will be made available at seller's residence)—that's when title shifts.

## EXERCISES

1. Why does it matter who has title?
2. If the parties do not otherwise agree, when does title shift from seller to buyer?
3. Why does the question of delivery terms arise in examining when title shifts?
4. When does title shift for goods stored in a warehouse that are not to be moved?

[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2A-103(1)(j).

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-319(2).

[3] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-320.

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-320.

[5] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-322.

[6] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-324.

[7] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-613.

[8] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1-201(15).

[9] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-401(2)(b).

[10] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-308 and 2-503.

## 18.2 Title from Nonowners

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand when and why a nonowner can nevertheless pass title on to a purchaser.

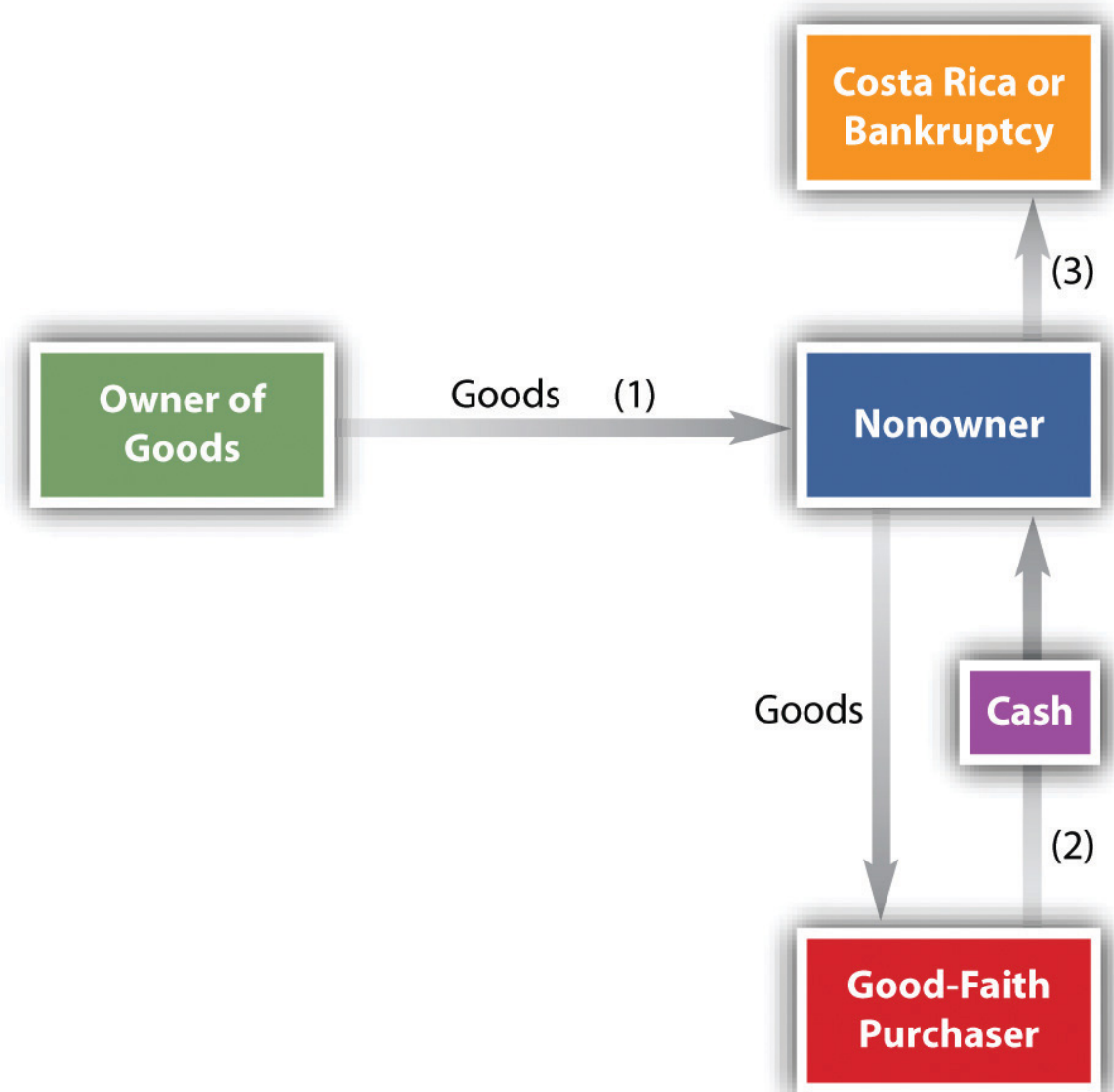
### The Problem of Title from Nonowners

We have examined when title transfers from buyer to seller, and here the assumption is, of course, that seller had good title in the first place. But what title does a purchaser acquire when the seller has no title or has at best only a voidable title? This question has often been difficult

for courts to resolve. It typically involves a type of eternal triangle with a three-step sequence of events, as follows (see [Figure 18.1 "Sales by Nonowners"](#)): (1) The nonowner obtains possession, for example, by loan or theft; (2) the nonowner sells the goods to an innocent purchaser for cash; and (3) the nonowner then takes the money and disappears, goes into bankruptcy, or ends up in jail. The result is that two innocent parties battle over the goods, the owner usually claiming that the purchaser is guilty of conversion (i.e., the unlawful assumption of ownership of property belonging to another) and claiming damages or the right to recover the goods.

*Figure 18.1 Sales by Nonowners*





## The Response to the Problem of Title from Nonowners

### The Basic Rule

To resolve this dilemma, we begin with a basic policy of jurisprudence: a person cannot transfer better title than he or she had. (The Uniform Commercial Code [UCC] notes this policy in Sections 2-403, 2A-304, and 2A-305.) This policy would apply in a sale-of-goods case in which the nonowner had a void title or no title at all. For example, if a nonowner stole the goods from the owner and then sold them to an innocent purchaser, the owner would be entitled to the goods or to damages. Because the thief had no title, he had no title to transfer to the purchaser.

A person cannot get good title to goods from a thief, nor does a person have to retain physical possession of her goods at all times to retain their ownership—people are expected to leave their cars with a mechanic for repair or to leave their clothing with a dry cleaner.

If thieves could pass on good title to stolen goods, there would be a hugely increased traffic in stolen property; that would be unacceptable. In such a case, the owner can get her property back from whomever the thief sold it to in an action called *replevin* (an action to recover personal property unlawfully taken). On the other hand, when a buyer in good faith buys goods from an apparently reputable seller, she reasonably expects to get good title, and that expectation cannot be dashed with impunity without faith in the market being undermined. Therefore, as between two innocent parties, sometimes the original owner does lose, on the theory that (1) that person is better able to avoid the problem than the downstream buyer, who had absolutely no control over the situation, and (2) faith in commercial transactions would be undermined by allowing original owners to claw back their property under all circumstances.

So the basic legal policy that a person cannot pass on better title than he had is subject to a number of exceptions. Likewise, the law governing the sale of goods contains exceptions to the basic legal policy. These usually fall within one of two categories: sellers with voidable title and entrustment.

### **The Exceptions**

As noted, there are exceptions to the law governing the sale of goods.

#### **Sellers with a Voidable Title**

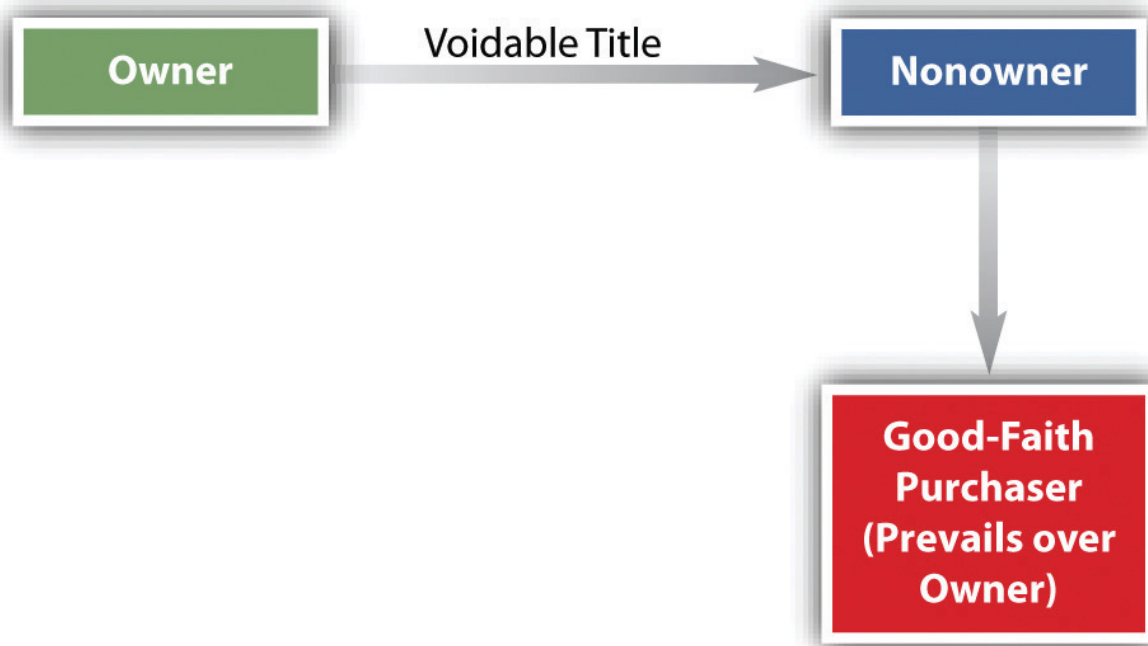
Under the UCC, a person with a voidable title has the power to transfer title to a good-faith purchaser for value (see [Figure 18.2 "Voidable Title"](#)). The UCC defines *good faith* as “honesty in fact in the conduct or transaction concerned.”<sup>[1]</sup> A “purchaser” is not restricted to one who pays cash; any taking that creates an interest in property, whether by mortgage, pledge, lien, or even gift, is a purchase for purposes of the UCC. And “value” is not limited to cash or goods; a person gives value if he gives any consideration sufficient to support a simple contract, including a binding commitment to extend credit and security for a preexisting claim. Recall from [Chapter 9 "The Agreement"](#) that a “voidable” title is one that, for policy reasons, the courts will cancel on application of one who is aggrieved. These reasons include fraud, undue influence, mistake, and

lack of capacity to contract. When a person has a voidable title, title can be taken away from her, but if it is not, she can transfer better title than she has to a good-faith purchaser for value.

(See [Section 18.4.2 "Defrauding Buyer Sells to Good-Faith Purchaser for Value"](#) at the end of this chapter.)

Rita, sixteen years old, sells a video game to her neighbor Annie, who plans to give the game to her nephew. Since Rita is a minor, she could rescind the contract; that is, the title that Annie gets is voidable: it is subject to be avoided by Rita's rescission. But Rita does not rescind. Then Annie discovers that her nephew already has that video game, so she sells it instead to an office colleague, Donald. He has had no notice that Annie bought the game from a minor and has only a voidable title. He pays cash. Should Rita—the minor—subsequently decide she wants the game back, it would be too late: Annie has transferred good title to Donald even though Annie's title was voidable.

*Figure 18.2 Voidable Title*



Suppose Rita was an adult and Annie paid her with a check that later bounced, but Annie sold the game to Donald before the check bounced. Does Donald still have good title? The UCC says he does, and it identifies three other situations in which the good-faith purchaser is protected:

(1) when the original transferor was deceived about the identity of the purchaser to whom he sold the goods, who then transfers to a good-faith purchaser; (2) when the original transferor was supposed to but did not receive cash from the intermediate purchaser; and (3) when “the delivery was procured through fraud punishable as larcenous under the criminal law.” [2]

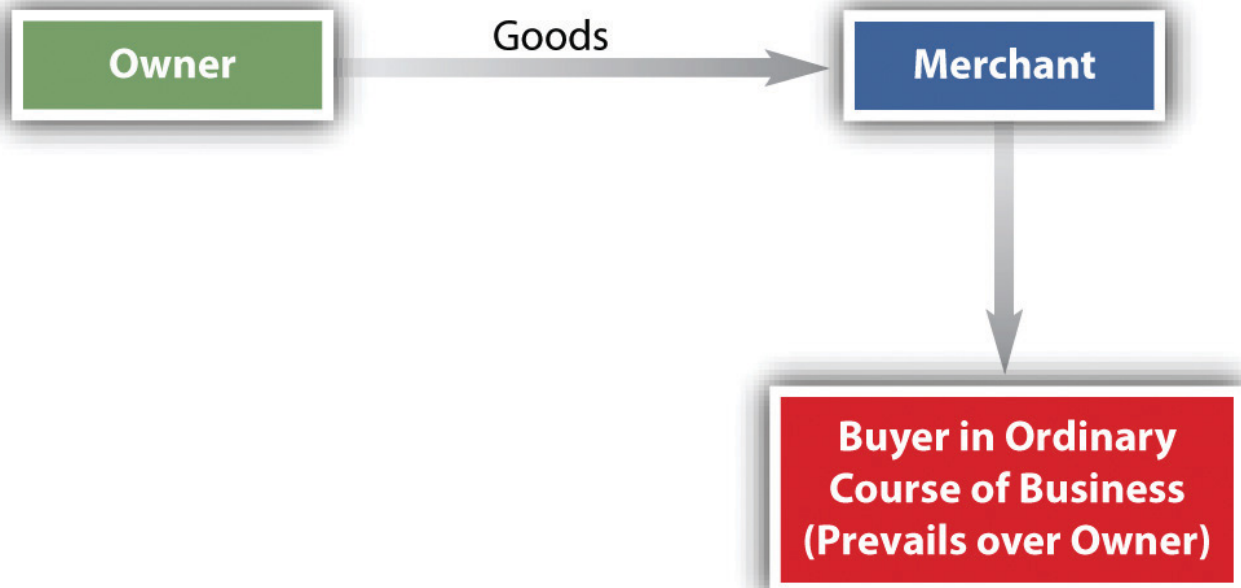
This last situation may be illustrated as follows: Dimension LLC leased a Volkswagen to DK Inc. The agreement specified that DK could use the Volkswagen solely for business and commercial purposes and could not sell it. Six months later, the owner of DK, Darrell Kempf, representing that the Volkswagen was part of DK’s used-car inventory, sold it to Edward Seabold. Kempf embezzled the proceeds from the sale of the car and disappeared. When DK defaulted on its payments for the Volkswagen, Dimension attempted to repossess it. Dimension discovered that Kempf had executed a release of interest on the car’s title by forging the signature of Dimension’s manager. The Washington Court of Appeals, applying the UCC, held that Mr. Seabold should keep the car. The car was not stolen from Dimension; instead, by leasing the vehicle to DK, Dimension transferred possession of the car to DK voluntarily, and because Seabold was a good-faith purchaser, he won. [3]

### **Entrustment**

A merchant who deals in particular goods has the power to transfer all rights of one who entrusts to him goods of the kind to a “buyer in the ordinary course of business” (see [Figure 18.3 "Entrustment"](#)). [4] The UCC defines such a buyer as a person who buys goods in an ordinary transaction from a person in the business of selling that type of goods, as long as the buyer purchases in “good faith and without knowledge that the sale to him is in violation of the ownership rights or security interest of a third party in the goods.” [5] Bess takes a pearl necklace, a family heirloom, to Wellborn’s Jewelers for cleaning; as the entrustor, she has entrusted the necklace to an trustee. The owner of Wellborn’s—perhaps by mistake—sells it to Clara, a buyer, in the ordinary course of business. Bess cannot take the necklace back from Clara, although she has a cause of action against Wellborn’s for conversion. As between the two innocent parties, Bess and Clara (owner and purchaser), the latter prevails. Notice that the UCC only says that the trustee can pass *whatever title the entrustor had* to a good-faith purchaser, not necessarily good title. If Bess’s cleaning woman borrowed the necklace, soiled it, and took it

to Wellborn's, which then sold it to Clara, Bess could get it back because the cleaning woman had no title to transfer to the entrustee, Wellborn's.

Figure 18.3 *Entrustment*



Entrustment is based on the general principle of estoppel: “A rightful owner may be estopped by his own acts from asserting his title. If he has invested another with the usual evidence of title, or an apparent authority to dispose of it, he will not be allowed to make claim against an innocent purchaser dealing on the faith of such apparent ownership.” [6]

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The general rule—for obvious reasons—is that nobody can pass on better title to goods than he or she has: a thief cannot pass on good title to stolen goods to anybody. But in balancing that policy against the reasonable expectations of good-faith buyers that they will get title, the UCC has made some exceptions. A person with voidable title can pass on good title to a good-faith purchaser, and a merchant who has been entrusted with goods can pass on title of the entrustor to a good-faith purchaser.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why is it the universal rule that good title to goods cannot be had from a thief?

2. What is the “voidable title” exception to the universal rule? Why is the exception made?
3. What is the “entrusting” exception to the general rule?

[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1-201(19).

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-403(1), 2-403(1), 2A-304, and 2A-305.

[3] *Dimension Funding, L.L.C. v. D.K. Associates, Inc.*, 191 P.3d 923 (Wash. App. 2008).

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-403(2), 2A-304(2), and 2A-305(2).

[5] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1-201(9).

[6] *Zendman v. Harry Winston, Inc.*, 111 N.E. 2d 871 (N.Y. 1953).

## 18.3 Risk of Loss

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why who has the risk of loss is important.
2. Know how parties may agree on when the risk of loss shifts.
3. Know when the risk of loss shifts if there is no breach, and if there is a breach.
4. Recognize what “insurable interest” is, why it is important, and how it attaches.

### Why Risk of Loss Is Important

“Risk of loss” means who has to pay—who bears the risk—if the goods are lost or destroyed *without the fault of either party*. It is obvious why this issue is important: Buyer contracts to purchase a new car for \$35,000. While the car is in transit to Buyer, it is destroyed in a landslide. Who takes the \$35,000 hit?

**The CISG, Article 66, provides as follows: “Loss of or damage to the goods after the risk has passed to the buyer does not discharge him from his obligation to pay the price, unless the loss or damage is due to an act or omission of the seller.”**

### When Risk of Loss Passes

#### The Parties May Agree

Just as title passes in accordance with the parties' agreement, so too can the parties fix the risk of loss on one or the other. They may even devise a formula to divide the risk between themselves. <sup>[1]</sup>

Common terms by which parties set out their delivery obligations that then affect when title shifts (F.O.B., F.A.S., ex-ship, and so on) were discussed earlier in this chapter. Similarly, parties may use common terms to set out which party has the risk of loss; these situations arise with trial sales. That is, sometimes the seller will permit the buyer to return the goods even though the seller had conformed to the contract. When the goods are intended primarily for the buyer's use, the transaction is said to be "sale on approval." When they are intended primarily for resale, the transaction is said to be "sale or return." When the "buyer" is really only a sales agent for the "seller," it is a consignment sale.

### **Sale on Approval**

Under a sale-on-approval contract, risk of loss (and title) remains with the seller until the buyer accepts, and the buyer's trial use of the goods does not in itself constitute acceptance. If the buyer decides to return the goods, the seller bears the risk and expense of return, but a merchant buyer must follow any reasonable instructions from the seller. Very Fast Foods asks Delta for some sample sponges to test on approval; Delta sends a box of one hundred sponges. Very Fast plans to try them for a week, but before that, through no fault of Very Fast, the sponges are destroyed in a fire. Delta bears the loss. <sup>[2]</sup>

### **Sale or Return**

The buyer might take the goods with the expectation of reselling them—as would a women's wear shop buy new spring fashions, expecting to sell them. But if the shop doesn't sell them before summer wear is in vogue, it could arrange with the seller to return them for credit. In contrast to sale-on-approval contracts, sale-or-return contracts have risk of loss (and title too) passing to the buyer, and the buyer bears the risk and expense of returning the goods.

Occasionally the question arises whether the buyer's other creditors may claim the goods when the sales contract lets the buyer retain some rights to return the goods. The answer seems straightforward: in a sale-on-approval contract, where title remains with the seller until acceptance, the buyer does not own the goods—hence they cannot be seized by his creditors—

unless he accepts them, whereas they are the buyer's goods (subject to his right to return them) in a sale-or-return contract and may be taken by creditors if they are in his possession.

### Consignment Sales

In a consignment situation, the seller is a bailee and an agent for the owner who sells the goods for the owner and takes a commission. Under the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), this is considered a sale or return, thus the consignee (at whose place the goods are displayed for sale to customers) is considered a buyer and has the risk of loss and title.<sup>[3]</sup> The consignee's creditors can take the goods; that is, unless the parties comply "with an applicable law providing for a consignor's interest or the like to be evidenced by a sign, or where it is established that the person conducting the business is generally known by his creditors to be substantially engaged in selling the goods of others" (or complies with secured transactions requirements under Article 9, discussed in a later chapter).<sup>[4]</sup>

### The UCC Default Position

If the parties fail to specify how the risk of loss is to be allocated or apportioned, the UCC again supplies the answers. A generally applicable rule, though not explicitly stated, is that risk of loss passes when the seller has completed obligations under the contract. Notice this is *not* the same as when title passes: title passes when seller has completed *delivery* obligations under the contract, risk of loss passes when *allobligations* are completed. (Thus a buyer could get good title to nonconforming goods, which might be better for the buyer than not getting title to them: if the seller goes bankrupt, at least the buyer has something of value.)

### Risk of Loss in Absence of a Breach

If the goods are *conforming*, then risk of loss would indeed pass when delivery obligations are complete, just as with title. And the analysis here would be the same as we looked at in examining shift of title.

**A shipment contract.** The contract requires Delta to ship the sponges by carrier but does not require it to deliver them to a particular destination. In this situation, risk of loss passes to Very Fast Foods when the goods are delivered to the carrier.

**The CISG—pretty much like the UCC—provides as follows (Article 67):**



***If the contract of sale involves carriage of the goods and the seller is not bound to hand them over at a particular place, the risk passes to the buyer when the goods are handed over to the first carrier for transmission to the buyer in accordance with the contract of sale. If the seller is bound to hand the goods over to a carrier at a particular place, the risk does not pass to the buyer until the goods are handed over to the carrier at that place.***

**A destination contract.** If the destination contract agreement calls for Delta to deliver the sponges by carrier to a particular location, Very Fast Foods assumes the risk of loss only when Delta's carrier tenders them at the specified place.

**The CISG provides for basically the same thing (Article 69): “If the contract is for something other than shipment, the risk passes to the buyer when he takes over the goods or, if he does not do so in due time, from the time when the goods are placed at his disposal and he commits a breach of contract by failing to take delivery.”**

**Goods not to be moved.** If Delta sells sponges that are stored at Central Warehousing to Very Fast Foods, and the sponges are not to be moved, Section 2-509(2) of the UCC sets forth three possibilities for transfer of the risk of loss:

1. The buyer receives a negotiable document of title covering the goods. A document of title is negotiable if by its terms goods are to be delivered to the bearer of the document or to the order of a named person.
2. The bailee acknowledges the buyer's right to take possession of the goods. Delta signs the contract for the sale of sponges and calls Central to inform it that a buyer has purchased 144 cartons and to ask it to set aside all cartons on the north wall for that purpose. Central does so, sending notice to Very Fast Foods that the goods are available. Very Fast Foods assumes risk of loss upon receipt of the notice.
3. When the seller gives the buyer a nonnegotiable document of title or a written direction to the bailee to deliver the goods and the buyer has had a reasonable time to present the document or direction.

**All other cases.** In any case that does not fit within the rules just described, the risk of loss passes to the buyer only when the buyer actually receives the goods. Cases that come within this section generally involve a buyer who is taking physical delivery from the seller's premises. A merchant who sells on those terms can be expected to insure his interest in any goods that remain under his control. The buyer is unlikely to insure goods not in his possession.

The *Ramos* case ([Section 18.4.3 "Risk of Loss, Seller a Merchant"](#) in this chapter) demonstrates how this risk-of-loss provision applies when a customer pays for merchandise but never actually receives his purchase because of a mishap.

### Risk of Loss Where Breach Occurs

The general rule for risk of loss was set out as this: risk of loss shifts when seller has completed obligations under the contract. We said if the goods are conforming, the only obligation left is delivery, so then risk of loss would shift upon delivery. But if the goods are nonconforming, then the rule would say the risk doesn't shift. And that's correct, though it's subject to one wrinkle having to do with insurance. Let's examine the two possible circumstances: breach by seller and breach by buyer.

First, suppose the *seller* breaches the contract by proffering nonconforming goods, and the buyer *rejects* them—never takes them at all. Then the goods are lost or damaged. Under Section 2-510(1) of the UCC, the loss falls on seller and remains there until seller cures the breach or until buyer accepts despite the breach. Suppose Delta is obligated to deliver a gross of industrial No. 2 sponges; instead it tenders only one hundred cartons or delivers a gross of industrial No. 3 sponges. The risk of loss falls on Delta because Delta has not completed its obligation under the contract and Very Fast Foods doesn't have possession of the goods. Or suppose Delta has breached the contract by tendering to Very Fast Foods a defective document of title. Delta cures the defect and gives the new document of title to Very Fast Foods, but before it does so the sponges are stolen. Delta is responsible for the loss.

Now suppose that a seller breaches the contract by proffering nonconforming goods and that the buyer, not having discovered the nonconformity, *accepts* them—the nonconforming goods are in the buyer's hands. The buyer has a right to revoke acceptance, but before the defective goods are returned to the seller, they are destroyed while in the buyer's possession. The seller breached,

but here's the wrinkle: the UCC says that the seller bears the loss only to the extent of any deficiency in the buyer's insurance coverage. <sup>[5]</sup> Very Fast Foods had taken delivery of the sponges and only a few days later discovered that the sponges did not conform to the contract. Very Fast has the right to revoke and announces its intention to do so. A day later its warehouse burns down and the sponges are destroyed. It then discovers that its insurance was not adequate to cover all the sponges. Who stands the loss? The seller does, again, to the extent of any deficiency in the buyer's insurance coverage.

Second, what if the *buyer* breaches the contract? Here's the scenario: Suppose Very Fast Foods calls two days before the sponges identified to the contract are to be delivered by Delta and says, "Don't bother; we no longer have a need for them." Subsequently, while the lawyers are arguing, Delta's warehouse burns down and the sponges are destroyed. Under the rules, risk of loss does not pass to the buyer until the seller has delivered, which has not occurred in this case.

Nevertheless, responsibility for the loss here has passed to Very Fast Foods, to the extent that the seller's insurance does not cover it. Section 2-510(3) of the UCC permits the seller to treat the risk of loss as resting on the buyer for a "commercially reasonable time" when the buyer repudiates the contract before risk of loss has passed to him. This transfer of the risk can take place only when the goods are identified to the contract. The theory is that if the buyer had taken the goods as per the contract, the goods would not have been in the warehouse and thus would not have been burned up.

## **Insurable Interest**

### **Why It Matters**

We noted at the start of this chapter that who has title is important for several reasons, one of which is because it affects who has an insurable interest. (You can't take out insurance in something you have no interest in: if you have no title, you may not have an insurable interest.) And it was noted that the rules on risk of loss are affected by insurance. (The theory is that a businessperson is likely to have insurance, which is a cost of business, and if she has insurance and also has possession of goods—even nonconforming ones—it is reasonable to charge her insurance with loss of the goods; thus she will have cause to take care of them in her possession, else her insurance rates increase.) So in commercial transactions insurance is important, and

when goods are lost or destroyed, the frequent argument is between the buyer's and the seller's insurance companies, neither of which wants to be responsible. They want to deny that their insured had an insurable interest. Thus it becomes important who has an insurable interest.

### **Insurable Interest of the Buyer**

It is not necessary for the buyer to go all the way to having title in order for him to have an insurable interest. The buyer obtains a “special property and insurable interest in goods by identification of existing goods as goods to which the contract refers.”<sup>[6]</sup> We already discussed how “identification” of the goods can occur. The parties can do it by branding, marking, tagging, or segregating them—and they can do it at any time. We also set out the rules for when goods will be considered identified to the contract under the UCC if the parties don't do it themselves ([Section 18.1.2 "Goods Identified to the Contract"](#)).

### **Insurable Interest of the Seller**

As long as the seller retains title to or any security interest in the goods, he has an insurable interest.

### **Other Rights of the Buyer**

The buyer's “special property” interest that arises upon identification of goods gives the buyer rights other than that to insure the goods. For example, under Section 2-502 of the UCC, the buyer who has paid for unshipped goods may take them from a seller who becomes insolvent within ten days after receipt of the whole payment or the first installment payment. Similarly, a buyer who has not yet taken delivery may sue a third party who has in some manner damaged the property.

## **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Knowing who has the risk of loss in a contract for the sale of goods is important for obvious reasons: it is not uncommon for goods to be lost or stolen between the time they leave the seller's possession and before the buyer gets them. The parties are certainly free to agree on when the risk of loss shifts; if they do not, the UCC says it shifts when the seller has completed obligations under the contract. Thus if there is no breach, the risk of loss shifts upon delivery. If there is a breach, the UCC places the risk of loss on the breaching party, with this caveat: where the nonbreaching party is in control of the goods, the UCC places the risk

of loss on that party to the extent of her insurance coverage. So if there is a breach by the seller (delivery of nonconforming goods), the risk of loss never shifts except if the buyer has taken possession of the nonconforming goods; in that case, the buyer does have the risk of loss insofar as her insurance covers the loss. If the buyer breaches by repudiating before the risk of loss passes to him (by the goods' delivery), the UCC permits the seller to treat the risk of loss as resting on the buyer for a commercially reasonable time as to goods identified to the contract.

Insurable interest becomes important when goods suffer a casualty loss because—among other reasons—often neither the seller's nor the buyer's insurance company wants *its* insured to have an interest in the goods: each side denies it. The seller retains an insurable interest if he has title to or any security interest in the goods, and the buyer obtains an insurable interest by identification of existing goods as goods to which the contract refers.

A person has an insurable interest in any property owned or in the person's possession.

## EXERCISES

1. Which is more important in determining who has the risk of loss, the agreement of the parties or the UCC's default provisions?
2. When does the risk of loss shift to the buyer if the parties have no agreement on the issue?
3. Why does the UCC impose the risk of loss to the extent of his insurance on a nonbreaching party if that party has control of the goods?
4. Why can a person not take out insurance for goods in which the person has no interest? How does a seller retain an insurable interest? When does the buyer get an insurable interest?

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[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-303.

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-327(1)(a).

[3] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-326(3).

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-326.

[5] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-510(2).

[6] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-501(1).

## 18.4 Cases

### Transfer of Title: Destination Contracts

*Sam and Mac, Inc. v. Treat*

*783 N.E.2d 760 (Ind. App. 2003)*

Anthony L. Gruda and Sharon R. Gruda (the “Grudas”) owned and operated Gruda Enterprises, Inc. (Gruda Enterprises), which in turn operated The Kitchen Works, a kitchen supply business. On March 5, 1998, Gruda Enterprises contracted to sell a set of kitchen cabinets to Sam and Mac, Inc. [SMI], a commercial construction and contracting corporation. Gruda Enterprises was also to deliver and install the cabinets. Because it did not have the cabinets in stock, Gruda Enterprises ordered them from a manufacturer. On March 14, 1998, nine days after placing the order, SMI pre-paid Gruda Enterprises for the cabinet order.

On May 14, 1998, prior to delivery and installation of the cabinets, the Grudas ceased operation of Gruda Enterprises and filed for personal bankruptcy. Gruda Enterprises did not file for bankruptcy and was not dissolved. Instead, the Grudas’ stock in Gruda Enterprises became part of their bankruptcy estate....When no cabinets were delivered or installed, and the Grudas ceased operation of Gruda Enterprises, SMI asked Treat, who was the landlord of Gruda Enterprises, to open the business premises and permit SMI to remove cabinets from the property. Treat declined, stating that he feared he would incur liability to Gruda Enterprises if he started giving away its inventory. Treat and other secured creditors sued Gruda Enterprises, which owed them money. [Summary judgment was for Treat, SMI appeals.]

SMI contends that there was a completed sale between SMI, as the buyer, and Gruda Enterprises, as the seller. Specifically, SMI maintains that title to the cabinets under [UCC] 2-401(3)(b) passed to SMI when the contract for sale was [made]....Therefore, SMI argues that the trial court improperly granted summary judgment in favor of Treat because [SMI] held title and, thus, a possessory interest in the cabinets....

[T]he contract is governed by the...Indiana Uniform Commercial Code (UCC). 2-401 establishes the point in time at which title passes from seller to buyer. Specifically, 2-401(2) provides, in

pertinent part, that unless explicitly agreed, title passes to the buyer at the time and place at which the seller completes his performance with respect to the physical delivery of goods.... Moreover, the record indicates that SMI and Gruda Enterprises did not have an explicit agreement to pass title at any other time, or at any time prior to actual delivery of the cabinets. SMI argues that title passed to it under 2-401(3)(b) ["where delivery is to be made without moving the goods,...if the goods are at the time of contracting already identified and no documents are to be delivered, title passes at the time and place of contracting."]....However, the record reflects that SMI admitted that the terms of the contract required Gruda Enterprises to not only order the cabinets, but to deliver and install them at the location specified by SMI, i.e. the house that SMI was building. 2-403(3) applies to purchases of goods where delivery is to be made without moving the goods. SMI argues that since the cabinets were identified at the time of contracting and no documents needed delivery, title passed at the time and place of contracting....

[T]itle to goods cannot pass under a contract for sale prior to their identification in the contract. See 2-401(1). This does not mean that title passes when the goods are identified. It only means that identification is merely the earliest possible opportunity for title to pass....[I]dentification does not, in and of itself, confer either ownership or possessory rights in the goods. [UCC] 2-401(2)(b) states that "[i]f the contract requires delivery at destination, title passes on tender there." In the present case, tender did not occur when Gruda Enterprises called SMI to notify it that the cabinets were in and ready to be delivered and installed. SMI requested that the cabinets remain at the warehouse until the house it was building was ready for the cabinets to be installed....[W]e find that SMI and Gruda Enterprises agreed to a destination point, i.e. the house that SMI was building. Accordingly, we find that 2-401(2)(b) is also applicable. The title to the cabinets did not pass to SMI because the cabinets were not delivered and installed at the agreed upon destination. Therefore, we conclude that SMI does not have a possessory interest in the cabinets.

Based on the foregoing, we conclude that the trial court properly granted summary judgment in favor of Treat....Affirmed.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. One argument made by the plaintiff was that because the plaintiff had paid for the goods and they had been identified to the contract, title passed to the plaintiff. Why did the court disagree with this contention?

2. When would title to the cabinets have shifted to the plaintiff?

3. This is footnote 2 (it was not included in the parts of the case set out above): “We note that Treat owned Kitchen Wholesalers, Inc., from approximately 1987 to approximately June 20, 1996. On or about June 20, 1996, Kitchen Wholesalers, Inc. sold its assets, inventory, equipment, and business to Gruda Enterprises. The Grudas executed an Agreement for Sale of Assets, Lease, and Security Agreement, as well as a Promissory Note in which they agreed to pay \$45,000 for the assets, inventory, equipment, and business, and to pay monthly rent of \$1,500 for the premises where the business was located, and secured their obligations with inventory, equipment, and proceeds therefrom, of the business which they were purchasing. Treat filed and perfected a security interest in the accounts receivable, inventory, and equipment of The Kitchen Works on August 28, 1998. The Grudas currently owe Treat \$61,794.99.”

This means that when the Grudas failed to pay Treat, he had a right to repossess all assets *belonging to them*, including the cabinets—Treat was a creditor of the Grudas. SMI, of course, contended it had title to the cabinets. Based on the court’s analysis, who is going to get the cabinets?

## Defrauding Buyer Sells to Good-Faith Purchaser for Value

*Marlow v. Conley*

*787 N.E.2d 490, (Ind. App. 2003)*

Donald E. Marlow appeals the trial court’s judgment in favor of Robert L. Medley and Linda L. Medley (collectively, the “Medleys”) on Marlow’s complaint for replevin. Marlow raises [this issue],...whether the Medleys obtained good title to a truck pursuant to Indiana UCC 2-403(1). We affirm.

The relevant facts follow. On May 21, 2000, Robert Medley attended a car show in Indianapolis. Henderson Conley attended the same car show and was trying to sell a 1932 Ford Truck



("Truck"). Conley told Robert that he operated a "buy here, pay here car lot," and Robert saw that the Truck had a dealer license plate. Robert purchased the Truck for \$7,500.00 as a gift for Linda. Conley gave Robert the Truck's certificate of title, which listed the owner as Donald Marlow. When Robert questioned Conley about the owner of the Truck, Conley responded that Marlow had signed the title as part of a deal Conley had made with him. After purchasing the Truck, Robert applied to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles for a certificate of title in Linda's name. On December 18, 2000, Marlow filed a complaint against Conley and the Medleys....At the bench trial, Marlow testified that he had met Conley at a car show in Indianapolis on May 19, 2000, and Conley had told him that Conley owed a "car lot" on the west side of Indianapolis. Marlow also testified that Conley came to his house that night, but he "didn't let him in." Rather, Marlow testified that Conley "[came] over [his] fence...a big high fence." According to Marlow, Conley asked him to invest in Conley's business that night. Marlow gave Conley \$500.00. Marlow testified that Conley came back the next day and Marlow gave him an additional \$4,000.00. Marlow then testified that Conley stole the certificate of title for the Truck from Marlow's house and stole the Truck from his garage. According to Marlow, he told Conley later in the day to bring his Truck back and Conley told him that it had caught on fire. Marlow testified that he then called the police. However, in the May 30, 2000 police report, which was admitted into evidence at trial, the police officer noted the following:

*The deal was [Conley] gets \$4500.00, plus an orange '32 Ford truck. In return, [Marlow] would get a '94 Ford flatbed dump truck and an '89 Ford Bronco. [Marlow] stated that he has not received the vehicles and that [Conley] keeps delaying getting the vehicles for him. [Conley] gave [Marlow] several titles of vehicles which are believed to be junk. [Conley] told [Marlow] that he has a car lot at 16th and Lafayette Road.*

[The trial court determined that Marlow bought the truck from Conley, paying Conley \$4500 plus a Ford flatbed truck and Ford Bronco.]

...

The issue is whether the Medleys obtained good title to the Truck pursuant to Indiana UCC 2-403(1) [voidable title passed on to good-faith purchaser]. We first note that UCC 2-401(2)

provides that “[u]nless otherwise explicitly agreed, title passes to the buyer at the time and place at which the seller completes his performance with reference to the physical delivery of the goods....” Further, 2-403(1) provides as follows: “A purchaser of goods acquires all title which his transferor had or had power to transfer....A person with voidable title has power to transfer a good title to a good faith purchaser for value. When goods have been delivered under a transaction of purchase, the purchaser has such power even though:...(d) the delivery was procured through fraud punishable as theft under the criminal law.”

Thus, Conley, as purchaser of the goods, acquired all title to the Truck that Marlow, as transferor, had or had power to transfer. Additionally, even if Conley had “voidable title,” he had the power to transfer good title to the Medleys if they were “good faith purchasers for value.” Consequently, we must determine whether Conley had voidable title and, if so, whether the Medleys were good faith purchasers for value.

#### **A. Voidable Title**

We first determine whether Conley had voidable title to the Truck....[T]he UCC does not define “voidable title.” However, we have held that Indiana’s UCC 2-403 is consistent with Indiana’s common law, which provided that “legal title passes to a defrauding buyer. This title is not void; it is voidable, which means that when title gets into the hands of a bona fide purchaser for value then he will prevail over the defrauded seller.” [Citation] Thus, a “defrauding buyer” obtains voidable title. However, a thief obtains void title. See, e.g., [Citation] holding that a renter who stole a motor home had void title, not voidable title, and could not convey good title)....

Here, Marlow argues that Conley stole the Truck and forged his name on the certificate of title. However, the trial court was presented with conflicting evidence regarding whether Conley stole the Truck and the certificate of title or whether Conley and Marlow had a business deal and Conley failed to comply with the agreement. The trial court found that:

*Evidence presented concerning [Marlow’s] complaint to the Indianapolis Police Department on May 30, 2000 casts doubt on the credibility of [Marlow’s] trial testimony as the report states the truck and title were obtained by Conley in exchange for a 1994 Ford Flatbed Dump Truck and a 1989 Ford Bronco plus the payment of*

*\$4500.00 by [Marlow]. Apparently, [Marlow] was complaining to the police concerning Conley's failure to deliver the two Ford vehicles.*

...The trial court did not find Marlow's testimony regarding the theft of the Truck and the certificate of title to be credible....[B]ased upon the trial court's findings of fact, we must assume that the police report accurately describes the circumstances under which Conley obtained possession of the Truck and its signed certificate of title. Consequently, we assume that Marlow gave Conley \$4,500.00 and the Truck in exchange for two other vehicles. Although Conley gave Marlow the certificates of title for the two vehicles, he never delivered the vehicles.

Conley's title is voidable if "the delivery was procured through fraud punishable as theft under the criminal law" under 2-403(1)(d)....Assuming that Conley knew that he would not deliver the two vehicles to Marlow, the delivery of the Truck to Conley was procured through fraud punishable as theft. Consequently, Marlow was defrauded, and Conley obtained voidable title to the Truck....

#### **B. Good Faith Purchasers for Value**

Having determined that Conley obtained voidable title to the Truck, we must now determine whether the Medleys were good faith purchasers for value. Marlow does not dispute that the Medleys were purchasers for value. Rather, Marlow questions their "good faith" because they purchased the Truck from someone other than the person listed on the Truck's certificate of title. [UCC 1-201919] defines good faith as "honesty in fact in the conduct or transaction concerned." Marlow argues that Robert did not purchase the Truck in good faith because, although Robert purchased the vehicle from Conley, he was aware that the certificate of title was signed by Marlow.

...Here, the sole evidence presented by Marlow regarding the Medleys' lack of good faith is the fact that the certificate of title provided by Conley was signed by Marlow. Robert testified that he thought Conley was a licensed dealer and operated a "buy here, pay here" car lot. The Truck had a dealer license plate. Robert questioned Conley about the certificate of title. Conley explained that Marlow had signed the title as part of a deal Conley had made with him. Robert also testified that he had previously purchased vehicles at car shows and had previously purchased a vehicle from a dealer where the certificate of title had the previous owner's name on it....

The Medleys' failure to demand a certificate of title complying with [the Indiana licensing statute] does not affect their status as good faith purchasers in this case....The statute does not void transactions that violate the statute. [Citations] Although the failure to comply with [the licensing statute] may, combined with other suspicious circumstances, raise questions about a purchaser's good faith, we find no such circumstances here. Consequently, the Medleys were good faith purchasers for value....

Lastly, Marlow also argues that the Medleys violated [licensing statutes] by providing false information to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles because the Medleys allegedly listed the seller of the Truck as Marlow rather than Conley. We noted above that legal title to a vehicle is governed by the sales provisions of the UCC rather than the Indiana Certificate of Title Act. Thus, although false statements to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles under Ind.Code § 9-18-2-2 could result in prosecution for perjury, such false statements do not affect legal title to the vehicle. In summary, we conclude that, as a defrauding buyer, Conley possessed voidable title and transferred good title to the Medleys as good faith purchasers for value....Thus, legal title to the Truck passed to the Medleys at the time Conley delivered the Truck to them. See UCC 2-401(2) (“[T]itle passes to the buyer at the time and place at which the seller completes his performance with reference to the physical delivery of the goods....”). This result is consistent with the policy behind 2-403.

Section 2-403 was intended to determine the priorities between the two innocent parties: (1) the original owner who parts with his goods through fraudulent conduct of another and (2) an innocent third party who gives value for the goods to the perpetrator of the fraud without knowledge of the fraud. By favoring the innocent third party, the Uniform Commercial Code endeavors to promote the flow of commerce by placing the burden of ascertaining and preventing fraudulent transactions on the one in the best position to prevent them, the original seller. The policy behind the UCC is to favor the Medleys because, as between the Medleys and Marlow, Marlow was in the best position to prevent the fraudulent transaction.

For the foregoing reasons, we affirm the trial court's judgment for the Medleys. Affirmed.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. The court determined Marlow was defrauded by Conley. How did Conley defraud Marlow?

2. What is the rationale, here expressed, for the UCC's provision that a defrauding purchaser (Conley) can pass on title to a good-faith purchaser for value?
3. Why did Marlow think the Medleys should not be considered good-faith purchasers?
4. Why would the UCC prevail over the state's certificate of title act?

## **Risk of Loss, Seller a Merchant**

*Ramos v. Wheel Sports Center*

*409 N.Y.S.2d 505 (N.Y. Civ. Ct. 1978)*

Mercorella, J.

In this non-jury action plaintiff/purchaser is seeking to recover from defendant/vendor the sum of \$893 [about \$3,200 in 2010 dollars] representing the payment made by plaintiff for a motorcycle.

The parties entered into a sales contract wherein defendant agreed to deliver a motorcycle to plaintiff by June 30, 1978, for the agreed price of \$893. The motorcycle was subsequently stolen by looters during the infamous power blackout of July 11, 1977.

It is uncontroverted that plaintiff paid for the motorcycle in full; was given the papers necessary for registration and insurance and did in fact register the cycle and secure liability insurance prior to the loss although license plates were never affixed to the vehicle. It is also conceded that the loss occurred without any negligence on defendant's part.

Plaintiff testified that defendant's salesman was informed that plaintiff was leaving on vacation and plaintiff would come for the cycle when he returned. He further testified that he never saw or rode the vehicle. From the evidence adduced at trial it is apparent that plaintiff never exercised dominion or control over the vehicle.

Defendant's president testified that he had no knowledge of what transpired between his salesman and plaintiff nor why the cycle was not taken prior to its loss.

The sole issue presented to the Court is which party, under the facts disclosed, bears the risk of loss?

It is the opinion of this Court that defendant must bear the risk of loss under the provisions of Section 2-509(3) of the Uniform Commercial Code.

This section provides that “...the risk of loss passes to the buyer on his receipt of the goods if the seller is a merchant....” Section 2-103(1)(c) states that receipt of goods means taking physical possession of them. [Authors’ note: UCC revisions have changed the rule so that risk of loss passes to the buyer on his receipt of the goods *irrespective* of whether the seller is a merchant or not. It is still 2-509(3), however.]

The provision tends more strongly to hold risk of loss on the seller than did the former Uniform Sales Act. Whether the contract involves delivery at the seller’s place of business or at the situs of the goods, a merchant seller cannot transfer risk of loss and it remains on him until actual receipt by the buyer, even though full payment has been made and the buyer notified that the goods are at his disposal. The underlying theory is that a merchant who is to make physical delivery at his own place continues meanwhile to control the goods and can be expected to insure his interest in them.

The Court is also of the opinion that no bailee/bailor relationship, constructive or otherwise, existed between the parties.

Accordingly, let judgment be entered in favor of plaintiff for the sum of \$893, together with interest, costs and disbursements.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What caused the loss here, through no fault of either party?
2. What is the rationale for holding the merchant-seller liable in this circumstance?
3. Suppose instead that Ramos had purchased the motorcycle at a garage sale from an acquaintance and the same loss occurred. Who would bear the risk then?

## 18.5 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Two significant questions lurk in the background of any sale: (1) when does title pass? and (2) who must bear the risk of loss if the goods are destroyed or damaged through no fault of either party?

In general, title passes when the buyer and the seller agree that it passes. If the buyer and the seller fail to specify the time at which title passes, Article 2 lays down four rules: (1) under a shipment contract, title passes when the seller places the goods with the carrier; (2) under a

destination contract, title passes when the goods are tendered at the place of delivery; (3) under a contract calling for delivery of documents of title, title passes when the seller tenders documents of title, even if the goods are not physically moved; and (4) when no physical delivery or exchange of documents is called for, title passes when the contract is signed.

The buyer and the seller may also specify who must bear the risk of loss. But if they do not, Article 2 sets out these four rules: (1) when the seller must ship by carrier but not to any particular destination, risk passes to the buyer when the seller delivers the goods to the carrier; (2) when the goods must be transported to a particular destination, risk passes when the carrier tenders them at that destination; (3) if the goods are held by a bailee who has issued a negotiable document of title, risk passes when the buyer receives the document; (4) in other cases, risk of loss turns on whether the seller is a merchant. If he is a merchant, risk passes when the buyer receives the goods; if he is not a merchant, risk passes when the seller tenders the goods. These rules are modified when either of the parties breaches the contract. In general, unless the breach is cured, the risk of uninsured losses lies on the party who breached.

Either party may insure the goods if it has an insurable interest in them. The buyer has an insurable interest in goods identified to the contract—for example, by marking them in some manner. The seller has an insurable interest as long as he retains title or a security interest.

In fixing passage of title and risk of loss, the parties often use shorthand terminology whose meaning must be mastered to make sense of the contract. These terms include F.O.B.; F.A.S.; ex-ship; C.I.F.; C.F.; no arrival, no sale; sale on approval; and sale or return. Use of these terms in a contract can have a significant effect on title and risk of loss.

Sometimes goods are sold by nonowners. A person with voidable title has the power to transfer title to a good-faith purchaser for value. A merchant who deals in particular goods has the power to transfer all rights of one who entrusts to him goods of the kind. And a rightful owner may be estopped by his own acts from asserting title against an innocent purchaser.

## EXERCISES

1. Betty from Baltimore contracts to purchase one hundred purple llama figurines from Sam of Syracuse. Sam is to send the goods by carrier and is not required to deliver them to Betty's

Boutique, their destination. He ships them by train, which unfortunately crashes in Delaware. All the figurines are destroyed. Whose loss is it? Why?

2. In Exercise 1, assume that the train did not crash but that Sam's creditors attempted to seize the goods before their arrival. May the creditors do so? Why?
3. Hattie's Head Shop signed a written agreement with the Tangerine Computer Company to supply a Marilyn, a supercomputer with bubble memory, to total up its orders and pay its foreign agents. The contract provided that the computer was to be specially built and that Tangerine would deliver it by carrier to Hattie's ready to install no later than June 1. Tangerine engineers worked feverishly to comply with the contract terms. On May 25, the computer stood gleaming in Tangerine's shipping department. That night, before the trucks could depart, a tornado struck the factory and destroyed the computer intended for Hattie's. Whose loss is it? Why?
4. In Exercise 3, assume that the tornado did not strike but that Tangerine's creditors attempted to seize the computer. May they? Why?
5. On February 18, Clancy, who was in debt, took his stereo to Lucy's repair shop. Because Lucy and Clancy were old friends, Lucy didn't give him a receipt. On February 19, hounded by creditors, Clancy sold the stereo on credit to Grover, who was to pick it up on February 21 at Lucy's, pay Lucy the repair bill, and pay the balance of the purchase price to Clancy. Who is entitled to the radio if, on February 20, Clancy's creditor appears with the sheriff to seize the stereo from Lucy? Why?
6. Assume in Exercise 5 that, instead of the attempted seizure of the stereo by the creditor, Lucy's shop and the stereo are destroyed by fire on February 20. Must Grover still pay Clancy for the stereo? Why?
7. Cleo's Close-Outs, a wholesaler of discounted merchandise, offered Randy's Retailers a chance to buy all the contents of a shipment of bathtub toys just received. Cleo estimated that she had between five hundred and six hundred rubber ducks and wrote on October 21 offering them to Randy for only one dollar each if Randy would pick them up at Cleo's. Randy received the letter in the mail the next day and mailed his acceptance immediately. In the wee hours of the following morning, October 23, a fire consumed Cleo's warehouse, melting



the ducks into an uneven soup. Assuming that Cleo was a merchant, who bears the loss? Why?

8. Plaintiff, a manufacturer of men's clothing in Los Angeles, contracted to sell a variety of clothing items to Defendant, Harrison's clothing store in Westport, Connecticut, "F.O.B. Los Angeles." Plaintiff delivered the goods to Trucking Company and received a bill of lading. When the goods arrived at Defendant's store about two weeks later, Mrs. Harrison, Defendant's wife, who was in charge of the store at the time, requested the truck driver to deliver the goods inside the door of the shop. The driver refused and ultimately drove away. The goods were lost. Defendant refused to pay for the goods and raised as a defense that "the Plaintiff refused to deliver the merchandise into the Defendant's place of business." Who wins and why? <sup>[1]</sup>
9. Jackson owned a number of guns and asked his friend Willard, who ran a country store, if Willard would let Jackson display the guns in the store for sale on consignment. Willard would get some compensation for his trouble. Willard agreed. Subsequently Willard's creditors seized assets of the store, including the guns. Jackson protested that they were his guns, not Willard's, and that the latter's creditors should keep their hands off them. Given no other facts, who wins?
10. Plaintiff advertised his car for sale. Roberts stopped by to look at it. He took it for a short test drive, returned to Plaintiff's house, and said, "I like it, but my wife needs to look at it before I buy it. I'll be back in less than half an hour." Roberts took the car and never returned. Plaintiff called the police, who later found the car in a neighboring state. Defendant had bought it from Roberts, who had presented him with forged registration papers. Plaintiff then sued Defendant to get the car back. Who wins?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. In a sale-on-approval contract
  - a. the goods are intended primarily for the buyer's use
  - b. the goods are intended primarily for resale
  - c. the risk of loss is on the buyer
  - d. the buyer obtains title upon receipt of the goods

As a general rule

- a. goods cannot be sold by persons with voidable title
- b. a rightful owner cannot be estopped from asserting title against an innocent purchaser
- c. a merchant cannot transfer the rights of a person who entrusts goods to him
- d. a person with voidable title has the power to transfer title to a good-faith purchaser for value

In general, title passes

- a. to a buyer when the contract is signed
- b. when the buyer and the seller agree that it passes
- c. to a buyer when the seller receives payment for goods
- d. under none of the above conditions

When a destination contract does not specify when title is to pass, it passes

- a. when the goods are shipped
- b. when the contract is signed
- c. when the buyer pays for the goods
- d. when the seller tenders delivery

In a C.I.F. contract

- a. the seller must obtain insurance
- b. the buyer must obtain insurance
- c. the seller has fewer duties than with a C.F. contract
- d. title passes to the buyer when the seller tenders delivery

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. a
- 2. d
- 3. b
- 4. d
- 5. a

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[1] *Ninth Street East, Ltd. v. Harrison*, 259 A.2d 772 (Conn. 1968).



# Chapter 19

## Performance and Remedies

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. What performance is expected of the seller in a sales contract
2. What performance is expected of the buyer in a sales contract
3. What rights and duties the buyer has if there is a nonconforming delivery
4. How, in general, the UCC approaches remedies
5. What the seller's remedies are for breach by the buyer
6. What the buyer's remedies are for breach by the seller
7. What excuses the UCC provides for nonperformance

In Part II, we examined contract performance and remedies under common law. In this chapter, we examine performance and remedies under Article 2, the law of sales, of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC). In the next chapter, we cover special remedies for those damaged or injured by defective products.

The parties often set out in their contracts the details of performance. These include price terms and terms of delivery—where the goods are to be delivered, when, and how. If the parties fail to list these terms, the rules studied in this chapter will determine the parties' obligations: the parties may agree; if they do not, the UCC rules kick in as the default. In any event, the parties have an obligation to act in good faith.

## 19.1 Performance by the Seller

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand what is meant when it is said the seller has a duty to “make a timely delivery of conforming goods.”

### The Seller's Duty in General

The general duty of the seller is this: to make a timely delivery of conforming goods. <sup>[1]</sup>

**The CISG, Article 30, says, “The seller must deliver the goods, hand over any documents relating to them and transfer the property in the goods, as required by the contract and this Convention.”**

## **Analysis of the Seller’s Duty**

### **Timing**

By agreement or stipulation, the parties may fix the time when delivery is to be made by including statements in contracts such as “Delivery is due on or before July 8” or “The first of 12 installments is due on or before July 8.” Both statements are clear.

If the parties do not stipulate in their contract when delivery is to occur, the UCC fills the gap. Section 2-309 of the UCC says, “The time for shipment or any other action under a contract if not provided for in this Article or agreed upon shall be a reasonable time.” And what is a “reasonable time” is addressed by comment 1 to this section:

*It thus turns on the criteria as to “reasonable time” and on good faith and commercial standards set forth in Sections 1-202, 1-203 and 2-103. It...depends on what constitutes acceptable commercial conduct in view of the nature, purposes and circumstances of the action to be taken.*

**The CISG (Article 33) provides as follows:**

***The seller must deliver the goods***

***(a) if a date is fixed by or determinable from the contract, on that date;***

***(b) if a period of time is fixed by or determinable from the contract, at any time within that period unless circumstances indicate that the buyer is to choose a date; or***

***(c) in any other case, within a reasonable time after the conclusion of the contract.***

### **Delivery**

The parties may agree as to how delivery shall be accomplished; if they do not, the UCC fills the gap.

**The CISG (Article 31) says this:**

***If the seller is not bound to deliver the goods at any other particular place, his obligation to deliver consists***

***(a) if the contract of sale involves carriage of the goods—in handing the goods over to the first carrier for transmission to the buyer;***

***(b) if, in cases not within the preceding subparagraph...in placing the goods at the buyer's disposal at that place [where the goods are];***

***(c) in other cases—in placing the goods at the buyer's disposal at the place where the seller had his place of business at the time of the conclusion of the contract.***

### **By Agreement**

The parties may use any language they want to agree on delivery terms.

### **If There Is No Agreement**

If the parties do not stipulate delivery terms or if their agreement is incomplete or merely formulaic, the UCC describes the seller's obligations or gives meaning to the formulaic language. (Because form contracts are prevalent, formulaic language is customary.) You recall the discussion in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch18 about when title shifts: we said title shifts when the seller has completed delivery obligations under the contract, and we ran through how those obligations are usually expressed. A quick review here is appropriate.

The contract may be either a *shipment* contract, a *destination* contract, or a contract where the *goods are not to be moved* (being held by a bailee). In any case, unless otherwise agreed, the delivery must be at a reasonable time and the tender (the offer to make delivery) must be kept open for a reasonable time; the buyer must furnish facilities “reasonably suited to the receipt of the goods.” <sup>[2]</sup>

In a shipment contract, the seller has four duties: (1) to deliver the goods to a carrier; (2) to deliver the goods with a reasonable contract for their transportation; (3) to deliver them with proper documentation for the buyer; and (4) to promptly notify the buyer of the shipment (UCC, Section 2-504). The contract may set out the seller's duties using customary abbreviations, and the UCC interprets those: “F.O.B [insert place where goods are to be shipped from]” means “free on board”—the seller must see to it that the goods are loaded on the vehicle of conveyance at the

place of shipment. “F.A.S. [port of shipment inserted here]” means the seller must see to it that the goods are placed along the ship on the dock ready to be loaded (Section 2-319). Price terms include “C.I.F.,” which means the sale price includes the cost of the goods, insurance, and freight charges, and “C. & F.,” which means the sales price includes the cost of the goods at a cheaper unit price and freight but not insurance. <sup>[3]</sup> If it is clear from the contract that the seller is supposed to ship the goods (i.e., the buyer is not going to the seller’s place to get them) but not clear whether it is a shipment or a destination contract, the UCC presumes it is a shipment contract. <sup>[4]</sup>

If it is a destination contract, the seller has two duties: to get the goods to the destination at the buyer’s disposal and to provide appropriate documents of delivery. <sup>[5]</sup> The contract language could be “F.O.B. [place of destination inserted here],” which obligates the seller to deliver to that specific location; “ex-ship,” which obligates the seller to unload the goods from the vehicle of transportation at the agreed location (e.g., load the goods onto the dock); or it could be “no arrival, no sale,” where the seller is not liable for failure of the goods to arrive, unless she caused it. <sup>[6]</sup>

If the goods are in the possession of a bailee and are not to be moved—and the parties don’t stipulate otherwise—the UCC, Section 2-503 says delivery is accomplished when the seller gives the buyer a negotiable document of title, or if none, when the bailee acknowledges the buyer’s right to take the goods.

If nothing at all is said about delivery, the place for delivery is the seller’s place of business or his residence if he has no place of business. <sup>[7]</sup>

### **Conforming Goods**

As always, the parties may put into the contract whatever they want about the goods as delivered. If they don’t, the UCC fills the gaps.

### **By Agreement**

The parties may agree on what “conforming goods” means. An order will specify “large grade A eggs,” and that means something in the trade. Or an order might specify “20 gross 100-count boxes No. 8 × 3/8 × 32 Phillips flathead machine screws.” That is a screw with a designated diameter, length, number of threads per inch, and with a unique, cruciform head insert to take a

particular kind of driver. The buyer might, for example, agree to purchase “seconds,” which are goods with some flaw, such as clothes with seams not sewed quite straight or foodstuffs past their pull date. The parties may also agree in the contract what happens if nonconforming goods are delivered, as we’ll see later in this chapter.

### **If There Is No Agreement**

If nothing is said in the contract about what quality of goods conform to the contract, then the UCC default rule kicks in. The seller is to make a perfect tender: what is delivered must in every respect conform to the contract.<sup>[8]</sup> And if what is delivered doesn’t conform to the contract, the buyer is not obligated to accept the goods.

**The CISG has no perfect tender rule. Article 46 provides this:**

***If the goods do not conform with the contract, the buyer may require delivery of substitute goods only if the lack of conformity constitutes a fundamental breach of contract and a request for substitute goods is made either in conjunction with notice given under article 39 or within a reasonable time thereafter. If the goods do not conform with the contract, the buyer may require the seller to remedy the lack of conformity by repair, unless this is unreasonable having regard to all the circumstances. A request for repair must be made either in conjunction with notice given under article 39 or within a reasonable time thereafter.***

### **Installment Contracts**

Unless otherwise agreed, all goods should be delivered at one time, and no payment is due until tender. But where circumstances permit either party to make or demand delivery in lots, Section 2-307 of the UCC permits the seller to demand payment for each lot if it is feasible to apportion the price. What if the contract calls for delivery in installment, and one installment is defective—is that a material breach of the whole contract? No. Section 2-612 of the UCC says this:

*(2) The buyer may reject any installment which is non-conforming if the non-conformity substantially impairs the value of that installment and cannot be cured or if the non-conformity is a defect in the required documents; but if the non-conformity*



*does not fall within subsection (3) and the seller gives adequate assurance of its cure the buyer must accept that installment.*

*(3) Whenever non-conformity or default with respect to one or more installments substantially impairs the value of the whole contract there is a breach of the whole.*

### **Cure for Improper Delivery**

Failure to make a perfect tender, unless otherwise agreed, is a material breach of the sales contract. However, before the defaulting seller is in complete default, she has a right to cure.

Here's what the UCC says in Section 2-508:

*(1) Where any tender or delivery by the seller is rejected because non-conforming and the time for performance has not yet expired, the seller may seasonably notify the buyer of his intention to cure and may then within the contract time make a conforming delivery.*

*(2) Where the buyer rejects a non-conforming tender which the seller had reasonable grounds to believe would be acceptable with or without money allowance the seller may if he seasonably notifies the buyer have a further reasonable time to substitute a conforming tender.*

Buyer orders Santa Claus candles deliverable November 5; on October 25 the goods are delivered, but they're not right: they're Christmas *angel* candles instead. But the seller still has eleven days to cure, and the buyer must allow that. Buyer places an order exactly the same as the first order, and the order arrives on November 5 in the original manufacturer's packaging, but they're not right. "Well," says the seller, "I thought they'd be OK right out of the package. I'll get the correct ones to you right away." And the buyer would have a duty to allow that, if "right away" is a "further reasonable time."

**Article 48 of the CISG says this:**

***The seller may, even after the date for delivery, remedy at his own expense any failure to perform his obligations, if he can do so without unreasonable delay and without causing the buyer unreasonable inconvenience or uncertainty of reimbursement by the seller of expenses advanced by the buyer. However, the buyer retains any right to claim***

***damages as provided for in this Convention. If the seller requests the buyer to make known whether he will accept performance and the buyer does not comply with the request within a reasonable time, the seller may perform within the time indicated in his request. The buyer may not, during that period of time, resort to any remedy which is inconsistent with performance by the seller.***

So, again, the seller's duty is to make a timely delivery of conforming goods. Let's take a look now at the buyer's duties.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The seller's obligation under the UCC is to make a timely delivery of conforming goods. For each element of the duty—timely, delivery, conforming goods—the parties may agree in their contract. If they do not, the UCC fills in default rules.

#### EXERCISES

1. If the parties do not specify a time for delivery, what is the UCC's default position?
2. What are the seller's obligations in an F.O.B. shipment contract? In an F.O.B. destination contract?
3. Compare the UCC's perfect tender rule to the common-law substantial performance doctrine.

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[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-301 and 2-309.

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-503.

[3] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-320.

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-503(5).

[5] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-503.

[6] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-319, 2-322, and 2-324.

[7] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-308.

[8] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-601.

## 19.2 Performance by Buyer

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what the general duties of the buyer are.
2. Recognize what rights the buyer has if the seller tenders a nonconforming delivery.

### General Duties of Buyer

The general duty of the buyer is this: inspection, acceptance, and payment. <sup>[1]</sup> But the buyer's duty does not arise unless the seller tenders delivery.

#### Inspection

Under Sections 2-513(1) and (2) of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), the buyer has a qualified right to inspect goods. That means the buyer must be given the chance to look over the goods to determine whether they conform to the contract. If they do not, he may properly reject the goods and refuse to pay. The right to inspect is subject to three exceptions:

1. The buyer waives the right. If the parties agree that payment must be made before inspection, then the buyer must pay (unless the nonconformity is obvious without inspection). Payment under these circumstances does not constitute acceptance, and the buyer does not lose the right to inspect and reject later.
2. The delivery is to be made C.O.D. (cash on delivery).
3. Payment is to be made against documents of title.

If the buyer fails to inspect, or fails to discover a defect that an inspection would have revealed, he cannot later revoke his acceptance, subject to some exceptions.

#### Acceptance

Acceptance is clear enough: it means the buyer takes the goods. But the buyer's options on improper delivery need to be examined, because that's often a problem area.

The buyer may accept goods by words, silence, or action. Section 2-606(1) of the UCC defines acceptance as occurring in any one of three circumstances:

1. **Words.** The buyer, after a reasonable opportunity to inspect, tells the seller either that the goods conform or that he will keep them despite any nonconformity.
2. **Silence.** The buyer fails to reject, after a reasonable opportunity to inspect.

3. **Action.** The buyer does anything that is inconsistent with the seller's ownership, such as using the goods (with some exceptions) or selling the goods to someone else.

Once the buyer accepts, she is obligated to pay at the contract rate and loses the right to reject the goods. <sup>[2]</sup> She is stuck, subject to some exceptions.

### **Payment**

The parties may specify in their contract what *payment* means and when it is to be made. If they don't, the UCC controls the transaction. <sup>[3]</sup>

### **A Buyer's Right on Nonconforming Delivery**

Obviously if the delivery is defective, the disappointed buyer does not have to accept the goods: the buyer may (a) reject the whole, (b) accept the whole, or (c) accept any commercial unit and reject the rest (2-601, 2A-509), or (d)—in two situations—revoke an acceptance already made.

### **Rejection and a Buyer's Duties after Rejection**

Under UCC, Section 2-601(a), rejection is allowed if the seller fails to make a perfect tender. The rejection must be made within a reasonable time after delivery or tender. Once it is made, the buyer may not act as the owner of the goods. If he has taken possession of the goods before he rejects them, he must hold them with reasonable care to permit the seller to remove them. If the buyer is a merchant, then the buyer has a special duty to follow reasonable instructions from the seller for disposing of the rejected goods; if no instructions are forthcoming and the goods are perishable, then he must try to sell the goods for the seller's account and is entitled to a commission for his efforts. Whether or not he is a merchant, a buyer may store the goods, reship them to the seller, or resell them—and charge the seller for his services—if the seller fails to send instructions on the goods' disposition. Such storage, reshipping, and reselling are not acceptance or conversion by the buyer.

### **Acceptance of a Nonconforming Delivery**

The buyer need not reject a nonconforming delivery. She may accept it with or without allowance for the nonconformity.

### **Acceptance of Part of a Nonconforming Delivery**

The buyer may accept any commercial unit and reject the rest if she wants to.

A commercial unit means "such a unit of goods as by commercial usage is a single whole for

purposes of sale and division of which materially impairs its character or value on the market or in use. A commercial unit may be a single article (as a machine), a set of articles (as a suite of furniture or an assortment of sizes), a quantity (as a bale, gross, or carload), or any other unit treated in use or in the relevant market as a single whole.”<sup>[4]</sup>

### **Installment Sales**

A contract for an installment sale complicates the answer to the question, “What right does the buyer have to accept or reject when the seller fails to deliver properly?”

(An installment contract is one calling for delivery of goods in separate lots with separate acceptance for each delivery.) The general answer is found in the UCC at Section 2-612, which permits the buyer to reject any nonconforming installment if the nonconformity cannot be cured if it substantially impairs the value of that particular installment. However, the seller may avoid rejection by giving the buyer adequate assurances that he will cure the defect, unless the particular defect substantially impairs the value of the whole contract.

Suppose the Corner Gas Station contracts to buy 12,000 gallons of regular gasoline from Gasoline Seller, deliverable in twelve monthly installments of 1,000 gallons on the first of each month, with a set price payable three days after delivery. In the third month, Seller is short and can deliver only 500 gallons immediately and will not have the second 500 gallons until midmonth. May Corner Gas reject this tender? The answer depends on the circumstances. The nonconformity clearly cannot be cured, since the contract calls for the full 1,000 on a particular day. But the failure to make full delivery does not necessarily impair the value of that installment; for example, Corner Gas may know that it will not use up the 500 gallons until midmonth. However, if the failure will leave Corner Gas short before midmonth and unable to buy from another supplier unless it agrees to take a full 1,000 (more than it could hold at once if it also took Seller’s 500 gallons), then Corner Gas is entitled to reject Seller’s tender.

Is Corner Gas entitled to reject the entire contract on the grounds that the failure to deliver impairs the value of the contract as a whole? Again, the answer depends on whether the impairment was substantial. Suppose other suppliers are willing to sell only if Corner Gas agrees to buy for a year. If Corner Gas needed the extra gasoline right away, the contract would have been breached as whole, and Corner Gas would be justified in rejecting all further attempted

tenders of delivery from Seller. Likewise, if the spot price of gasoline were rising so that month-to-month purchases from other suppliers might cost it more than the original agreed price with Seller, Corner Gas would be justified in rejecting further deliveries from Seller and fixing its costs with a supply contract from someone else. Of course, Corner Gas would have a claim against Seller for the difference between the original contract price and what it had to pay another supplier in a rising market (as you'll see later in this chapter).

### Revocation

A revocation of acceptance means that although the buyer has accepted and exercised ownership of the goods, he can return the goods and get his money back. There are two circumstances in which the buyer can revoke an acceptance if the nonconformity “substantially impairs its value to him”:<sup>[5]</sup>

- a. if the buyer reasonably thought the nonconformity would be cured and it is not within a reasonable time; or
- b. if the acceptance was due to a latent defect that could not reasonably have been discovered before acceptance.

Consider two examples illustrated in the next paragraph. The first deals with point a (buyer thought nonconformity would be cured and it was not within a reasonable time), and the second gets to point b (latent defect).

In August 1983, the Borsages purchased a furnished mobile home on the salesperson's assertion that it was “the Cadillac of mobile homes.” But when they moved in, the Borsages discovered defects: water leaks, loose moldings, a warped dishwasher door, a warped bathroom door, holes in walls, defective heating and cooling systems, cabinets with chips and holes, furniture that fell apart, mold and mildew in some rooms, a closet that leaked rainwater, and defective doors and windows. They had not seen these defects at the time of purchase because they looked at the mobile home at night and there were no lights on in it. The Borsages immediately complained. Repairmen came by but left, only promising to return again. Others did an inadequate repair job by cutting a hole in the bottom of the home and taping up the hole with masking tape that soon failed, causing the underside of the home to pooch out. Yet more repairmen came by but made things worse by inadvertently poking a hole in the septic line and failing to fix it, resulting in a

permanent stench. More repairmen came by, but they simply left a new dishwasher door and countertop at the home, saying they didn't have time to make the repairs. In June 1984, the Borsages provided the seller a long list of uncorrected problems; in October they stopped making payments. Nothing happened. In March 1986—thirty-one months after buying the mobile home—they told the seller to pick up the mobile home: they revoked their acceptance and sued for the purchase price. The defendant seller argued that the Borsages' failure to move out of the house for so long constituted acceptance. But they were repeatedly assured the problems would be fixed, and moreover they had no place else to live, and no property to put another mobile home on if they abandoned the one they had. The court had no problem validating the Borsages' revocation of acceptance, under the section noted earlier, if they ever had accepted it. The seller might have a right to some rental value, though. <sup>[6]</sup>

In April 1976, Clarence Miller ordered a new 1976 Dodge Royal Monaco station wagon from plaintiff Colonial Dodge. The car included a heavy-duty trailer package with wide tires. The evening of the day the Millers picked up the new car, Mrs. Miller noticed that there was no spare tire. The following morning, the defendant notified the plaintiff that he insisted on a spare tire, but when he was told there were no spare tires available (because of a labor strike), Mr. Miller told the plaintiff's salesman that he would stop payment on the check he'd given them and that the car could be picked up in front of his house. He parked it there, where it remained until the temporary registration sticker expired and it was towed by the police to an impound yard. Plaintiff sued for the purchase price, asserting that the missing spare tire did not "substantially impair the value of the goods to the buyer." On appeal to the Michigan Supreme Court, the plaintiff lost. "In this case the defendant's concern with safety is evidenced by the fact that he ordered the special package which included spare tires. The defendant's occupation demanded that he travel extensively, sometimes in excess of 150 miles per day on Detroit freeways, often in the early morning hours....He was afraid of a tire going flat...at 3 a.m. Without a spare, he would be helpless until morning business hours. The dangers attendant upon a stranded motorist are common knowledge, and Mr. Miller's fears are not unreasonable." The court observed that although he had accepted the car before he discovered the nonconformity, that did not preclude revocation: the spare was under a fastened panel, concealed from view. <sup>[7]</sup>

## KEY TAKEAWAY

The duty of the buyer in a sales contract is to inspect, accept, and pay. Failure to discover a defect that an inspection would have revealed is a waiver of right to complain. Normally the goods are conforming and the buyer accepts them, but upon discovery of a defect the buyer may reject the whole nonconforming delivery, part of it (the buyer has some duties if she has possession of the rejected goods), or in some cases reject one installment of an installment sale or, if one defective installment is serious enough to vitiate the whole contract, the buyer may consider the contract terminated. If goods have been accepted because the seller promised to fix defects or because the defects were latent, then the buyer may revoke the acceptance where the nonconformity substantially impairs the value of the contract to the buyer.

## EXERCISES

1. If a buyer takes possession of goods and shortly thereafter discovers they are nonconforming, what duty does the nonmerchant buyer have with respect to the goods? What duty does the merchant buyer have with respect to the goods?
2. What is the difference between rejection and revocation?
3. Under what circumstances will a defective installment allow the buyer to reject that installment? Under what circumstances would a defective installment allow the buyer to terminate the contract?

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[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-301 and 2-513.

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-607.

[3] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-511 and 2-512.

[4] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-105 and 2A103(1).

[5] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-608.

[6] *North River Homes, Inc., v. Borsage, Mississippi* (1992).

[7] *Colonial Dodge v. Miller*, 362 N.W.2d 704 (Mich. 1984).



## 19.3 Remedies

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what purpose remedies serve under the UCC.
2. Be able to see when the parties' agreements as to limited remedies fail under the UCC.
3. Recognize what the seller's remedies are.
4. Recognize what the buyer's remedies are.

### Remedies in General

#### General Policy

The general policy of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) is to put the aggrieved party in a good position as if the other party had fully performed—as if there had been a timely delivery of conforming goods. The UCC provisions are to be read liberally to achieve that result if possible. Thus the seller has a number of potential remedies when the buyer breaches, and likewise the buyer has a number of remedies when the seller breaches.

#### The CISG provides, at Article 74:

***Damages for breach of contract by one party consist of a sum equal to the loss, including loss of profit, suffered by the other party as a consequence of the breach. Such damages may not exceed the loss which the party in breach foresaw or ought to have foreseen at the time of the conclusion of the contract, in the light of the facts and matters of which he then knew or ought to have known, as a possible consequence of the breach of contract.***

#### Specifying Remedies

We have emphasized how the UCC allows people to make almost any contract they want (as long as it's not unconscionable). Just as the parties may specify details of performance in the contract, so they may provide for and limit remedies in the event of breach. <sup>[1]</sup> The following would be a typical limitation of remedy: "Seller's sole obligation in the event goods are deemed defective by the seller is to replace a like quantity of nondefective goods." A remedy is optional unless it is expressly agreed that it is the exclusive remedy. <sup>[2]</sup>

But the parties are not free to eliminate all remedies. As the UCC comment to this provision puts it, "If the parties intend to conclude a contract for sale within this Article they must accept the

legal consequence that there be at least a fair quantum of remedy for breach of the obligations or duties outlined in the contract.” In particular, the UCC lists three exemptions from the general rule that the parties are free to make their contract up any way they want as regards remedies:

1. When the circumstances cause the agreed-to remedy to fail or be ineffective, the default UCC remedy regime works instead. <sup>[3]</sup>
2. Consequential damages may be limited or excluded unless the limitation or exclusion is unconscionable. Limitation of consequential damages for injury to the person in the case of consumer goods is prima facie unconscionable, but limitation of damages where the loss is commercial is not. <sup>[4]</sup>
3. The parties may agree to liquidated damages: “Damages for breach by either party may be liquidated in the agreement but only at an amount which is reasonable in the light of the anticipated or actual harm caused by the breach, the difficulties of proof of loss, and the inconvenience or nonfeasibility of otherwise obtaining an adequate remedy. A term fixing unreasonably large liquidated damages is void as a penalty.” <sup>[5]</sup> The Code’s equivalent position on *leases* is interestingly slightly different. UCC 2A-504(1) says damages may be liquidated “but only at an amount or by a formula that is reasonable in light of the then anticipated harm caused” by the breach. It leaves out anything about difficulties of proof or inconvenience of obtaining another adequate remedy.

### **Statute of Limitations**

The UCC statute of limitations for breach of any sales contract is four years. The parties may “reduce the period of limitation to not less than one year but may not extend it.” <sup>[6]</sup> Article 2A-506(1) is similar, but omits the prohibition against extending the limitation. Article 2-725(2) goes on: “A cause of action accrues when the breach occurs, regardless of the aggrieved party’s lack of knowledge of the breach. A breach of warranty occurs when tender of delivery is made, except that where a warranty explicitly extends to future performance of the goods and discovery of the breach must await the time of such performance the cause of action accrues when the breach is or should have been discovered.”

Article 2A-506(2) is similar to 2-725(2).

### **Seller’s Remedies**

## Article 2 in General

Article 2-703 of the UCC lists the four things the buyer can do by way of default, and it lists—here slightly paraphrased—the seller’s remedies (2A-523(1) is similar for leases):

*Where the buyer wrongfully rejects or revokes acceptance of goods or fails to make a payment due on or before delivery or repudiates with respect to a part or the whole, then with respect to any goods directly affected and, if the breach is of the whole contract, then also with respect to the whole undelivered balance, the aggrieved seller may:*

- (1) withhold delivery of such goods;*
- (2) stop delivery by any bailee;*
- (3) identify to the contract conforming goods not already identified;*
- (4) reclaim the goods on the buyer’s insolvency;*
- (5) resell and recover damages;*
- (6) recover damages for non-acceptance or repudiation;*
- (7) or in a proper case recover the price;*
- (8) cancel.*

Items (1)–(4) address the seller’s rights to deal with the goods; items (5)–(7) deal with the seller’s rights as regards the price, and item (8) deals with the continued existence of the contract.

**The CISG’s take is similar. Article 61 and following state,**

***If the buyer fails to perform any of his obligations under the contract or this Convention, the seller may:...***

- (a) require the buyer to pay the price.***
- (b) Fix an additional period of time of reasonable length for performance by the buyer of his obligations; unless the seller has received notice from the buyer that he will not perform within the period so fixed, the seller may not, during that period, resort to any remedy for breach of contract.***
- (c) Declare the contract avoided if the failure by the buyer to perform any of his obligations under the contract or this Convention amounts to a fundamental breach of contract or if the buyer does not, within the***

***additional period of time fixed by the seller [above], perform his obligation to pay the price or take delivery of the goods, or if he declares that he will not do so within the period so fixed. (d) The seller also has the right to damages.***

To illustrate the UCC's remedy provision, in this and the following section, we assume these facts: Howard, of Los Angeles, enters into a contract to sell and ship one hundred prints of a Pieter Bruegel painting, plus the original, to Bunker in Dallas. Twenty-five prints have already been delivered to Bunker, another twenty-five are en route (having been shipped by common carrier), another twenty-five are finished but haven't yet been shipped, and the final twenty-five are still in production. The original is hanging on the wall in Howard's living room. We will take up the seller's remedies if the buyer breaches and if the buyer is insolvent.

#### **Remedies on Breach**

Bunker, the buyer, breaches the contract. He sends Howard an e-mail stating that he won't buy and will reject the goods if delivery is attempted. Howard has the following cumulative remedies; election is not required.

#### **Withhold Further Delivery**

Howard may refuse to send the third batch of twenty-five prints that are awaiting shipment.

#### **Stop Delivery**

Howard may also stop the shipment. If Bunker is insolvent, and Howard discovers it, Howard would be permitted to stop any shipment in the possession of a carrier or bailee. If Bunker is not insolvent, the UCC permits Howard to stop delivery only of carload, truckload, planeload, or larger shipment. The reason for limiting the right to bulk shipments in the case of noninsolvency is that stopping delivery burdens the carrier and requiring a truck, say, to stop and the driver to find a small part of the contents could pose a sizeable burden.

#### **Identify to the Contract Goods in Possession**

Howard could "identify to the contract" the twenty-five prints in his possession. Section 2-704(1) of the UCC permits the seller to denote conforming goods that were not originally specified as the exact objects of the contract, if they are under his control or in his possession at the time of the breach. Assume that Howard had five hundred prints of the Bruegel painting.

The contract did not state which one hundred of those prints he was obligated to sell, but once Bunker breached, Howard could declare that those particular prints were the ones contemplated by the contract. He has this right whether or not the identified goods could be resold. Moreover, Howard may complete production of the twenty-five unfinished prints and identify them to the contract, too, if in his “reasonable commercial judgment” he could better avoid loss—for example, by reselling them. If continued production would be expensive and the chances of resale slight, the seller should cease manufacture and resell for scrap or salvage value.

### **Resell**

Howard could resell the seventy-five prints still in his possession as well as the original. As long as he proceeds in good faith and in a commercially reasonable manner, per Section 2-706(2) and Section 2A-527(3), he is entitled to recover the difference between the resale price and the contract price, plus incidental damages (but less any expenses saved, like shipping expenses). “Incidental damages” include any reasonable charges or expenses incurred because, for example, delivery had to be stopped, new transportation arranged, storage provided for, and resale commissions agreed on.

The seller may resell the goods in virtually any way he desires as long as he acts reasonably. He may resell them through a public or private sale. If the resale is public—at auction—only identified goods can be sold, unless there is a market for a public sale of futures in the goods (as there is in agricultural commodities, for example). In a public resale, the seller must give the buyer notice unless the goods are perishable or threaten to decline in value speedily. The goods must be available for inspection before the resale, and the buyer must be allowed to bid or buy. The seller may sell the goods item by item or as a unit. Although the goods must relate to the contract, it is not necessary for any or all of them to have existed or to have been identified at the time of breach.

The seller does not owe the buyer anything if resale or re-lease results in a profit for the buyer. <sup>[7]</sup>

### **Recover Damages**

The seller may recover damages equal to the difference between the market price (measured at the time and place for tender of delivery) and the unpaid contract price, plus incidental damages, but less any expenses saved because of the buyer’s breach. Suppose Howard’s contract

price was \$100 per print plus \$10,000 for the original and that the market price on the day Howard was to deliver the seventy-five prints was \$75 (plus \$8,000 for the original). Suppose too that the shipping costs (including insurance) that Howard saved when Bunker repudiated were \$2,000 and that to resell them Howard would have to spend another \$750. His damages, then, would be calculated as follows: original contract price (\$17,500) less market price (\$13,625) = \$3,875 less \$2,000 in saved expenses = \$1,875 plus \$750 in additional expenses = \$2,625 net damages recoverable by Howard, the seller.

**The CISG puts it similarly in Article 75: “If the contract is avoided and if, in a reasonable manner and within a reasonable time after avoidance, the buyer has bought goods in replacement or the seller has resold the goods, the party claiming damages may recover the difference between the contract price and the price in the substitute transaction as well as any further damages recoverable.”**

If the formula would not put the seller in as good a position as performance under the contract, then the measure of damages is lost profits—that is, the profit that Howard would have made had Bunker taken the original painting and prints at the contract price (again, deducting expenses saved and adding additional expenses incurred, as well as giving credit for proceeds of any resale).<sup>[8]</sup> This provision becomes especially important for so-called lost volume sellers.

Howard may be able to sell the remaining seventy-five prints easily and at the same price that Bunker had agreed to pay. Then why isn't Howard whole? The reason is that the second buyer was not a *substitute* buyer but an *additional* one; that is, Howard would have made that sale even if Bunker had not reneged on the contract. So Howard is still short a sale and is out a profit that he would have made had Bunker honored the contract.

### Recover the Price

Howard—the seller—could recover from Bunker for the price of the twenty-five prints that Bunker holds. Or suppose they had agreed to a shipment contract, so that the risk of loss passed to Bunker when Howard placed the other prints with the trucker and that the truck crashed en route and the cargo destroyed. Howard could recover the price. Or suppose there were no market for the remaining seventy-five prints and the original. Howard could identify these prints to the contract and recover the contract price. If Howard did resell some prints, the

proceeds of the sale would have to be credited to Bunker's account and deducted from any judgment. Unless sold, the prints must be held for Bunker and given to him upon his payment of the judgment.

### Cancel the Contract

When Bunker repudiated, Howard could declare the contract cancelled. This would also apply if a buyer fails to make a payment due on or before delivery. Cancellation entitles the nonbreaching party to any remedies for the breach of the whole contract or for any unperformed balance. That is what happens when Howard recovers damages, lost profits, or the price. <sup>[9]</sup>

**Again, the CISG is similar. Article 64 provides that the seller may declare the contract avoided “if the failure by the buyer to perform any of his obligations under the contract or this Convention amounts to a fundamental breach of contract; or if the buyer does not, within the additional period of time fixed by the seller perform his obligation to pay the price or take delivery of the goods, or if he declares that he will not do so within the period so fixed.”**

Note again that these UCC remedies are cumulative. That is, Howard could withhold future delivery *and* stop delivery en route, *and* identify to the contract goods in his possession, *and* resell, *and* recover damages, *and* cancel.

### Remedies on Insolvency

The remedies apply when the buyer *breaches* the contract. In addition to those remedies, the seller has remedies when he learns that the buyer is insolvent, even if the buyer has not breached. Insolvency results, for example, when the buyer has “ceased to pay his debts in the ordinary course of business,” or the buyer “cannot pay his debts as they become due.” <sup>[10]</sup>

Upon learning of Bunker's insolvency, Howard could refuse to deliver the remaining prints, unless Bunker pays cash not only for the remaining prints but for those already delivered. If Howard learned of Bunker's insolvency within ten days of delivering the first twenty-five prints, he could make a demand to reclaim them. If within three months prior to delivery, Bunker had falsely represented that he was solvent, the ten-day limitation would not cut off Howard's right to reclaim. If he does seek to reclaim, Howard will lose the right to any other remedy with respect to those particular items. However, Howard cannot reclaim goods already purchased

from Bunker by a customer in the ordinary course of business. The customer does not risk losing her print purchased several weeks before Bunker has become insolvent. <sup>[11]</sup>

In the lease situation, of course, the goods belong to the lessor—the lessor has title to them—so the lessor can repossess them if the lessee defaults. <sup>[12]</sup>

## Buyer's Remedies

In this section, let us assume that Howard, rather than Bunker, breaches, and all other circumstances are the same. That is, Howard had delivered twenty-five prints, twenty-five more were en route, the original painting hung in Howard's living room, another twenty-five prints were in Howard's factory, and the final twenty-five prints were in production.

### In General

The buyer can do the following three things by way of defaulting: repudiate the contract, fail to deliver the goods, or deliver or tender nonconforming goods. Section 2-711 of the UCC provides the following remedies for the buyer:

*Where the seller fails to make delivery or repudiates, or the buyer rightfully rejects or justifiably revokes, then with respect to any goods involved, and with respect to the whole if the breach goes to the whole contract, the buyer may*

- (1) cancel the contract, and*
- (2) recover as much of the price as has been paid; and*
- (3) "cover" and get damages; and*
- (4) recover damages for nondelivery.*

*Where the seller fails to deliver or repudiates, the buyer may also:*

- (5) if the goods have been identified recover them; or*
- (6) in a proper case obtain specific performance or*
- (7) replevy the goods.*

*On rightful rejection or justifiable revocation of acceptance, a buyer:*

- (8) has a security interest in goods in his possession or control for any payments made on their price and any expenses reasonably incurred in their inspection, receipt, transportation, care and custody and may hold such goods and resell them in like manner as an aggrieved seller.*



*If the buyer has accepted non-conforming goods and notified seller of the non-conformity, buyer can*

*(9) recover damages for the breach;*<sup>[13]</sup>

*and in addition the buyer may*

*(10) recover incidental damages and*

*(11) recover consequential damages.*<sup>[14]</sup>

Thus the buyer's remedies can be divided into two general categories: (1) remedies for goods that the buyer does not receive or accept, when he has justifiably revoked acceptance or when the seller repudiates, and (2) remedies for goods accepted.

**The CISG provides similar remedies at Articles 45–51:**

***If the seller fails to perform any of his obligations under the contract, buyer may (1) declare the contract avoided if the seller's breach is fundamental; or (2) require performance by the seller of his obligations unless the buyer has resorted to a remedy which is inconsistent with this requirement; (3) require delivery of substitute goods if the non-conformity constitutes a fundamental breach of contract; (4) may require the seller to remedy the lack of conformity by repair, unless this is unreasonable having regard to all the circumstances; (5) may fix an additional period of time of reasonable length for performance by the seller of his obligations and unless the buyer has received notice from the seller that he will not perform within the period so fixed, the buyer may not, during that period, resort to any remedy for breach of contract; (6) in case of non-conforming delivery, reduce the price in the same proportion as the value that the goods actually delivered had at the time of the delivery bears to the value that conforming goods would have had at that time.***

### **Goods Not Received**

The UCC sets out buyer's remedies if goods are not received or if they are rightfully rejected or acceptance is rightfully revoked.

## **Cancel**

If the buyer has not yet received or accepted the goods (or has justifiably rejected or revoked acceptance because of their nonconformity), he may cancel the contract and—after giving notice of his cancellation—he is excused from further performance. <sup>[15]</sup>

## **Recover the Price**

Whether or not the buyer cancels, he is entitled to recover the price paid above the value of what was accepted.

## **Cover**

In the example case, Bunker—the buyer—may “cover” and have damages: he may make a good-faith, reasonable purchase of substitute goods. He may then recover damages from the seller for the difference between the cost of cover and the contract price. This is the buyer’s equivalent of the seller’s right to resell. Thus Bunker could try to purchase seventy-five additional prints of the Bruegel from some other manufacturer. But his failure or inability to do so does not bar him from any other remedy open to him.

## **Sue for Damages for Nondelivery**

Bunker could sue for damages for nondelivery. Under Section 2-713 of the UCC, the measure of damages is the difference between the market price at the time when the buyer learned of the breach and the contract price (plus incidental damages, less expenses saved). Suppose Bunker could have bought seventy-five prints for \$125 on the day Howard called to say he would not be sending the rest of the order. Bunker would be entitled to \$1,875—the market price (\$9,375) less the contract price (\$7,500). This remedy is available even if he did not in fact purchase the substitute prints. Suppose that at the time of breach, the original painting was worth \$15,000 (Howard having just sold it to someone else at that price). Bunker would be entitled to an additional \$5,000, which would be the difference between his contract price and the market price.

For leases, the UCC, Section 2A-519(1), provides the following: “the measure of damages for non-delivery or repudiation by the lessor or for rejection or revocation of acceptance by the lessee is the present value, as of the date of the default, of the then market rent minus the present value as of the same date of the original rent, computed for the remaining lease term of

the original lease agreement, together with incidental and consequential damages, less expenses saved in consequence of the lessor's default.”

### **Recover the Goods**

If the goods are unique—as in the case of the original Bruegel—Bunker is entitled to specific performance—that is, recovery of the painting. This section is designed to give the buyer rights comparable to the seller's right to the price and modifies the old common-law requirement that courts will not order specific performance except for unique goods. It permits specific performance “in other proper circumstances,” and these might include particular goods contemplated under output or requirements contracts or those peculiarly available from one market source. <sup>[16]</sup>

Even if the goods are not unique, the buyer is entitled to *replevy* them if they are identified to the contract and after good-faith effort he cannot recover them. Replevin is the name of an ancient common-law action for recovering goods that have been unlawfully taken; in effect it is not different from specific performance, and the UCC makes no particular distinction between them in Section 2-716. Section 2A-521 holds the same for leases. In our case, Bunker could replevy the twenty-five prints identified and held by Howard.

Bunker also has the right to recover the goods should it turn out that Howard is insolvent. Under UCC, Section 2-502, if Howard were to become insolvent within ten days of the day on which Bunker pays the first installment of the price due, Bunker would be entitled to recover the original and the prints, as long as he tendered any unpaid portion of the price.

For security interest in goods rightfully rejected, if the buyer rightly rejects nonconforming goods or revokes acceptance, he is entitled to a security interest in any goods in his possession. In other words, Bunker need not return the twenty-five prints he has already received unless Howard reimburses him for any payments made and for any expenses reasonably incurred in their inspection, receipt, transportation, care, and custody. If Howard refuses to reimburse him, Bunker may resell the goods and take from the proceeds the amount to which he is entitled. <sup>[17]</sup>

### **Goods Accepted**

The buyer does not have to reject nonconforming goods. She may accept them anyway or may effectively accept them because the time for revocation has expired. In such a case, the buyer is

entitled to remedies as long as she notifies the seller of the breach within a reasonable time. <sup>[18]</sup> In our example, Bunker can receive three types of damages, all of which are outlined here.

### **Compensatory Damages**

Bunker may recover damages for any losses that in the ordinary course of events stem from the seller's breach. Suppose Howard had used inferior paper that was difficult to detect, and within several weeks of acceptance the prints deteriorated. Bunker is entitled to be reimbursed for the price he paid.

### **Consequential Damages**

Bunker is also entitled to consequential damages. <sup>[19]</sup> These are losses resulting from general or particular requirements of the buyer's needs, which the seller had reason to know and which the buyer could not reasonably prevent by cover or otherwise. Suppose Bunker is about to make a deal to resell the twenty-five prints that he has accepted, only to discover that Howard used inferior ink that faded quickly. Howard knew that Bunker was in the business of retailing prints and therefore he knew or should have known that one requirement of the goods was that they be printed in long-lasting ink. Because Bunker will lose the resale, he is entitled to the profits he would have made. (If Howard had not wished to take the risk of paying for consequential damages, he could have negotiated a provision limiting or excluding this remedy.) The buyer has the burden of proving consequential damages, but the UCC does not require mathematical precision. Suppose customers come to Bunker's gallery and sneer at the faded colors. If he can show that he would have sold the prints were it not for the fading ink (perhaps by showing that he had sold Bruegels in the past), he would be entitled to recover a reasonable estimate of his lost profits.

In *De La Hoya v. Slim's Gun Shop* the plaintiff purchased a handgun from the defendant, a properly licensed dealer. While the plaintiff was using it for target shooting, he was questioned by a police officer, who traced the serial number of the weapon and determined that—unknown to either the plaintiff or the defendant—it had been stolen. The plaintiff was arrested for possession of stolen property and incurred, in 2010 dollars, \$3,000 in attorney fees to extricate himself from the criminal charges. He sued the defendant for breach of the implied warranty of

title and was awarded the amount of the attorney fees as consequential damages. On appeal the California court held it foreseeable that the plaintiff would get arrested for possessing a stolen gun, and “once the foreseeability of the arrest is established, a natural and usual consequence is that the [plaintiff] would incur attorney’s fee.” <sup>[20]</sup> Compare with *In re Stem* in the exercises later in this chapter.

### Incidental Damages

Section 2-715 of the UCC allows incidental damages, which are “damages resulting from the seller’s breach including expenses reasonably incurred in inspection, receipt, transportation and care and custody of goods rightfully rejected, any commercially reasonable charges, expenses or commissions in connection with effecting cover and any other reasonable expense incident to the delay or other breach.” Section 2A-520(1) of the UCC is similar for leases.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Parties to a contract for the sale of goods may specify what the remedies will be in case of breach. They may limit or exclude remedies, but the UCC insists that there be some remedies; if the parties agree to liquidated damages, the amount set cannot be a penalty. If the parties do not agree to different remedies for the seller in case the buyer defaults, the UCC sets out remedies. As to the seller’s obligation, he may cancel the contract. As to the goods, he may withhold or stop delivery, identify conforming goods to the contract, or reclaim goods upon the buyer’s insolvency. As to money, he may resell and recover damages or lost profits and recover the price. Unless they are inconsistent, these remedies are cumulative. The point of the range of remedies is, as much as possible, to put the nonbreaching seller in the position she would have been in had there been no breach. The aggrieved lessor is entitled to similar remedies as the seller.

The UCC also provides a full panoply of remedies available to a buyer if the seller fails to deliver goods or if the buyer rightfully rejects them or revokes her acceptance. As to the buyer’s obligations, she may cancel the contract. As to the goods, she may claim a security interest in those rightfully rejected, recover goods identified if the seller is insolvent, or replevy or seek specific performance to get goods wrongfully withheld. As to money, she may recover payments made or cover and recover damages for nondelivery. If the buyer accepts

nonconforming goods, she is entitled to damages for breach of warranty. These remedies are cumulative, so the aggrieved buyer may pursue any of them, unless the remedies are mutually exclusive. The Article on leases provides basically the same remedies for the aggrieved lessee (UCC 2A 520–523).

## EXERCISES

1. What are the four things a breaching seller could do to cause the buyer grief, commercially speaking?
2. If the buyer breaches, what rights does the seller have in regard to the goods?
3. In regard to the money owed to her?
4. In regard to the continued existence of the contract?
5. What are the four things a breaching buyer could do to cause the seller grief, commercially speaking?
6. If the seller breaches, what rights does the buyer have in regard to the goods?
7. In regard to the money owed to him?
8. In regard to the continued existence of the contract?

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- [1] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-719(1) and 2A-503(1).
  - [2] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-719(1)(b) and 2A-503(2).
  - [3] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-719(2) and 2A-503(2).
  - [4] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-719(3) and 2A-503(2).
  - [5] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-718.
  - [6] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-725.
  - [7] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-706 and 2A-527.
  - [8] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-708(2); Section 2A-528(2) is similar.
  - [9] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-703(f) and 2A-524(1)(a).
  - [10] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1-201(23).
  - [11] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-702 (3).
  - [12] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2A-525(2).

- [13] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-714.
- [14] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-715.
- [15] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-711(1), 2-106, 2A-508(1)(a), and 2A-505(1).
- [16] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-716(1) and 2A-521(1).
- [17] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-711(3), 2-706, 2A-508(5), and 2A-527(5).
- [18] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-714(1) and 2A-519(3).
- [19] Uniform Commercial Code, Sections 2-714(3), 2-715, and 2A-519(3).
- [20] *De La Hoya v. Slim's Gun Shop*, 146 Cal. Rptr. 68 (Super. 1978).

## 19.4 Excuses for Nonperformance

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize how parties are discharged if the goods are destroyed.
2. Determine what defenses are valid when it becomes very difficult or impossible to perform.
3. Understand the UCC's position on the right to adequate assurances and anticipatory repudiation.

In contracts for the sale of goods, as in common law, things can go wrong. What then?

### Casualty to Identified Goods

As always, the parties may agree what happens if the goods are destroyed before delivery. The default is Sections 2-613 and 2A-221(a) of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC). The UCC says that “where the contract requires for its performance goods identified when the contract is made, and the goods suffer casualty without fault of either party before the risk of loss passes to the buyer,...then (a) if the loss is total the contract is avoided; and (b) if the loss is partial the buyer may nevertheless accept them with due allowance for the goods' defects.” Thus if Howard ships the original Bruegel to Bunker but the painting is destroyed, through no fault of either party, before delivery occurs, the parties are discharged. If the frame is damaged, Bunker could, if he wants, take the painting anyway, but at a discount.

### The UCC's Take on Issues Affecting “Impossibility”

Although this matter was touched on in [Chapter 15 "Discharge of Obligations"](#), it is appropriate to mention briefly again the UCC's treatment of variations on the theme of “impossibility.”

## Impracticability

Sections 2-614(1) and 2A-404(1) of the UCC require reasonable substitution for berthing, loading, and unloading facilities that become unavailable. They also require reasonable substitution for transportation and delivery systems that become “commercially impracticable”; if a practical alternative exists, “performance must be tendered and accepted.” If Howard agreed to send the prints by rail, but a critical railroad bridge is unusable and no trains can run, delivery by truck would be required.

Section 2-615 of the UCC says that the failure to deliver goods is not a breach of the seller’s duty “if performance as agreed has become impracticable by the occurrence of a contingency the non-occurrence of which was a basic assumption on which the contract was made or by compliance in good faith with any applicable foreign or domestic government regulation or order whether or not it later proves to be invalid.” Section 2A-405(b) of the UCC is similar for leases.

**The CISG provides something similar at Article 79: “A party is not liable for a failure to perform any of his obligations if he proves that the failure was due to an impediment beyond his control and that he could not reasonably be expected to have taken the impediment into account at the time of the conclusion of the contract or to have avoided or overcome it or its consequences.”**

## Right to Adequate Assurances of Performance

Section 2-609, Comment 1, of the UCC observes that “the essential purpose of a contract...is actual performance [but] a continuing sense of reliance and security that the promised performance will be forthcoming when due is an important feature of the bargain.” Thus the UCC says that if one party has “reasonable grounds for insecurity arise...either party may in writing demand adequate assurance and until he receives such assurance may if commercially reasonable suspend [his own] performance[.]”

**The CISG has a similar take at Article 71: “A party may suspend the performance of his obligations if, after the conclusion of the contract, it becomes apparent that the other party will not perform a substantial part of his obligations. A party suspending performance, whether before or after dispatch of the goods, must immediately give notice of the suspension to the other party and must continue**



**with performance if the other party provides adequate assurance of his performance.”**

### **Anticipatory Repudiation**

Obviously if a person repudiates the contract it's clear she will not perform, but what if she repudiates before time for performance is due? Does the other side have to wait until nonperformance actually happens, or can he sue in anticipation of the other's default? Sections 2-610 and 2A-402 of the UCC say the aggrieved party can do either: wait for performance or “resort to any remedy for breach.” Under the UCC, Sections 2-611 and 2A-403, the one who has anticipatorily repudiated can “retract his repudiation unless the aggrieved party has since the repudiation cancelled or materially changed his position[.]”

Suppose that Howard has cause to suspect that if he does deliver the goods, Bunker won't pay. Howard may write to Bunker and demand—not request—assurances of adequate performance. If such assurances are not adequately forthcoming, Howard may assume that Bunker has repudiated the contract and have remedies.

**Article 72 of the CISG is pretty much the same: “If prior to the date for performance of the contract it is clear that one of the parties will commit a fundamental breach of contract, the other party may declare the contract avoided.”**

### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

If, through no fault of either party, the goods are destroyed before the risk of loss has passed from the seller to the buyer, the parties are both discharged. If the expected means of performance is impossible, but an alternative is available, the alternative must be utilized. If performance becomes impracticable because of an unexpected contingency, failure to deliver the goods is excused. But a party who has concerns whether the other side will perform is entitled to adequate assurances of performance; if they are not forthcoming, the worried party may suspend performance. Where a party repudiates a contract before performance is due, the other side may sue immediately (anticipatory repudiation) or may wait until the time performance comes due and then sue.

### **EXERCISES**

1. Suppose Plaintiff sues Defendant for breach of contract, and Defendant successfully raises an excuse for nonperformance. What liability does Defendant have now?
2. The contract read that the goods would be “shipped F.O.B. Seattle, by Burlington Northern Rail to the buyer in Vancouver, B.C.” Due to heavy rain and mudslides, the rail line between Seattle and points north was impassable. Buyer insists Seller is obligated to send the goods by motor truck; Seller insists her performance has become impossible or at least that shipment must await the rail-line clearance. Who is correct? Explain.
3. Buyer manufactured ceramic insulators and ordered the dies into which the liquid ceramic would be poured for hardening and finishing from Seller, to be delivered April 15. The first test batch of a dozen dies arrived on February 15; these dies were defective. Buyer wrote inquiring whether the defects could be remedied in time for the final delivery. Seller responded, “We are working to address the problems here.” Buyer again inquired; Seller responded, “As I said, we are working on the problems.” Buyer fretted that the deadline—two months in the future—would not be met. What remedy, if any, does Buyer have now?

## 19.5 Cases

### Limitations of Remedy Results in No Remedy

*Hartzell v. Justus Co., Inc.*

*693 F.2d 770 (8th Cir. S.D. 1982)*

Arnold, J.

This is a diversity case arising out of the purchase by Dr. Allan Hartzell of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, of a log home construction kit manufactured by the defendant Justus Homes. Dr. Hartzell purchased the package in 1977 for \$38,622 [about \$135,000 in 2010 dollars] from Del Carter, who was Justus Homes’ dealer for the Sioux Falls area. He also hired Carter’s construction company, Natural Wood Homes, to build the house. Hartzell, who testified that the home eventually cost about \$150,000, was dissatisfied with the house in many respects. His chief complaints were that knotholes in the walls and ceiling leaked rain profusely, and that the home was not weather tight because flashings were not included in the roofing materials and because the timbers were not kiln-dried and therefore shrank. He also complained that an

undersized support beam, which eventually cracked, was included in the package. This latter defect was alleged to have resulted in cracks in the floor and inside doors that would not close. Hartzell further alleged that these structural defects were only partially remediable, and that the fair market value of the house was reduced even after all practicable repairs had been made. Alleging breach of implied and express warranties and negligence, he sought damages for this loss in value and for the cost of repairs. After a two-day trial, the jury returned a plaintiff's verdict for \$34,794.67.

Justus Homes contends the District Court erred in failing to instruct the jury on a limitation-of-remedies clause contained in its contract with the plaintiff. The defendants rely on Clause 10c of the contract, which says Justus *will repair or replace defective materials*, and Clause 10d, which states that *this limited repair or replacement clause is the exclusive remedy available against Justus* [emphasis added]. These agreements, Justus asserts, are valid under the Uniform Commercial Code 2-719(1). Section 2-719(1) states:

*(1) Subject to the provisions of subsections (2) and (3) of this section and of § 57A-2-718 on liquidation and limitation of damages,*

*(a) The agreement may provide for remedies in addition to or in substitution for those provided in this chapter and may limit or alter the measure of damages recoverable under this chapter, as by limiting the buyer's remedies to return of the goods and repayment of the price or to repair and replacement of nonconforming goods or parts; and*

*(b) Resort to a remedy as provided is optional unless the remedy is expressly agreed to be exclusive, in which case it is the sole remedy.*

Subsection (1) of section 2-719 is qualified by subsection (2): "Where circumstances cause an exclusive or limited remedy to fail of its essential purpose, remedy may be had as provided in this title."...

The jury's verdict for the plaintiff in an amount almost exactly equal to the plaintiff's evidence of cost of repairs plus diminution in market value means it must have found that the structural defects were not entirely remediable. Such a finding necessarily means that the limited warranty failed of its essential purpose.

Two of our recent cases support this conclusion. In *Soo Line R.R. v. Fruehauf Corp.*, 547 F.2d 1365 (8th Cir.1977), the defendant claimed, relying on a limitation-of-remedies clause similar to the one involved here, that the plaintiff's damages should be limited to the reasonable cost of repairing the railroad cars that plaintiff had bought from defendant. The jury verdict included, among other things, an award for the difference between the value of the cars as actually manufactured, and what they would have been worth if they had measured up to the defendant's representations. This Court affirmed the verdict for the larger amount. We held, construing the Minnesota U.C.C., which is identical to § 2-719 as adopted in South Dakota, that the limitation-of-remedies clause was ineffective because the remedy as thus limited failed of its essential purpose. The defendant, though called upon to make the necessary repairs, had refused to do so, and the repairs as performed by the plaintiff itself "did not fully restore the cars to totally acceptable operating conditions."

Here, Justus Homes attempted to help with the necessary repairs, which is more than Fruehauf did in the *Soo Line* case, but after the repairs had been completed the house was still, according to the jury verdict, not what Justus had promised it would be. The purpose of a remedy is to give to a buyer what the seller promised him—that is, a house that did not leak. If repairs alone do not achieve that end, then to limit the buyer's remedy to repair would cause that remedy to fail of its essential purpose....

An analogous case is *Select Pork, Inc. v. Babcock Swine, Inc.* [Citation], applying § 2-719 as adopted in Iowa. The defendant had promised to deliver to plaintiff certain extraordinary pigs known as Midwestern Gilts and Meatline Boars. Instead, only ordinary pigs were delivered. Plaintiff sued for breach of warranty, and defendant claimed that its damages, if any, should be limited to a return of the purchase price by an express clause to that effect in the contract. The District Court held that the clause was unenforceable because it was unconscionable, see § 2-719(3), and because it failed of its essential purpose. We affirmed,..."Having failed to deliver the highly-touted special pigs, defendants may not now assert a favorable clause to limit their liability." So here, where the house sold was found by the jury to fall short of the seller's promises, and where repairs could not make it right, defendant's liability cannot be limited to the cost of repairs. If the repairs had been adequate to restore the house to its promised

condition, and if Dr. Hartzell had claimed additional consequential damages, for example, water damage to a rug from the leaky roof, the limitation-of-remedies clause would have been effective. But that is not this case.

There was no double recovery here: the verdict was not for cost of repair plus the entire decrease in market value, but rather for cost of repair plus the decrease in market value that still existed after all the repairs had been completed.

[T]he evidence in the record all demonstrate[s] that the repair or replacement clause was a failure under the circumstances of this case. Some of the house's many problems simply could not be remedied by repair or replacement. The clause having failed of its essential purpose, that is, effective enjoyment of implied and express warranties, the plaintiff was entitled, under UCC § 2-719(2), to any of the buyer's remedies provided by the Code. Among these remedies are consequential damages as provided in §§ 2-714 and 2-715(2)....

The judgment is affirmed.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What did the seller here limit itself to do in case of defects? What was the limitation of remedy?
2. Did Justus Homes disclaim implied and expressed warranties with its contract language regarding limitation of remedies?
3. Was the essential purpose of the limitation of remedy to protect the party benefiting from it—here, the seller of the log home kit—or was the essential purpose of the limitation of remedy, as the court said, “effective enjoyment of implied and expressed warranties”?
4. In a part of the opinion excised, the court wrote, “A finding of unconscionability is, as a matter of logic, simply unnecessary in cases where § 2-719(2) applies.” Would it be easier simply to say that the limitation of liability here was unconscionable?

### Cure for Improper Delivery

*Wilson v. Scampoli*

*228 A.2d 848 (D.C. App. 1967)*

Myers, J.

This is an appeal from an order of the trial court granting rescission of a sales contract for a color television set and directing the return of the purchase price plus interest and costs. Appellee [Mrs. Kolley's father] purchased the set in question on November 4, 1965, paying the total purchase price in cash. The transaction was evidenced by a sales ticket showing the price paid and guaranteeing ninety days' free service and replacement of any defective tube and parts for a period of one year. Two days after purchase the set was delivered and uncrated, the antennae adjusted and the set plugged into an electrical outlet to "cook out." When the set was turned on however, it did not function properly, the picture having a reddish tinge. Appellant's delivery man advised the buyer's daughter, Mrs. Kolley, that it was not his duty to tune in or adjust the color but that a service representative would shortly call at her house for that purpose. After the departure of the delivery men, Mrs. Kolley unplugged the set and did not use it. On November 8, 1965, a service representative arrived, and after spending an hour in an effort to eliminate the red cast from the picture advised Mrs. Kolley that he would have to remove the chassis from the cabinet and take it to the shop as he could not determine the cause of the difficulty from his examination at the house. He also made a written memorandum of his service call, noting that the television "\Needs Shop Work (Red Screen)." Mrs. Kolley refused to allow the chassis to be removed, asserting she did not want a 'repaired' set but another 'brand new' set. Later she demanded the return of the purchase price, although retaining the set. Appellant refused to refund the purchase price, but renewed his offer to adjust, repair, or, if the set could not be made to function properly, to replace it. Ultimately, appellee instituted this suit against appellant seeking a refund of the purchase price. After a trial, the court ruled that "under the facts and circumstances the complaint is justified. Under the equity powers of the Court I will order the parties put back in their original status, let the \$675 [about \$4500 in 2010 dollars] be returned, and the set returned to the defendant."

Appellant does not contest the jurisdiction of the trial court to order rescission in a proper case, but contends the trial judge erred in holding that rescission here was appropriate. He argues that he was always willing to comply with the terms of the sale either by correcting the malfunction by minor repairs or, in the event the set could not be made thereby properly

operative, by replacement; that as he was denied the opportunity to try to correct the difficulty, he did not breach the contract of sale or any warranty thereunder, expressed or implied.

[The District of Columbia UCC 2-508] provides:

*(1) Where any tender or delivery by the seller is rejected because non-conforming and the time for performance has not yet expired, the seller may seasonably notify the buyer of his intention to cure and may then within the contract time make a conforming delivery.*

*(2) Where the buyer rejects a nonconforming tender which the seller had reasonable grounds to believe would be acceptable with or without money allowance the seller may if he seasonably notifies the buyer have a further reasonable time to substitute a conforming tender.*

...

Removal of a television chassis for a short period of time in order to determine the cause of color malfunction and ascertain the extent of adjustment or correction needed to effect full operational efficiency presents no great inconvenience to the buyer. In the instant case, appellant's expert witness testified that this was not infrequently necessary with new televisions. Should the set be defective in workmanship or parts, the loss would be upon the manufacturer who warranted it free from mechanical defect. Here the adamant refusal of Mrs. Kolley, acting on behalf of appellee, to allow inspection essential to the determination of the cause of the excessive red tinge to the picture defeated any effort by the seller to provide timely repair or even replacement of the set if the difficulty could not be corrected. The cause of the defect might have been minor and easily adjusted or it may have been substantial and required replacement by another new set—but the seller was never given an adequate opportunity to make a determination.

We do not hold that appellant has no liability to appellee, but as he was denied access and a reasonable opportunity to repair, appellee has not shown a breach of warranty entitling him either to a brand new set or to rescission. We therefore reverse the judgment of the trial court granting rescission and directing the return of the purchase price of the set.

Reversed.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why did the seller “have reasonable grounds to believe [the television] would be acceptable”?
2. What did Mrs. Kolley want?
3. Does this case require a buyer to accept patchwork goods or substantially repaired articles in lieu of flawless merchandise?

### Seller’s Remedies When Buyer Defaults

*Santos v. DeBellis*

*901 N.Y.S.2d 457 (N.Y. Sup.App. 2010)*

Molia, J.

On March 1, 2008 and March 11, 2008, plaintiff made payments to defendant of \$3,000 each, in connection with the purchase of a mobile home located in Fort Pierce, Florida. Thereafter, on March 13, 2008, plaintiff and defendant signed an agreement which had been prepared by defendant. The agreement described the subject property by its location, recorded the fact that plaintiff had paid defendant deposits totaling \$6,000, set forth a closing date of March 25, 2008, and specified that “the remaining \$27,000.00” was payable at closing to defendant by a guaranteed financial instrument. Plaintiff never paid the outstanding balance and brought this action to recover the \$6,000 deposit she paid to defendant. Following a nonjury trial, judgment was awarded in favor of defendant dismissing the complaint.

Because the sale of a mobile home constitutes a contract for the sale of goods rather than of real property [Citations], the parties’ agreement was governed by the Uniform Commercial Code. The agreement, which was made after plaintiff had made the two \$3,000 “deposit” payments, constituted a memorandum in confirmation of an oral agreement and, even though it omitted some terms, was sufficient to satisfy the statute of frauds [Citations].

Section 2-718 of the Uniform Commercial Code specifies that in the absence of a contractual provision with respect to the liquidation or limitation of damages and the return of deposits,

*(2) Where the seller justifiably withholds delivery of goods because of the buyer’s breach, the buyer is entitled to restitution of any amount by which the sum of his payments exceeds...*



*(b) [in the absence of contractually fixed terms] twenty per cent of the value of the total performance for which the buyer is obligated under the contract or \$500, whichever is smaller.*

*(3) The buyer's right to restitution under subsection (2) is subject to offset to the extent that the seller establishes*

*(a) a right to recover damages under the provisions of this Article other than subsection (1), and*

*(b) the amount or value of any benefits received by the buyer directly or indirectly by reason of the contract.*

Here, notwithstanding the fact that plaintiff, as buyer, had breached the contract, defendant failed to demonstrate any damages resulting therefrom; nor did defendant establish that plaintiff had received any benefits directly or indirectly by reason of the parties' agreement (see UCC 2-718[3]). Therefore, pursuant to UCC 2-718(2), plaintiff was entitled to the return of all but \$500 of her deposit.

The order of the District Court dismissing the complaint is accordingly reversed, and judgment is awarded to plaintiff in the principal sum of \$5,500.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. If the plaintiff had been a dealer in mobile homes and the unit here had been part of his inventory, he would be entitled to claim lost profits on the sale of one unit. Here, apparently, the plaintiff seller was a private party. Why was he not entitled to any damages greater than \$500?
2. New York adopted the UCC in 1964. Five hundred dollars in 1964 would be worth about \$3,500 in 2010. Why isn't the change in the dollar's value recognized here?

#### Buyer's Remedies When Seller Breaches

*[Note: this case is slightly edited by the authors.]*

*Furlong v. Alpha Chi Omega Sorority*

*657 N.E.2d 866 (Ohio Mun. 1993)*

Bachman, J.

In late September through mid-October 1992, plaintiff Johnathan James Furlong (“Furlong”) contacted defendant Alpha Chi Omega Sorority (“AXO”), by phoning the chairperson of its social committee, Emily Lieberman (“Emily”), between a dozen and a dozen and a half times. Ultimately (about the first week in October), Furlong received Emily’s order for one hundred sixty-eight imprinted sweaters at \$21.50 each (plus one free sweater) for delivery on Friday, October 23, 1992, so as to arrive in time for AXO’s Midnight Masquerade III on the evening of Saturday, October 24, 1992.

The price was to be \$3,612, [about \$5600 in 2010 dollars] payable as follows: \$2,000 down payment when the contract was made, and \$1,612 balance when the sweaters were delivered. An oral contract for the sale of goods (the imprinted sweaters) was made between Furlong and AXO, at a definite price and with specified dates for payment and for delivery.

At some point in those phone calls with Furlong, Emily said that the sweaters were to be custom designed with the following specified design: namely, with three colors (hunter green letters on top of maroon letters outlined in navy blue, and hunter green masks). Furlong promised to have them so imprinted (by a third party whom he would select)...Thereafter, he delivered to Emily an Ohio Wesleyan sweater with maroon letters to show her the maroon color....Additionally, he faxed to Emily a two-page description of the sweaters, which not only included the designs for the fronts and the backs of the sweaters, but also included arrows showing where each of the three colors would go (hunter green letters on top of maroon letters outlined in navy blue, and hunter green masks).

Furlong and Emily created an express warranty by each of the above three statutory means: namely, by affirmation of fact (his initial phone calls); by sample (the maroon sweater) by description (the fax). This express warranty became part of the contract. Each of the three methods of showing the express warranty was not in conflict with the other two methods, and thus they are consistent and cumulative, and constitute the warranty. [2-317]

The design was a “dickered” aspect of the individual bargain and went clearly to the essence of that. Thus, the express warranty was that the sweaters would be in accordance with the above design (including types of colors for the letters and the mask, and the number of colors for the same). Further, the express warranty became part of the contract.

On October 13, 1992, AXO mailed Furlong a \$2,000 check for the down payment; he deposited it in his bank account on October 16, 1992. Thereafter, as discussed below, Furlong had the sweaters imprinted (on Thursday, October 22) and delivered to AXO (on Friday, October 23). Upon receipt of the delivery, AXO gave a check to Furlong's agent in the amount of \$1,612 for the balance of the purchase price. However, later on that day, AXO inspected the sweaters, discovered the design changes (mentioned below), caused AXO's bank to stop payment on the check, and stated AXO's objections in a phone call with Furlong. AXO has never paid Furlong that balance on the purchase price.

Furlong's obligation as the seller was to transfer and deliver the goods in accordance with the contract. AXO's obligation was to accept and pay in accordance with that contract. [2-301] We will now discuss whether it legally did so.

Furlong was a jobber for Argento Bros., Inc. ("Argento") and had Argento print the sweaters. In doing so, Furlong worked with Argento's artists. Early in the morning of Thursday (October 22, 1992), the artist(s) began to prepare the art work and recommended changes to the design. Furlong authorized the artist(s) to change the design without the knowledge or consent of AXO. Argento spent about eight hours printing the sweaters all day Thursday. Furlong did not phone AXO about the changes until the next day, Friday (October 23), after the sweaters were printed with those changes. Here are the five design changes that he made:

- The *first change* was to delete the agreed-upon outline for the letters (namely, the navy blue outline).
- The *second change* was to reduce the agreed-upon number of colors for the fronts and the backs (from three colors per side to two colors per side).
- The *third change* was to alter one of the agreed-upon colors (from maroon to red).
- The *fourth change* was to alter the agreed-upon scheme of colors for the letters on the fronts and the backs (namely, both sides were to have the same two colors of maroon and hunter green; whereas in fact the backs had neither of those colors, and instead had a navy blue color for the letters).
- The *fifth change* was to alter the agreed-upon color of the masks (from hunter green to maroon—actually red).

The court specifically finds that the color was *red* (actually, scarlet) and was *not maroon* (like the maroon-colored letters on the Ohio Wesleyan sweater).

The sweaters did not conform to the contract (specifically, the express warranty in the contract). Thus (in the words of the statute), the sweaters did “fail in any respect to conform to the contract.” Actually, the sweaters failed in at least five respects. [2-601] Further, not only did they “fail in any respect,” they failed in a substantial respect. In either event, they were a nonconforming tender of goods. [2-601]

On Friday morning (October 23), Furlong picked up the five to six boxes of sweaters from Argento and had a friend deliver them from Columbus to Bowling Green. The boxes arrived at the AXO house around midday. Sometime thereafter on the same day, Emily inspected one of them and screamed her dismay upon discovering that the sweaters were not what AXO had ordered.

The court rejects Furlong’s assertion that he did all that he could do under the circumstances. The obvious answer is that he did not do enough. He should have gotten AXO’s prior consent to the changes. He could have done this by providing for more lead time-between the time that Argento prepared the art work and the time that it printed the sweaters. Instead, he had both done at the same time (Thursday morning).

Finally, and alternatively, plaintiff should have entered into a contract that gave him discretion to make design changes without AXO’s consent. We must remember that “these sweaters,” as Furlong himself admits (and describes), were to be “custom-designed” for AXO. Thus, they were to be printed according to AXO’s specifications, and not according to Furlong’s discretion.

Next, Furlong asserts that AXO—after learning of the changes—should have agreed to his offer of compromise: namely, that he would reduce the unit price of the sweaters in exchange for AXO’s keeping them and paying the reduced price. Also, Furlong asserts that AXO should have communicated his compromise offer to AXO’s members and pledges. In both respects, the court disagrees: Although the law allowed AXO to do so, it did not require AXO to do. Instead, AXO did exactly what the law allowed: AXO rejected the nonconforming goods in whole.

About 4:00 p.m. on the same day that the sweaters arrived at the AXO house (Friday, October 23), Amy—as the AXO president—phoned Furlong. She said that the sweaters were not what

AXO had ordered. She stated the specifics as to why the sweaters were not as ordered. She offered to return the sweaters to him, but he said “No.” AXO still has possession or custody of the boxes of sweaters.

[The UCC] provides: “Rejection of goods must be within a reasonable time after their delivery \* \* \*. It is ineffective unless the buyer seasonably notifies the seller.” [2-602] AXO did what this statute requires.

That statute further provides: “[I]f the buyer has before rejection taken physical possession of goods \* \* \*, he is under a duty after rejection to hold them with reasonable care at the seller’s disposition for a time sufficient to permit the seller to remove them[.]” [2-602(2)(b)] AXO has done this, too. From the above, it is seen that AXO legally rejected the sweaters on the same day that AXO received physical possession of them.

The court disagrees with Furlong’s assertion that AXO accepted the sweaters. He is confusing a layman’s understanding of the term *accept* (“to receive a thing [with a consenting mind]),” Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (5 Ed.1947), at 6, with the statutory meaning of the term. The mere fact that AXO took physical possession of the sweaters does not, by itself, mean that AXO legally “accepted” them.

In regard to...seller’s remedies, Furlong has no legal remedies because AXO did not breach the contract. Thus, he is not entitled to an award for the \$1,612 balance that he claims is due on the contract price.

As concluded above, AXO rightfully rejected the sweaters, after having paid part of the purchase price: namely, \$2,000. AXO is entitled to cancel the contract and to recover the partial payment of the purchase price. [2-606]

Also, as concluded above, AXO still has rightful possession or control of the sweaters. AXO has a security interest in the sweaters in its possession or control for the part payment made on the purchase price—but when reimbursed for that part payment AXO must return the sweaters to Furlong.

The court will prepare, file, and serve a judgment entry as follows: dismissing with prejudice Furlong’s claim against all defendants; dismissing with prejudice Emily Lieberman’s and Amy

Altomondo's counterclaims against Furlong; granting AXO's counterclaim (for \$2,000, plus ten percent per annum postjudgment interest and costs).

Further, that entry will order AXO's attorney (Mr. Reddin) to retain possession of the sweaters either until further court order or until AXO's judgment is satisfied in full (whereupon he shall surrender the sweaters to Furlong if Furlong picks them up within thirty days thereafter, or, if Furlong does not, he may then dispose of them as abandoned property without any liability).

Judgment accordingly.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Surely the plaintiff could not have thought that the radically altered design would be acceptable for the young women's masquerade ball. On what basis did he think he would be entitled to the full payment contracted for?
2. Whether Amy Altomondo knew it or not, she did what the UCC says a buyer should do when nonconforming goods are delivered. What are those steps?
3. What does it mean that AXO has a security interest in the sweaters? Security for what?

## 19.6 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

As with most of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), the parties may specify the terms of their performance. Only if they fail to do so does Article 2 (and 2A) provide the terms for them. The seller's duty is to make a timely delivery of conforming goods. In the absence of agreement, the time for delivery is a reasonable one, and the place of delivery is the seller's place of business. All goods must be tendered in a single delivery, unless circumstances permit either party the right to make or demand delivery in lots.

If the seller ships nonconforming goods but has time to meet his contractual obligations or if he reasonably believed the goods would be suitable, he may notify the buyer of his intention to cure, and if he does so in a timely manner the buyer must pay.

The buyer's general obligation is to inspect, accept, and pay. If an inspection reveals that the goods are nonconforming, the buyer may reject them; if he has accepted because defects were latent or because he received assurances that the defects would be cured, and they are not, the buyer may revoke his acceptance. He then has some duties concerning the goods in his

possession. The buyer must pay for any conforming goods; payment may be in any manner consistent with current business customs. Payment is due at the time and place at which the buyer will ultimately receive the goods.

The general policy of the UCC is to put an aggrieved party in as good a position as she would have been had the other party fully performed. The parties may specify or limit certain remedies, but they may not eliminate all remedies for a breach. However, if circumstances make an agreed-on remedy inadequate, then the UCC's other remedies apply; parties may not unconscionably limit consequential damages; they may agree to liquidated damages, but not to unreasonable penalties.

In general, the seller may pursue the following remedies: withhold further delivery, stop delivery, identify to the contract goods in her possession, resell the goods, recover damages or the price, or cancel the contract. In addition, when it becomes apparent that the buyer is insolvent, the seller may, within certain time periods, refuse to deliver the remaining goods or reclaim goods already delivered.

The buyer, in general, has remedies. For goods not yet received, she may cancel the contract; recover the price paid; cover the goods and recover damages for the difference in price; or recover the specific goods if they are unique or in "other proper circumstances." For goods received and accepted, the buyer may recover ordinary damages for losses that stem from the breach and consequential damages if the seller knew of the buyer's particular needs and the buyer could not reasonably cover.

The UCC provides some excuses for nonperformance: casualty of the goods, through no fault of either party; the nonhappening of presupposed conditions that were a basic assumption of the contract; substituted performance if the agreed-on methods of performance become impracticable; right to adequate assurances of performance when reasonable grounds for insecurity of performance arise; anticipatory repudiation and resort to any remedy, before time for performance is due, is allowed if either party indicates an unwillingness to perform.

## EXERCISES

1. Anne contracted to sell one hundred cans of yellow tennis balls to Chris, with a delivery to be made by June 15.

- a. On June 8, Anne delivered one hundred cans of white tennis balls, which were rejected by Chris. What course of action would you recommend for Anne, and why?
- b. Assume Ann had delivered the one hundred cans of white balls on June 15; these were rejected by Chris. Under what circumstances might Anne be allowed additional time to perform the contract?
- c. If the contract did not specify delivery, when must Anne deliver the tennis balls?
  - a. When Anne delivers the tennis balls, does Chris have a right to inspect them? If Chris accepts the white tennis balls, may the acceptance be revoked?
  - b. Assume Chris decided she could use twenty-five cans of the white balls. Could she accept twenty-five cans and reject the rest?
  - c. Suppose Anne delivered white tennis balls because a fire at her warehouse destroyed her entire stock of yellow balls. Does the fire discharge Anne's contractual duties?
  - d. If Chris rejected the white tennis balls and Anne refused to deliver yellow ones, may Chris recover damages? If so, how would they be calculated?

In 1961, Dorothy and John Wilson purchased a painting from Hammer Galleries titled *Femme Debout*. It cost \$11,000 (about \$78,000 in 2010 dollars) and came with this promise: "The authenticity of this picture is guaranteed." In 1984, an expert deemed the painting a fake. The district court held that the Wilsons' suit for breach of warranty, filed in February 1987—twenty-one years after its purchase—was barred by the UCC's four-year statute of limitations. The Wilsons argued, however, that the Code's exception to the four-year rule applied: <sup>[1]</sup> "A breach of warranty occurs when tender of delivery is made, except where a warranty explicitly extends to future performance and discovery must await the time of such performance the cause of action accrues when the breach is or should have been discovered."



They said the painting “performed” by being an authentic Vuillard—a French artist—and that the warranty of authenticity not only guaranteed the present “being” of the painting but also extended, as required by 2-725(2), to the future existence as a Vuillard. Therefore, they contended, explicit words warranting future performance would be superfluous: a warranty that promises authenticity “now and at all times in the future” would be redundant. How should the court rule?

Speedi Lubrication Centers Inc. and Atlas Match Corp. entered into a contract that provided for Speedi to buy 400,000 advertising matchbooks from Atlas, to be paid for within thirty days of delivery of each shipment. Orders for such matches required artwork, artists’ commissions, and printing plates. Atlas sent twenty-two cases of matches to Speedi with an invoice showing \$2,100 owed. Almost ninety days later, Speedi sent Atlas a check for \$1,000, received the same day Atlas sent Speedi a letter declaring Speedi to be in material breach of the contract. A second check for \$1,100 was later received; it bounced but was later replaced by a cashier’s check. The contract provided that an untimely payment was a breach, and it included these provisions related to liquidated damages:

*Atlas shall have the right to recover from Purchaser the price of all matchbooks and packaging delivered and/or identified to this agreement at the time of Purchaser’s breach hereof and shall be additionally entitled to recover fifty percent (50%) of the contract price of matchbooks and/or packaging ordered hereby, but not delivered or identified to this Agreement at the time of Purchaser’s breach.*

*Purchaser agrees that the percentage as specified hereinabove...will be reasonable and just compensation for such breach, and Purchaser hereby promises to pay such sum as liquidated damages, not as penalty in the event of any such breach.*

On appeal, Speedi complained that the liquidated damages clause was a penalty. Is the matter settled by the contract saying the liquidated damages are reasonable? On what criteria would a court determine whether liquidated damages are reasonable?

Mrs. Kaiden made a \$5,000 deposit on the purchase of new 1973 Rolls-Royce automobile. Lee Oldsmobile, the seller, confirmed the request by transmitting a regular order form, which Mrs. Kaiden signed and returned. The price was \$29,500.00 [about \$150,000 in 2010 dollars]. Some of the correspondence and a notation on Mrs. Kaiden's check indicated that delivery was expected in November. The order form, however, specified no delivery date. Further, it contained a disclaimer of liability for delay in delivery beyond the dealer's control, and it provided that the dealer had the right, upon failure of the purchaser to accept delivery, to retain as liquidated damages any cash deposit made. On November 21, 1973, Mrs. Kaiden notified Lee by telephone that she had purchased another Rolls-Royce elsewhere. She told the salesman to cancel her order. On November 29, Lee Oldsmobile notified Mrs. Kaiden that the car was ready for delivery. She refused delivery and demanded the return of her deposit. The dealer refused. In January 1974, the dealer—without notice to the Kaidens—sold the Rolls-Royce to another purchaser for \$26,495. Mrs. Kaiden sued Lee Oldsmobile for the \$5,000 deposit. The dealer carefully itemized its losses on the Kaiden deal—\$5080.07. On what basis did the court dismiss the liquidated damages clause? What is the consequence of the dealer's failure to give notice of the private sale under UCC, Section 2-706(3)?

Hemming saw an advertisement for a Cadillac convertible once owned by the famous early rock 'n' roll singer Elvis Presley. He contracted to buy it from Whitney for \$350,000 and sent Whitney \$10,000 as a deposit. But, after some delay, Whitney returned the \$10,000 and informed Hemming that the car had been sold to another purchaser. What remedy does Hemming have?

Murrey manufactured and sold pool tables. He was approached by Madsen, who had an idea for a kind of electronic pool table that would light up and make sounds like a pinball machine. Madsen made a \$70,000 deposit on an order for one hundred tables but then encountered difficulties and notified Murrey that he would be unable to accept delivery of

the tables. Murrey broke the tables up, salvaging materials worth about \$15,000 and using the rest for firewood. The evidence was that the tables, if completed by Murrey, could have been sold for \$45,000 as regular pool tables. Madsen gets his deposit back less expenses incurred by Murrey. But what principle affects Murrey's measure of damages, his right to claim expenses incurred?

In January 1992, Joseph Perna bought an eleven-year-old Oldsmobile at a New York City police auction sale for \$1,800 plus towing fees. It had been impounded by the police for nonpayment of parking tickets. The bill of sale from the police to Perna contained this language: "subject to the terms and conditions of any and all chattel mortgages, rental agreements, liens, conditional bills of sale, and encumbrances that may be on the motor vehicle of the [its original owner]." About a year later Perna sold the car to a coworker, Elio Marino, for \$1,200. Marino repaired and improved the car by replacing the radiator, a gasket, and door locks. Ten months after his father bought the car, Marino's son was stopped by police and arrested for driving a stolen vehicle; Mario paid \$600 to a lawyer to get that matter resolved, and he never got the car back from the police. Is Perna liable to Marino for the value of the car? Is Perna liable for the consequential damages—the attorney's fees? The relevant UCC sections are 2-312(2) and 2-714.

William Stem bought a used BMW from Gary Braden for \$6,600 on Braden's assertion that as far as he knew the car had not been wrecked and it was in good condition. Less than a week later Stem discovered a disconnected plug; when connected the oil-sensor warning light glowed. Mechanics informed Stem that the car was made up of the front end of a 1979 BMW and the rear end of a 1975 BMW, and the front half had 100,000 more miles on it than Stem thought. Six weeks after he purchased the car, Stem wrote Braden a letter that he refused the car and intended to rescind the sale. Braden did not accept return of the car or refund the money, and Braden continued to drive it for seven months and nearly 9,000 miles before suing. He had no other car and needed to transport his child. These issues were before the Alabama Supreme Court, construing UCC, Section 2-608: did Stem's use of the car, notwithstanding his letter of rescission, constitute such use of it as to be an acceptance? And if not, does Stem owe Braden anything for its use?

Donnelly ordered a leather motorcycle jacket from Leathers Inc. The jacket was specially designed according to Donnelly's instructions: it had a unique collar, various chromed studs throughout, and buckles, and he required an unusually large size. The coat cost \$6,000. Donnelly paid \$1,200 as a deposit, but after production was nearly complete, he telephoned Leathers Inc. and repudiated the contract. What should Leathers do now?

## SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. In the absence of agreement, the place of delivery is

- a. the buyer's place of business
- b. the seller's place of business
- c. either the buyer's place of business or the buyer's residence
- d. any of the above

The UCC's statute of limitations is

- a. two years
- b. three years
- c. four years
- d. none of the above

Under the UCC, if the buyer breaches, the seller can

- a. withhold further delivery
- b. resell the goods still in the seller's possession
- c. recover damages
- d. do all of the above

If the seller breaches, the buyer can generally

- a. recover the goods, even when the goods have not been identified to the contract and the seller is not insolvent
- b. purchase substitute goods and recover their cost
- c. purchase substitute goods and recover the difference between their cost and the contract price
- d. recover punitive damages

Following a seller's breach, the buyer can recover the price paid

- a. if the buyer cancels the contract
- b. only for goods the buyer has accepted
- c. for all the goods the buyer was to have received, whether or not they were accepted
- d. under none of the above conditions

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

1. b
2. c
3. d
4. c
5. d

[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-725(2).

## Chapter 20

# Products Liability

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. How products-liability law allocates the costs of a consumer society
2. How warranty theory works in products liability, and what its limitations are
3. How negligence theory works, and what its problems are
4. How strict liability theory works, and what its limitations are
5. What efforts are made to reform products-liability law, and why

## 20.1 Introduction: Why Products-Liability Law Is Important

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why products-liability law underwent a revolution in the twentieth century.
2. Recognize that courts play a vital role in policing the free enterprise system by adjudicating how the true costs of modern consumer culture are allocated.
3. Know the names of the modern causes of action for products-liability cases.

In previous chapters, we discussed remedies generally. In this chapter, we focus specifically on remedies available when a defective product causes personal injury or other damages. Products liability describes a type of claim, not a separate theory of liability. Products liability has strong emotional overtones—ranging from the pro-litigation position of consumer advocates to the conservative perspective of the manufacturers.

### History of Products-Liability Law

The theory of caveat emptor—let the buyer beware—that pretty much governed consumer law from the early eighteenth century until the early twentieth century made some sense. A horse-drawn buggy is a fairly simple device: its workings are apparent; a person of average experience in the 1870s would know whether it was constructed well and made of the proper woods. Most foodstuffs 150 years ago were grown at home and “put up” in the home kitchen or bought in bulk from a local grocer, subject to inspection and sampling; people made home remedies for coughs and colds and made many of their own clothes. Houses and furnishings were built of wood, stone, glass, and plaster—familiar substances. Entertainment was a book or a piano. The state of technology was such that the things consumed were, for the most part, comprehensible and—very important—mostly locally made, which meant that the consumer who suffered damages from a defective product could confront the product’s maker directly. Local reputation is a powerful influence on behavior.

The free enterprise system confers great benefits, and no one can deny that: materialistically, compare the image sketched in the previous paragraph with circumstances today. But those benefits come with a cost, and the fundamental political issue always is who has to pay. Consider the following famous passage from Upton Sinclair’s great novel *The Jungle*. It appeared in 1906. He wrote it to inspire labor reform; to his dismay, the public outrage focused instead on consumer protection reform. Here is his description of the sausage-making process in a big Chicago meatpacking plant:

*There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white—it would be dosed with borax and glycerin, and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption. There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit. There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage. There were the butt-ends of smoked meat, and the scraps of corned beef, and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plants, that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there. Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it only paid to do once in a long time, and among these was the cleaning out of the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water—and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public's breakfast. Some of it they would make into "smoked" sausage—but as the smoking took time, and was therefore expensive, they would call upon their chemistry department, and preserve it with borax and color it with gelatin to make it brown. All of their sausage came out of the same bowl, but when they came to wrap it they would stamp some of it "special," and for this they would charge two cents more a pound. <sup>[1]</sup>*

It became clear from Sinclair's exposé that associated with the marvels of then-modern meatpacking and distribution methods was food poisoning: a true cost became apparent. When the true cost of some money-making enterprise (e.g., cigarettes) becomes inescapably apparent, there are two possibilities. First, the legislature can in some way mandate that the manufacturer itself pay the cost; with the meatpacking plants, that would be the imposition of sanitary food-processing standards. Typically, Congress creates an administrative agency and gives the agency some marching orders, and then the agency crafts regulations dictating as many industry-wide reform measures as are politically possible. Second, the people who incur damages from the product (1) suffer and die or (2) access the machinery of the legal system and sue the manufacturer. If plaintiffs win enough lawsuits, the manufacturer's insurance company raises rates, forcing reform (as with high-powered muscle cars in the 1970s); the business goes bankrupt; or the legislature is pressured to act, either for the consumer or for the manufacturer. If the industry has enough clout to blunt—by various means—a robust proconsumer legislative response so that government regulation is too lax to prevent harm, recourse is had through the legal system. Thus for all the talk about the need for tort reform (discussed later in this chapter), the courts play a vital role in policing the free enterprise system by adjudicating how the true costs of modern consumer culture are allocated.

Obviously the situation has improved enormously in a century, but one does not have to look very far to find terrible problems today. Consider the following, which occurred in 2009–10:

- In the United States, Toyota recalled 412,000 passenger cars, mostly the Avalon model, for steering problems that reportedly led to three accidents.
- Portable baby recliners that are supposed to help fussy babies sleep better were recalled after the death of an infant: the Consumer Product Safety Commission announced the recall of 30,000 Nap Nanny recliners made by Baby Matters of Berwyn, Pennsylvania.
- More than 70,000 children and teens go to the emergency room each year for injuries and complications from medical devices. Contact lenses are the leading culprit, the first detailed national estimate suggests.



- Smith and Noble recalled 1.3 million Roman shades and roller shades after a child was nearly strangled: the Consumer Product Safety Commission says a five-year-old boy in Tacoma, Washington, was entangled in the cord of a roller shade in May 2009. <sup>[2]</sup>
- The Consumer Product Safety Commission reported that 4,521 people were killed in the United States in consumer-product-related incidences in 2009, and millions of people visited hospital emergency rooms from consumer-product-related injuries. <sup>[3]</sup>
- Reports about the possibility that cell-phone use causes brain cancer continue to be hotly debated. Critics suggest that the studies minimizing the risk were paid for by cell-phone manufacturers. <sup>[4]</sup>

Products liability can also be a life-or-death matter from the manufacturer’s perspective. In 2009, Bloomberg BusinessWeek reported that the costs of product safety for manufacturing firms can be enormous: “Peanut Corp., based in Lynchberg, Va., has been driven into bankruptcy since health officials linked tainted peanuts to more than 600 illnesses and nine deaths. Mattel said the first of several toy recalls it announced in 2007 cut its quarterly operating income by \$30 million. Earlier this decade, Ford Motor spent roughly \$3 billion replacing 10.6 million potentially defective Firestone tires.” <sup>[5]</sup> Businesses complain, with good reason, about the expenses associated with products-liability problems.

### **Current State of the Law**

Although the debate has been heated and at times simplistic, the problem of products liability is complex and most of us regard it with a high degree of ambivalence. We are all consumers, after all, who profit greatly from living in an industrial society. In this chapter, we examine the legal theories that underlie products-liability cases that developed rapidly in the twentieth century to address the problems of product-caused damages and injuries in an industrial society.

In the typical products-liability case, three legal theories are asserted—a contract theory and two tort theories. The contract theory is warranty, governed by the UCC, and the two tort theories are negligence and strict products liability, governed by the common law. See /6059 - mayer\_1.0- ch20\_s01\_s02\_f01.

Figure 20.1 Major Products Liability Theories



### KEY TAKEAWAY

As products became increasingly sophisticated and potentially dangerous in the twentieth century, and as the separation between production and consumption widened, products liability became a very important issue for both consumers and manufacturers. Millions of people every year are adversely affected by defective products, and manufacturers and sellers pay huge amounts for products-liability insurance and damages. The law has responded with causes of action that provide a means for recovery for products-liability damages.

### EXERCISES

1. How does the separation of production from consumption affect products-liability issues?
2. What other changes in production and consumption have caused the need for the development of products-liability law?
3. How can it be said that courts adjudicate the allocation of the costs of a consumer-oriented economy?

[1] Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Signet Classic, 1963), 136.

[2] FindLaw, AP reports.

[3] US Consumer Product Safety Commission, *2009 Report to the President and the Congress*, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/reports/2009rpt.pdf>.

[4] Matt Hamblen, "New Study Warns of Cell Phone Dangers," *Computerworld US*, August 9, 2009, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://news.techworld.com/personal-tech/3200539/new-study-warns-of-cell-phone-dangers>.

[5] Michael Orey, "Taking on Toy Safety," *BusinessWeek*, March 6, 2009, accessed March 1, 2011, [http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/mar2009/ca2009036\\_271002.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/mar2009/ca2009036_271002.htm).

## 20.2 Warranties

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize a UCC express warranty and how it is created.
2. Understand what is meant under the UCC by implied warranties, and know the main types of implied warranties: merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose, and title.
3. Know that there are other warranties: against infringement and as may arise from usage of the trade.
4. See that there are difficulties with warranty theory as a cause of action for products liability; a federal law has addressed some of these.

The UCC governs express warranties and various implied warranties, and for many years it was the only statutory control on the use and meanings of warranties. In 1975, after years of debate, Congress passed and President Gerald Ford signed into law the Magnuson-Moss Act, which imposes certain requirements on manufacturers and others who warrant their goods. We will examine both the UCC and the Magnuson-Moss Act.

### Types of Warranties

#### Express Warranties

An express warranty is created whenever the seller affirms that the product will perform in a certain manner. Formal words such as "warrant" or "guarantee" are not necessary. A seller may create an express warranty as part of the basis for the bargain of sale by means of (1) an affirmation of a fact or promise relating to the goods, (2) a description of the goods, or (3) a sample or model. Any of these will create an express warranty that the goods will conform to the fact, promise, description, sample, or model. Thus a seller who states that "the use of rustproof linings in the cans would prevent discoloration and adulteration of the Perform solution" has

given an express warranty, whether he realized it or not. <sup>[1]</sup> Claims of breach of express warranty are, at base, claims of misrepresentation.

But the courts will not hold a manufacturer to every statement that could conceivably be interpreted to be an express warranty. Manufacturers and sellers constantly “puff” their products, and the law is content to let them inhabit that gray area without having to make good on every claim. UCC 2-313(2) says that “an affirmation merely of the value of the goods or a statement purporting to be merely the seller’s opinion or commendation of the goods does not create a warranty.” Facts do.

It is not always easy, however, to determine the line between an express warranty and a piece of puffery. A salesperson who says that a strawberry huller is “great” has probably puffed, not warranted, when it turns out that strawberries run through the huller look like victims of a massacre. But consider the classic cases of the defective used car and the faulty bull. In the former, the salesperson said the car was in “A-1 shape” and “mechanically perfect.” In the latter, the seller said not only that the bull calf would “put the buyer on the map” but that “his father was the greatest living dairy bull.” The car, carrying the buyer’s seven-month-old child, broke down while the buyer was en route to visit her husband in the army during World War II. The court said that the salesperson had made an express warranty. <sup>[2]</sup> The bull calf turned out to be sterile, putting the farmer on the judicial rather than the dairy map. The court said the seller’s spiel was trade talk, not a warranty that the bull would impregnate cows. <sup>[3]</sup>

Is there any qualitative difference between these decisions, other than the quarter century that separates them and the different courts that rendered them? Perhaps the most that can be said is that the more specific and measurable the statement’s standards, the more likely it is that a court will hold the seller to a warranty, and that a written statement is easier to construe as a warranty than an oral one. It is also possible that courts look, if only subliminally, at how reasonable the buyer was in relying on the statement, although this ought not to be a strict test. A buyer may be unreasonable in expecting a car to get 100 miles to the gallon, but if that is what the seller promised, that ought to be an enforceable warranty.

**The CISG (Article 35) provides, “The seller must deliver goods which are of the quantity, quality and description required by the contract and which are contained**

**or packaged in the manner required by the contract. [And the] goods must possess the qualities of goods which the seller has held out to the buyer as a sample or model.”**

### **Implied Warranties**

Express warranties are those over which the parties dickered—or could have. Express warranties go to the essence of the bargain. An implied warranty, by contrast, is one that circumstances alone, not specific language, compel reading into the sale. In short, an implied warranty is one created by law, acting from an impulse of common sense.

### **Implied Warranty of Merchantability**

Section 2-314 of the UCC lays down the fundamental rule that goods carry an implied warranty of merchantability if sold by a merchant-seller. What is merchantability?

Section 2-314(2) of the UCC says that merchantable goods are those that conform at least to the following six characteristics:

1. Pass without objection in the trade under the contract description
2. In the case of fungible goods, are of fair average quality within the description
3. Are fit for the ordinary purposes for which such goods are used
4. Run, within the variations permitted by the agreement, of even kind, quality, and quantity within each unit and among all units involved
5. Are adequately contained, packaged, and labeled as the agreement may require
6. Conform to the promise or affirmations of fact made on the container or label if any

For the purposes of Section 2-314(2)(c) of the UCC, selling and serving food or drink for consumption on or off the premises is a sale subject to the implied warranty of merchantability—the food must be “fit for the ordinary purposes” to which it is put. The problem is common: you bite into a cherry pit in the cherry-vanilla ice cream, or you choke on the clam shells in the chowder. Is such food fit for the ordinary purposes to which it is put? There are two schools of thought. One asks whether the food was natural as prepared. This view adopts the seller’s perspective. The other asks what the consumer’s reasonable expectation was.

The first test is sometimes said to be the “natural-foreign” test. If the substance in the soup is natural to the substance—as bones are to fish—then the food is fit for consumption. The second test, relying on reasonable expectations, tends to be the more commonly used test.

**The Convention provides (Article 35) that “unless otherwise agreed, the goods sold are fit for the purposes for which goods of the same description would ordinarily be used.”**

### **Fitness for a Particular Purpose**

Section 2-315 of the UCC creates another implied warranty. Whenever a seller, at the time she contracts to make a sale, knows or has reason to know that the buyer is relying on the seller’s skill or judgment to select a product that is suitable for the particular purpose the buyer has in mind for the goods to be sold, there is an implied warranty that the goods are fit for that purpose. For example, you go to a hardware store and tell the salesclerk that you need a paint that will dry overnight because you are painting your front door and a rainstorm is predicted for the next day. The clerk gives you a slow-drying oil-based paint that takes two days to dry. The store has breached an implied warranty of fitness for particular purpose.

Note the distinction between “particular” and “ordinary” purposes. Paint is made to color and when dry to protect a surface. That is its ordinary purpose, and had you said only that you wished to buy paint, no implied warranty of fitness would have been breached. It is only because you had a particular purpose in mind that the implied warranty arose. Suppose you had found a can of paint in a general store and told the same tale, but the proprietor had said, “I don’t know enough about that paint to tell you anything beyond what’s on the label; help yourself.” Not every seller has the requisite degree of skill and knowledge about every product he sells to give rise to an implied warranty. Ultimately, each case turns on its particular circumstances: **“The Convention provides (Article 35): [The goods must be] fit for any particular purpose expressly or impliedly made known to the seller at the time of the conclusion of the contract, except where the circumstances show that the buyer did not rely, or that it was unreasonable for him to rely, on the seller’s skill and judgment.”**

### **Other Warranties**

Article 2 contains other warranty provisions, though these are not related specifically to products liability. Thus, under UCC, Section 2-312, unless explicitly excluded, the seller warrants he is conveying *good title* that is rightfully his and that the goods are transferred free of any security interest or other lien or encumbrance. In some cases (e.g., a police auction of bicycles picked up around campus and never claimed), the buyer should know that the seller does not claim title in himself, nor that title will necessarily be good against a third party, and so subsection (2) excludes warranties in these circumstances. But the circumstances must be so obvious that no reasonable person would suppose otherwise.

In *Menzel v. List*, an art gallery sold a painting by Marc Chagall that it purchased in Paris.<sup>[4]</sup> The painting had been stolen by the Germans when the original owner was forced to flee Belgium in the 1930s. Now in the United States, the original owner discovered that a new owner had the painting and successfully sued for its return. The customer then sued the gallery, claiming that it had breached the implied warranty of title when it sold the painting. The court agreed and awarded damages equal to the appreciated value of the painting. A good-faith purchaser who must surrender stolen goods to their true owner has a claim for breach of the implied warranty of title against the person from whom he bought the goods.

A second implied warranty, related to title, is that the merchant-seller warrants the goods are *free of any rightful claim by a third person* that the seller has infringed his rights (e.g., that a gallery has not infringed a copyright by selling a reproduction). This provision only applies to a seller who regularly deals in goods of the kind in question. If you find an old print in your grandmother's attic, you do not warrant when you sell it to a neighbor that it is free of any valid infringement claims.

A third implied warranty in this context involves the course of dealing or usage of trade. Section 2-314(3) of the UCC says that unless modified or excluded implied warranties may arise from a course of dealing or usage of trade. If a certain way of doing business is understood, it is not necessary for the seller to state explicitly that he will abide by the custom; it will be implied. A typical example is the obligation of a dog dealer to provide pedigree papers to prove the dog's lineage conforms to the contract.

## Problems with Warranty Theory

## **In General**

It may seem that a person asserting a claim for breach of warranty will have a good chance of success under an express warranty or implied warranty theory of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. In practice, though, claimants are in many cases denied recovery. Here are four general problems:

- The claimant must prove that there was a sale.
- The sale was of goods rather than real estate or services.
- The action must be brought within the four-year statute of limitations under Article 2-725, when the tender of delivery is made, not when the plaintiff discovers the defect.
- Under UCC, Section 2-607(3)(a) and Section 2A-516(3)(a), which covers leases, the claimant who fails to give notice of breach within a reasonable time of having accepted the goods will see the suit dismissed, and few consumers know enough to do so, except when making a complaint about a purchase of spoiled milk or about paint that wouldn't dry.

In addition to these general problems, the claimant faces additional difficulties stemming directly from warranty theory, which we take up later in this chapter.

### **Exclusion or Modification of Warranties**

The UCC permits sellers to exclude or disclaim warranties in whole or in part. That's reasonable, given that the discussion here is about contract, and parties are free to make such contracts as they see fit. But a number of difficulties can arise.

#### **Exclusion of Express Warranties**

The simplest way for the seller to exclude express warranties is not to give them. To be sure, Section 2-316(1) of the UCC forbids courts from giving operation to words in fine print that negate or limit express warranties if doing so would unreasonably conflict with express warranties stated in the main body of the contract—as, for example, would a blanket statement that “this contract excludes all warranties express or implied.” The purpose of the UCC provision is to prevent customers from being surprised by unbargained-for language.

#### **Exclusion of Implied Warranties in General**

Implied warranties can be excluded easily enough also, by describing the product with language such as “as is” or “with all faults.” Nor is exclusion simply a function of what the seller says. The



buyer who has either examined or refused to examine the goods before entering into the contract may not assert an implied warranty concerning defects an inspection would have revealed.

**The Convention provides a similar rule regarding a buyer's rights when he has failed to inspect the goods (Article 35): "The seller is not liable...for any lack of conformity of the goods if at the time of the conclusion of the contract the buyer knew or could not have been unaware of such lack of conformity."**

### **Implied Warranty of Merchantability**

Section 2-316(2) of the UCC permits the seller to disclaim or modify the implied warranty of merchantability, as long as the statement actually mentions "merchantability" and, if it is written, is "conspicuous." Note that the disclaimer need not be in writing, and—again—all implied warranties can be excluded as noted.

### **Implied Warranty of Fitness**

Section 2-316(2) of the UCC permits the seller also to disclaim or modify an implied warranty of fitness. This disclaimer or modification must be in writing, however, and must be conspicuous. It need not mention fitness explicitly; general language will do. The following sentence, for example, is sufficient to exclude all implied warranties of fitness: "There are no warranties that extend beyond the description on the face of this contract."

Here is a standard disclaimer clause found in a Dow Chemical Company agreement: "Seller warrants that the goods supplied here shall conform to the description stated on the front side hereof, that it will convey good title, and that such goods shall be delivered free from any lawful security interest, lien, or encumbrance. SELLER MAKES NO WARRANTY OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR USE. NOR IS THERE ANY OTHER EXPRESS OR IMPLIED WARRANTY."

### **Conflict between Express and Implied Warranties**

Express and implied warranties and their exclusion or limitation can often conflict. Section 2-317 of the UCC provides certain rules for deciding which should prevail. In general, all warranties are to be construed as consistent with each other and as cumulative. When that assumption is unreasonable, the parties' intention governs the interpretation, according to the

following rules: (a) exact or technical specifications displace an inconsistent sample or model or general language of description; (b) a sample from an existing bulk displaces inconsistent general language of description; (c) express warranties displace inconsistent implied warranties other than an implied warranty of fitness for a particular purpose. Any inconsistency among warranties must always be resolved in favor of the implied warranty of fitness for a particular purpose. This doesn't mean that warranty cannot be limited or excluded altogether. The parties may do so. But in cases of doubt whether it or some other language applies, the implied warranty of fitness will have a superior claim.

### **The Magnuson-Moss Act and Phantom Warranties**

After years of debate over extending federal law to regulate warranties, Congress enacted the Magnuson-Moss Federal Trade Commission Warranty Improvement Act (more commonly referred to as the Magnuson-Moss Act) and President Ford signed it in 1975. The act was designed to clear up confusing and misleading warranties, where—as Senator Magnuson put it in introducing the bill—“purchasers of consumer products discover that their warranty may cover a 25-cent part but not the \$100 labor charge or that there is full coverage on a piano so long as it is shipped at the purchaser's expense to the factory....There is a growing need to generate consumer understanding by clearly and conspicuously disclosing the terms and conditions of the warranty and by telling the consumer what to do if his guaranteed product becomes defective or malfunctions.” The Magnuson-Moss Act only applies to consumer products (for household and domestic uses); commercial purchasers are presumed to be knowledgeable enough not to need these protections, to be able to hire lawyers, and to be able to include the cost of product failures into the prices they charge.

The act has several provisions to meet these consumer concerns; it regulates the content of warranties and the means of disclosing those contents. The act gives the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) the authority to promulgate detailed regulations to interpret and enforce it. Under FTC regulations, any written warranty for a product costing a consumer more than ten dollars must disclose in a single document and in readily understandable language the following nine items of information:

1. The identity of the persons covered by the warranty, whether it is limited to the original purchaser or fewer than all who might come to own it during the warranty period.
2. A clear description of the products, parts, characteristics, components, or properties covered, and where necessary for clarity, a description of what is excluded.
3. A statement of what the warrantor will do if the product fails to conform to the warranty, including items or services the warranty will pay for and, if necessary for clarity, what it will not pay for.
4. A statement of when the warranty period starts and when it expires.
5. A step-by-step explanation of what the consumer must do to realize on the warranty, including the names and addresses of those to whom the product must be brought.
6. Instructions on how the consumer can be availed of any informal dispute resolution mechanism established by the warranty.
7. Any limitations on the duration of implied warranties—since some states do not permit such limitations, the warranty must contain a statement that any limitations may not apply to the particular consumer.
8. Any limitations or exclusions on relief, such as consequential damages—as above, the warranty must explain that some states do not allow such limitations.
9. The following statement: “This warranty gives you specific legal rights, and you may also have other rights which vary from state to state.”

In addition to these requirements, the act requires that the warranty be labeled either a full or limited warranty. A full warranty means (1) the defective product or part will be fixed or replaced for free, including removal and reinstallation; (2) it will be fixed within a reasonable time; (3) the consumer need not do anything unreasonable (like shipping the piano to the factory) to get warranty service; (4) the warranty is good for anyone who owns the product during the period of the warranty; (5) the consumer gets money back or a new product if the item cannot be fixed within a reasonable number of attempts. But the full warranty may not cover the whole product: it may cover only the hard drive in the computer, for example; it must state what parts are included and excluded. A limited warranty is less inclusive. It may cover only parts, not labor; it may require the consumer to bring the product to the store for service; it

may impose a handling charge; it may cover only the first purchaser. Both full and limited warranties may exclude consequential damages.

Disclosure of the warranty provisions prior to sale is required by FTC regulations; this can be done in a number of ways. The text of the warranty can be attached to the product or placed in close conjunction to it. It can be maintained in a binder kept in each department or otherwise easily accessible to the consumer. Either the binders must be in plain sight or signs must be posted to call the prospective buyer's attention to them. A notice containing the text of the warranty can be posted, or the warranty itself can be printed on the product's package or container.

Phantom warranties are addressed by the Magnuson-Moss Act. As we have seen, the UCC permits the seller to disclaim implied warranties. This authority often led sellers to give what were called phantom warranties—that is, the express warranty contained disclaimers of implied warranties, thus leaving the consumer with fewer rights than if no express warranty had been given at all. In the words of the legislative report of the act, “The bold print giveth, and the fine print taketh away.” The act abolished these phantom warranties by providing that if the seller gives a written warranty, whether express or implied, he cannot disclaim or modify implied warranties. However, a seller who gives a limited warranty can limit implied warranties to the duration of the limited warranty, if the duration is reasonable.

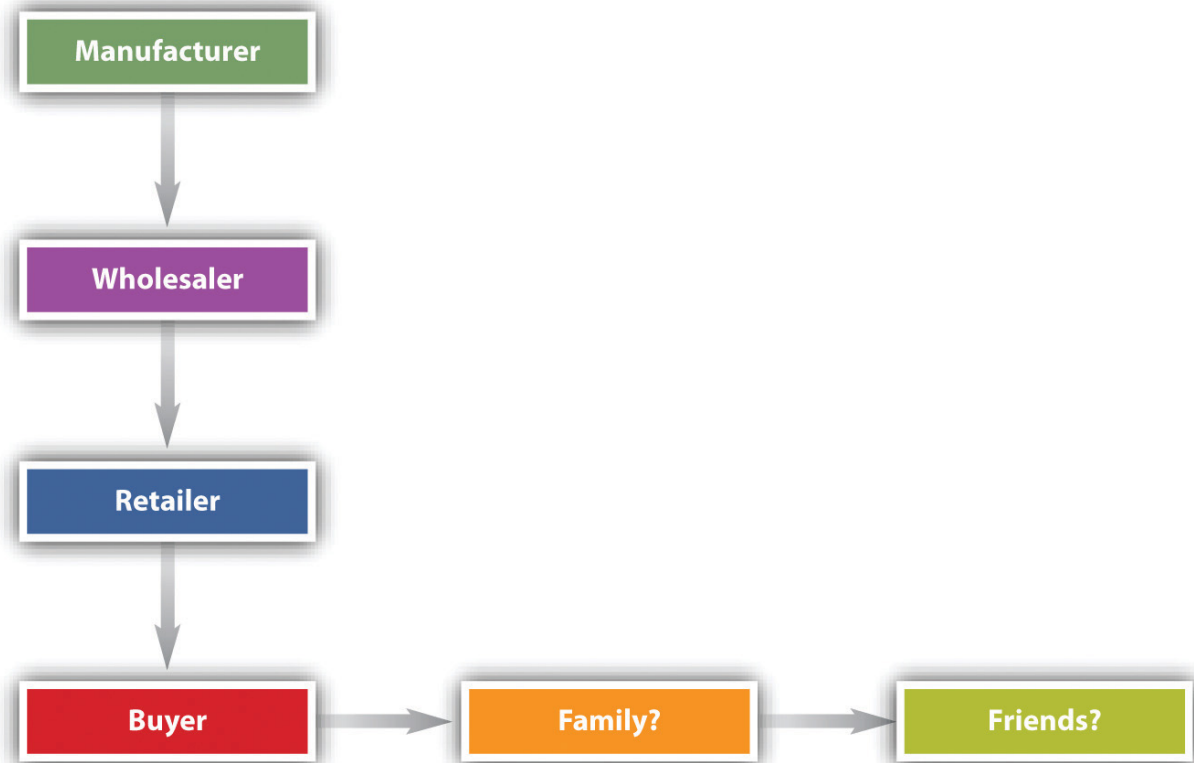
A seller's ability to disclaim implied warranties is also limited by state law in two ways. First, by amendment to the UCC or by separate legislation, some states prohibit disclaimers whenever consumer products are sold.<sup>[5]</sup> Second, the UCC at 2-302 provides that unconscionable contracts or clauses will not be enforced. UCC 2-719(3) provides that limitation of damages for personal injury in the sale of “consumer goods is prima facie unconscionable, but limitation of damages where the loss is commercial is not.” (Unconscionability was discussed in [Chapter 12 "Legality"](#).)

A first problem with warranty theory, then, is that it's possible to disclaim or limit the warranty. The worst abuses of manipulative and tricky warranties are eliminated by the Magnuson-Moss Act, but there are several other reasons that warranty theory is not the panacea for claimants who have suffered damages or injuries as a result of defective products.

## Privity

A second problem with warranty law (after exclusion and modification of warranties) is that of privity. Privity is the legal term for the direct connection between the seller and buyer, the two contracting parties. For decades, the doctrine of privity has held that one person can sue another only if they are in privity. That worked well in the days when most commerce was local and the connection between seller and buyer was immediate. But in a modern industrial (or postindustrial) economy, the product is transported through a much larger distribution system, as depicted in [Figure 20.2 "Chain of Distribution"](#). Two questions arise: (1) Is the manufacturer or wholesaler (as opposed to the retailer) liable to the buyer under warranty theory? and (2) May the buyer's family or friends assert warranty rights?

*Figure 20.2 Chain of Distribution*



## Horizontal Privity

Suppose Carl Consumer buys a new lamp for his family's living room. The lamp is defective: Carl gets a serious electrical shock when he turns it on. Certainly Carl would be covered by the implied warranty of merchantability: he's in direct privity with the seller. But what if Carl's spouse Carlene is injured? She didn't buy the lamp; is she covered? Or suppose Carl's friend David, visiting for an afternoon, gets zapped. Is David covered? This gets to horizontal privity, noncontracting parties who suffer damages from defective goods, such as nonbuyer users, consumers, and bystanders. Horizontal privity determines to whose benefit the warranty "flows"—who can sue for its breach. In one of its rare instances of nonuniformity, the UCC does not dictate the result. It gives the states three choices, labeled in Section 2-318 as Alternatives A, B, and C.

Alternative A says that a seller's warranty extends "to any natural person who is in the family or household of his buyer or who is a guest in his home" provided (1) it is reasonable to expect the person suffering damages to use, consume, or be affected by the goods and (2) the warranty extends only to damages for personal injury.

Alternative B "extends to any natural person who may reasonably be expected to use, consume, or be affected by the goods, and who is injured in person by breach of the warranty." It is less restrictive than the first alternative: it extends protection to people beyond those in the buyer's home. For example, what if Carl took the lamp to a neighbor's house to illuminate a poker table: under Alternative B, anybody at the neighbor's house who suffered injury would be covered by the warranty. But this alternative does not extend protection to organizations; "natural person" means a human being.

Alternative C is the same as B except that it applies not only to any "natural person" but "to any person who is injured by breach of the warranty." This is the most far-reaching alternative because it provides redress for damage to *property* as well as for *personal* injury, and it extends protection to corporations and other institutional buyers.

One may incidentally note that having three different alternatives for when third-party nonpurchasers can sue a seller or manufacturer for breach of warranty gives rise to unintended consequences. First, different outcomes are produced among jurisdictions, including variations

in the common law. Second, the great purpose of the Uniform Commercial Code in promoting national uniformity is undermined. Third, battles over choice of law—where to file the lawsuit—are generated.

UCC, Section 2A-216, provides basically the same alternatives as applicable to the leasing of goods.

### **Vertical Privity**

The traditional rule was that remote selling parties were not liable: lack of privity was a defense by the manufacturer or wholesaler to a suit by a buyer with whom these entities did not themselves contract. The buyer could recover damages from the retailer but not from the original manufacturer, who after all made the product and who might be much more financially able to honor the warranty. The UCC takes no position here, but over the last fifty years the judicial trend has been to abolish this vertical privity requirement. (See [Figure 20.2 "Chain of Distribution"](#); the entities in the distribution chain are those in vertical privity to the buyer.) It began in 1958, when the Michigan Supreme Court overturned the old theory in an opinion written by Justice John D. Voelker (who also wrote the novel *Anatomy of a Murder*, under the pen name Robert Traver). <sup>[6]</sup>

### **Contributory Negligence, Comparative Negligence, and Assumption of Risk**

After disclaimers and privity issues are resolved, other possible impediments facing the plaintiff in a products-liability warranty case are issues of assumption of the risk, contributory negligence, and comparative negligence (discussed in [Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort Law"](#) on torts).

Courts uniformly hold that assumption of risk is a defense for sellers against a claim of breach of warranty, while there is a split of authority over whether comparative and contributory negligence are defenses. However, the courts' use of this terminology is often conflicting and confusing. The ultimate question is really one of causation: was the seller's breach of the warranty the cause of the plaintiff's damages?

The UCC is not markedly helpful in clearing away the confusion caused by years of discussion of assumption of risk and contributory negligence. Section 2-715(2)(b) of the UCC says that among the forms of consequential damage for which recovery can be sought is "injury to person or

property *proximately* resulting from any breach of warranty” (emphasis added). But “proximately” is a troublesome word. Indeed, ultimately it is a circular word: it means nothing more than that the defendant must have been a direct enough cause of the damages that the courts will impose liability. Comment 5 to this section says, “Where the injury involved follows the use of goods without discovery of the defect causing the damage, the question of ‘proximate’ turns on whether it was reasonable for the buyer to use the goods without such inspection as would have revealed the defects. If it was not reasonable for him to do so, or if he did in fact discover the defect prior to his use, the injury would not proximately result from the breach of warranty.”

Obviously if a sky diver buys a parachute and then discovers a few holes in it, his family would not likely prevail in court when they sued to recover for his death because the parachute failed to function after he jumped at 5,000 feet. But the general notion that it must have been reasonable for a buyer to use goods without inspection can make a warranty case difficult to prove.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

A first basis of recovery in products-liability theory is breach of warranty. There are two types of warranties: express and implied. Under the implied category are three major subtypes: the implied warranty of merchantability (only given by merchants), the implied warranty of fitness for a particular purpose, and the implied warranty of title. There are a number of problems with the use of warranty theory: there must have been a sale of the goods; the plaintiff must bring the action within the statute of limitations; and the plaintiff must notify the seller within a reasonable time. The seller may—within the constraints of the Magnuson-Moss Act—limit or exclude express warranties or limit or exclude implied warranties. Privity, or lack of it, between buyer and seller has been significantly eroded as a limitation in warranty theory, but lack of privity may still affect the plaintiff’s recovery; the plaintiff’s assumption of the risk in using defective goods may preclude recovery.

#### EXERCISES

1. What are the two main types of warranties and the important subtypes?
2. Who can make each type of warranty?
3. What general problems does a plaintiff have in bringing a products-liability warranty case?



4. What problems are presented concerning exclusion or manipulative express warranties, and how does the Magnuson-Moss Act address them?
5. How are implied warranties excluded?
6. What is the problem of lack of privity, and how does modern law deal with it?

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[1] *Rhodes Pharmacal Co. v. Continental Can Co.*, 219 N.E.2d 726 (Ill. 1976).

[2] *Wat Henry Pontiac Co. v. Bradley*, 210 P.2d 348 (Okla. 1949).

[3] *Frederickson v. Hackney*, 198 N.W. 806 (Minn. 1924).

[4] *Menzel v. List*, 246 N.E.2d 742 (N.Y. 1969).

[5] A number of states have special laws that limit the use of the UCC implied warranty disclaimer rules in consumer sales. Some of these appear in amendments to the UCC and others are in separate statutes. The broadest approach is that of the nine states that prohibit the disclaimer of implied warranties in consumer sales (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, Vermont, Maryland, the District of Columbia, West Virginia, Kansas, Mississippi, and, with respect to personal injuries only, Alabama). There is a difference in these states whether the rules apply to manufacturers as well as retailers.

[6] *Spence v. Three Rivers Builders & Masonry Supply, Inc.*, 90 N.W.2d 873 (Mich. 1958).

## 20.3 Negligence

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize how the tort theory of negligence may be of use in products-liability suits.
2. Understand why negligence is often not a satisfactory cause of action in such suits: proof of it may be difficult, and there are powerful defenses to claims of negligence.

Negligence is the second theory raised in the typical products-liability case. It is a tort theory (as compared to breach of warranty, which is of course a contract theory), and it does have this advantage over warranty theory: privity is never relevant. A pedestrian is struck in an intersection by a car whose brakes were defectively manufactured. Under no circumstances would breach of warranty be a useful cause of action for the pedestrian—there is no privity at all. Negligence is considered in detail in the [Chapter 7 "Introduction to Tort Law"](#) on torts; it basically means lack of due care.

### Typical Negligence Claims: Design Defects and Inadequate Warnings

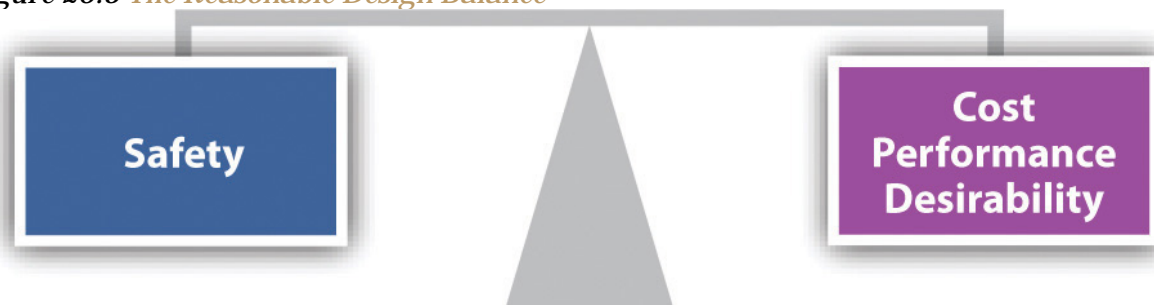
Negligence theory in products liability is most useful in two types of cases: defective design and defective warnings.

### Design Defects

Manufacturers can be, and often are, held liable for injuries caused by products that were defectively designed. The question is whether the designer used reasonable care in designing a product reasonably safe for its foreseeable use. The concern over reasonableness and standards of care are elements of negligence theory.

Defective-design cases can pose severe problems for manufacturing and safety engineers. More safety means more cost. Designs altered to improve safety may impair functionality and make the product less desirable to consumers. At what point safety comes into reasonable balance with performance, cost, and desirability (see [Figure 20.3 "The Reasonable Design Balance"](#)) is impossible to forecast accurately, though some factors can be taken into account. For example, if other manufacturers are marketing comparable products whose design are intrinsically safer, the less-safe products are likely to lose a test of reasonableness in court.

*Figure 20.3 The Reasonable Design Balance*



### Warning Defects

We noted that a product may be defective if the manufacturer failed to warn the user of potential dangers. Whether a warning should have been affixed is often a question of what is reasonably foreseeable, and the failure to affix a warning will be treated as negligence. The manufacturer of a weed killer with poisonous ingredients is certainly acting negligently when it fails to warn the consumer that the contents are potentially lethal.

The law governing the necessity to warn and the adequacy of warnings is complex. What is reasonable turns on the degree to which a product is likely to be misused and, as the disturbing *Laaperi* case ([Section 20.6.3 "Failure to Warn"](#)) illustrates, whether the hazard is obvious.

## Problems with Negligence Theory

Negligence is an ancient cause of action and, as was discussed in the torts chapter, it carries with it a number of well-developed defenses. Two categories may be mentioned: common-law defenses and preemption.

### Common-Law Defenses against Negligence

Among the problems confronting a plaintiff with a claim of negligence in products-liability suits (again, these concepts are discussed in the torts chapter) are the following:

- Proving negligence at all: just because a product is defective does not necessarily prove the manufacturer breached a duty of care.
- Proximate cause: even if there was some negligence, the plaintiff must prove her damages flowed proximately from that negligence.
- Contributory and comparative negligence: the plaintiff's own actions contributed to the damages.
- Subsequent alteration of the product: generally the manufacturer will not be liable if the product has been changed.
- Misuse or abuse of the product: using a lawn mower to trim a hedge or taking too much of a drug are examples.
- Assumption of the risk: knowingly using the product in a risky way.

### Preemption

Preemption (or "pre-emption") is illustrated by this problem: suppose there is a federal standard concerning the product, and the defendant manufacturer meets it, but the standard is not really very protective. (It is not uncommon, of course, for federal standard makers of all types to be significantly influenced by lobbyists for the industries being regulated by the standards.) Is it enough for the manufacturer to point to its satisfaction of the standard so that such satisfaction preempts (takes over) any common-law negligence claim? "We built the

machine to federal standards: we can't be liable. Our compliance with the federal safety standard is an affirmative defense.”

Preemption is typically raised as a defense in suits about (1) cigarettes, (2) FDA-approved medical devices, (3) motor-boat propellers, (4) pesticides, and (5) motor vehicles. This is a complex area of law. Questions inevitably arise as to whether there was federal preemption, express or implied. Sometimes courts find preemption and the consumer loses; sometimes the courts don't find preemption and the case goes forward. According to one lawyer who works in this field, there has been “increasing pressure on both the regulatory and congressional fronts to preempt state laws.” That is, the usual defendants (manufacturers) push Congress and the regulatory agencies to state explicitly in the law that the federal standards preempt and defeat state law. <sup>[1]</sup>

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Negligence is a second possible cause of action for products-liability claimants. A main advantage is that no issues of privity are relevant, but there are often problems of proof; there are a number of robust common-law defenses, and federal preemption is a recurring concern for plaintiffs' lawyers.

#### EXERCISES

1. What two types of products-liability cases are most often brought under negligence?
2. How could it be said that merely because a person suffers injury as the result of a defective product, proof of negligence is not necessarily made?
3. What is “preemption” and how is it used as a sword to defeat products-liability plaintiffs?

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[1] C. Richard Newsome and Andrew F. Knopf, “Federal Preemption: Products Lawyers Beware,” *Florida Justice Association Journal*, July 27, 2007, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.newsomelaw.com/resources/articles/federal-preemption-products-lawyers-beware>.

## 20.4 Strict Liability in Tort

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know what “strict products liability” means and how it differs from the other two products-liability theories.

2. Understand the basic requirements to prove strict products liability.
3. See what obstacles to recovery remain with this doctrine.

The warranties grounded in the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) are often ineffective in assuring recovery for a plaintiff's injuries. The notice requirements and the ability of a seller to disclaim the warranties remain bothersome problems, as does the privity requirement in those states that continue to adhere to it.

Negligence as a products-liability theory obviates any privity problems, but negligence comes with a number of familiar defenses and with the problems of preemption.

To overcome the obstacles, judges have gone beyond the commercial statutes and the ancient concepts of negligence. They have fashioned a tort theory of products liability based on the principle of **strict products liability**. One court expressed the rationale for the development of the concept as follows: "The rule of strict liability for defective products is an example of necessary paternalism judicially shifting risk of loss by application of tort doctrine because [the UCC] scheme fails to adequately cover the situation. Judicial paternalism is to loss shifting what garlic is to a stew—sometimes necessary to give full flavor to statutory law, always distinctly noticeable in its result, overwhelmingly counterproductive if excessive, and never an end in itself." <sup>[1]</sup>Paternalism or not, strict liability has become a very important legal theory in products-liability cases.

### Strict Liability Defined

The formulation of strict liability that most courts use is Section 402A of the Restatement of Torts (Second), set out here in full:

- (1) One who sells any product in a defective condition unreasonably dangerous to the user or consumer or to his property is subject to liability for physical harm thereby caused to the ultimate user or consumer, or to his property, if*
  - (a) the seller is engaged in the business of selling such a product, and*
  - (b) it is expected to and does reach the user or consumer without substantial change in the condition in which it is sold.*
- (2) This rule applies even though*

- (a) the seller has exercised all possible care in the preparation and sale of his product, and
- (b) the user or consumer has not bought the product from or entered into any contractual relation with the seller.

Section 402A of the Restatement avoids the warranty booby traps. It states a rule of law not governed by the UCC, so limitations and exclusions in warranties will not apply to a suit based on the Restatement theory. And the consumer is under no obligation to give notice to the seller within a reasonable time of any injuries. Privity is not a requirement; the language of the Restatement says it applies to “the user or consumer,” but courts have readily found that bystanders in various situations are entitled to bring actions under Restatement, Section 402A. The formulation of strict liability, though, is limited to physical harm. Many courts have held that a person who suffers economic loss must resort to warranty law.

Strict liability avoids some negligence traps, too. No proof of negligence is required. See [Figure 20.4 "Major Difference between Warranty and Strict Liability"](#).

*Figure 20.4 Major Difference between Warranty and Strict Liability*

	Warranty	Strict Liability
1. Notice of Defect from Buyer to Seller Required?	Yes	No
2. Disclaimer Possible?	Yes	No
3. Privity Required?	Sometimes	No

## Section 402A Elements

### Product in a Defective Condition

Sales of goods but not sales of services are covered under the Restatement, Section 402A. Furthermore, the plaintiff will not prevail if the product was safe for normal handling and consumption when sold. A glass soda bottle that is properly capped is not in a defective condition merely because it can be broken if the consumer should happen to drop it, making the

jagged glass dangerous. Chocolate candy bars are not defective merely because you can become ill by eating too many of them at once. On the other hand, a seller would be liable for a product defectively packaged, so that it could explode or deteriorate and change its chemical composition. A product can also be in a defective condition if there is danger that could come from an anticipated wrongful use, such as a drug that is safe only when taken in limited doses. Under those circumstances, failure to place an adequate dosage warning on the container makes the product defective.

The plaintiff bears the burden of proving that the product is in a defective condition, and this burden can be difficult to meet. Many products are the result of complex feats of engineering. Expert witnesses are necessary to prove that the products were defectively manufactured, and these are not always easy to come by. This difficulty of proof is one reason why many cases raise the failure to warn as the dispositive issue, since in the right case that issue is far easier to prove. The *Anderson* case (detailed in the exercises at the end of this chapter) demonstrates that the plaintiff cannot prevail under strict liability merely because he was injured. It is not the fact of injury that is dispositive but the defective condition of the product.

### **Unreasonably Dangerous**

The product must be not merely dangerous but unreasonably dangerous. Most products have characteristics that make them dangerous in certain circumstances. As the Restatement commentators note, “Good whiskey is not unreasonably dangerous merely because it will make some people drunk, and is especially dangerous to alcoholics; but bad whiskey, containing a dangerous amount of fuel oil, is unreasonably dangerous....Good butter is not unreasonably dangerous merely because, if such be the case, it deposits cholesterol in the arteries and leads to heart attacks; but bad butter, contaminated with poisonous fish oil, is unreasonably dangerous.”<sup>[2]</sup> Under Section 402A, “the article sold must be dangerous to an extent beyond that which would be contemplated by the ordinary consumer who purchases it, with the ordinary knowledge common to the community as to its characteristics. ”

Even high risks of danger are not necessarily unreasonable. Some products are unavoidably unsafe; rabies vaccines, for example, can cause dreadful side effects. But the disease itself, almost always fatal, is worse. A product is unavoidably unsafe when it cannot be made safe for

its intended purpose given the present state of human knowledge. Because important benefits may flow from the product's use, its producer or seller ought not to be held liable for its danger. However, the failure to warn a potential user of possible hazards can make a product defective under Restatement, Section 402A, whether unreasonably dangerous or even unavoidably unsafe. The dairy farmer need not warn those with common allergies to eggs, because it will be presumed that the person with an allergic reaction to common foodstuffs will be aware of them. But when the product contains an ingredient that could cause toxic effects in a substantial number of people and its danger is not widely known (or if known, is not an ingredient that would commonly be supposed to be in the product), the lack of a warning could make the product unreasonably dangerous within the meaning of Restatement, Section 402A. Many of the suits brought by asbestos workers charged exactly this point; "The utility of an insulation product containing asbestos may outweigh the known or foreseeable risk to the insulation workers and thus justify its marketing. The product could still be unreasonably dangerous, however, if unaccompanied by adequate warnings. An insulation worker, no less than any other product user, has a right to decide whether to expose himself to the risk."<sup>[3]</sup> This rule of law came to haunt the Manville Corporation: it was so burdened with lawsuits, brought and likely to be brought for its sale of asbestos—a known carcinogen—that it declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1982 and shucked its liability.<sup>[4]</sup>

### **Engaged in the Business of Selling**

Restatement, Section 402A(1)(a), limits liability to sellers "engaged in the business of selling such a product." The rule is intended to apply to people and entities engaged in business, not to casual one-time sellers. The business need not be solely in the defective product; a movie theater that sells popcorn with a razor blade inside is no less liable than a grocery store that does so. But strict liability under this rule does not attach to a private individual who sells his own automobile. In this sense, Restatement, Section 402A, is analogous to the UCC's limitation of the warranty of merchantability to the merchant.

The requirement that the defendant be in the business of selling gets to the rationale for the whole concept of strict products liability: businesses should shoulder the cost of injuries because they are in the best position to spread the risk and distribute the expense among the public. This



same policy has been the rationale for holding bailors and lessors liable for defective equipment just as if they had been sellers. <sup>[5]</sup>

### **Reaches the User without Change in Condition**

Restatement, Section 402A(1)(b), limits strict liability to those defective products that are expected to and do reach the user or consumer without substantial change in the condition in which the products are sold. A product that is safe when delivered cannot subject the seller to liability if it is subsequently mishandled or changed. The seller, however, must anticipate in appropriate cases that the product will be stored; faulty packaging or sterilization may be the grounds for liability if the product deteriorates before being used.

### **Liability Despite Exercise of All Due Care**

Strict liability applies under the Restatement rule even though “the seller has exercised all possible care in the preparation and sale of his product.” This is the crux of “strict liability” and distinguishes it from the conventional theory of negligence. It does not matter how reasonably the seller acted or how exemplary is a manufacturer’s quality control system—what matters is whether the product was defective and the user injured as a result. Suppose an automated bottle factory manufactures 1,000 bottles per hour under exacting standards, with a rigorous and costly quality-control program designed to weed out any bottles showing even an infinitesimal amount of stress. The plant is “state of the art,” and its computerized quality-control operation is the best in the world. It regularly detects the one out of every 10,000 bottles that analysis has shown will be defective. Despite this intense effort, it proves impossible to weed out every defective bottle; one out of one million, say, will still escape detection. Assume that a bottle, filled with soda, finds its way into a consumer’s home, explodes when handled, sends glass shards into his eye, and blinds him. Under negligence, the bottler has no liability; under strict liability, the bottler will be liable to the consumer.

### **Liability without Contractual Relation**

Under Restatement, Section 402A(2)(b), strict liability applies even though the user has not purchased the product from the seller nor has the user entered into any contractual relation with the seller. In short, privity is abolished and the injured user may use the theory of strict liability against manufacturers and wholesalers as well as retailers. Here, however, the courts have

varied in their approaches; the trend has been to allow bystanders recovery. The Restatement explicitly leaves open the question of the bystander's right to recover under strict liability.

### **Problems with Strict Liability**

Strict liability is liability without proof of negligence and without privity. It would seem that strict liability is the "holy grail" of products-liability lawyers: the complete answer. Well, no, it's not the holy grail. It is certainly true that 402A abolishes the contractual problems of warranty.

Restatement, Section 402A, Comment *m*, says,

*The rule stated in this Section is not governed by the provisions of the Uniform Commercial Code, as to warranties; and it is not affected by limitations on the scope and content of warranties, or by limitation to "buyer" and "seller" in those statutes. Nor is the consumer required to give notice to the seller of his injury within a reasonable time after it occurs, as provided by the Uniform Act. The consumer's cause of action does not depend upon the validity of his contract with the person from whom he acquires the product, and it is not affected by any disclaimer or other agreement, whether it be between the seller and his immediate buyer, or attached to and accompanying the product into the consumer's hands. In short, "warranty" must be given a new and different meaning if it is used in connection with this Section. It is much simpler to regard the liability here stated as merely one of strict liability in tort.*

Inherent in the Restatement's language is the obvious point that if the product has been altered, losses caused by injury are not the manufacturer's liability. Beyond that there are still some limitations to strict liability.

### **Disclaimers**

Comment *m* specifically says the cause of action under Restatement, Section 402A, is not affected by disclaimer. But in *nonconsumer* cases, courts have allowed clear and specific disclaimers. In 1969, the Ninth Circuit observed: "In *Kaiser Steel Corp.* the [California Supreme Court] court upheld the dismissal of a strict liability action when the parties, dealing from positions of relatively equal economic strength, contracted in a commercial setting to limit the defendant's liability. The court went on to hold that in this situation the strict liability cause of action does not apply at all. In reaching this conclusion, the court in *Kaiser* reasoned that strict

liability ‘is designed to encompass situations in which the principles of sales warranties serve their purpose “fitfully at best.” [Citation]’ It concluded that in such commercial settings the UCC principles work well and “to apply the tort doctrines of products liability will displace the statutory law rather than bring out its full flavor.” [6]

### **Plaintiff’s Conduct**

Conduct by the plaintiff herself may defeat recovery in two circumstances.

### **Assumption of Risk**

Courts have allowed the defense of assumption of the risk in strict products-liability cases. A plaintiff assumes the risk of injury, thus establishing defense to claim of strict products liability, when he is aware the product is defective, knows the defect makes the product unreasonably dangerous, has reasonable opportunity to elect whether to expose himself to the danger, and nevertheless proceeds to make use of the product. The rule makes sense.

### **Misuse or Abuse of the Product**

Where the plaintiff does not know a use of the product is dangerous but nevertheless uses for an incorrect purpose, a defense arises, but only if such misuse was not foreseeable. If it was, the manufacturer should warn against that misuse. In *Eastman v. Stanley Works*, a carpenter used a framing hammer to drive masonry nails; the claw of the hammer broke off, striking him in the eye. [7] He sued. The court held that while a defense does exist “where the product is used in a capacity which is unforeseeable by the manufacturer and completely incompatible with the product’s design...misuse of a product suggests a use which was unanticipated or unexpected by the product manufacturer, or unforeseeable and unanticipated [but] it was not the case that reasonable minds could only conclude that appellee misused the [hammer]. Though the plaintiff’s use of the hammer might have been *unreasonable*, unreasonable use is not a defense to a strict product-liability action or to a negligence action.”

### **Limited Remedy**

The Restatement says recovery under strict liability is limited to “physical harm thereby caused to the ultimate user or consumer, or to his property,” but not other losses and not economic losses. In *Atlas Air v. General Electric*, a New York court held that the “economic loss rule” (no recovery for economic losses) barred strict products-liability and negligence claims by the

purchaser of a used airplane against the airplane engine manufacturer for damage to the plane caused by an emergency landing necessitated by engine failure, where the purchaser merely alleged economic losses with respect to the plane itself, and not damages for personal injury (recovery for damage to the engine was allowed).<sup>[8]</sup>

But there are exceptions. In *Duffin v. Idaho Crop Imp. Ass'n*, the court recognized that a party generally owes no duty to exercise due care to avoid purely economic loss, but if there is a “special relationship” between the parties such that it would be equitable to impose such a duty, the duty will be imposed.<sup>[9]</sup> “In other words, there is an extremely limited group of cases where the law of negligence extends its protections to a party’s economic interest.”

### **The Third Restatement**

The law develops. What seemed fitting in 1964 when the Restatement (Second) announced the state of the common-law rules for strict liability in Section 402A seemed, by 1997, not to be tracking common law entirely closely. The American Law Institute came out with the Restatement (Third) in that year. The Restatement changes some things. Most notably it abolishes the “unreasonably dangerous” test and substitutes a “risk-utility test.” That is, a product is not defective unless its riskiness outweighs its utility. More important, the Restatement (Third), Section 2, now requires the plaintiff to provide a reasonable alternative design to the product in question. In advancing a reasonable alternative design, the plaintiff is not required to offer a prototype product. The plaintiff must only show that the proposed alternative design exists and is superior to the product in question. The Restatement (Third) also makes it more difficult for plaintiffs to sue drug companies successfully. One legal scholar commented as follows on the Restatement (Third):

*The provisions of the Third Restatement, if implemented by the courts, will establish a degree of fairness in the products liability arena. If courts adopt the Third Restatement’s elimination of the “consumer expectations test,” this change alone will strip juries of the ability to render decisions based on potentially subjective, capricious and unscientific opinions that a particular product design is unduly dangerous based on its performance in a single incident. More important, plaintiffs will be required to propose a reasonable alternative design to the product in question.*

*Such a requirement will force plaintiffs to prove that a better product design exists other than in the unproven and untested domain of their experts' imaginations.*<sup>[10]</sup>

Of course some people put more faith in juries than is evident here. The new Restatement has been adopted by a few jurisdictions and some cases the adopting jurisdictions incorporate some of its ideas, but courts appear reluctant to abandon familiar precedent.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Because the doctrines of breach of warranty and negligence did not provide adequate relief to those suffering damages or injuries in products-liability cases, beginning in the 1960s courts developed a new tort theory: strict products liability, restated in the Second Restatement, section 402A. Basically the doctrine says that if goods sold are unreasonably dangerous or defective, the merchant-seller will be liable for the immediate property loss and personal injuries caused thereby. But there remain obstacles to recovery even under this expanded concept of liability: disclaimers of liability have not completely been dismissed, the plaintiff's conduct or changes to the goods may limit recovery, and—with some exceptions—the remedies available are limited to personal injury (and damage to the goods themselves); economic loss is not recoverable. Almost forty years of experience with the Second Restatement's section on strict liability has seen changes in the law, and the Third Restatement introduces those, but it has not been widely accepted yet.

#### EXERCISES

1. What was perceived to be inadequate about warranty and negligence theories that necessitated the development of strict liability?
2. Briefly describe the doctrine.
3. What defects in goods render their sellers strictly liable?
4. Who counts as a liable seller?
5. What obstacles does a plaintiff have to overcome here, and what limitations are there to recovery?

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[1] *Kaiser Steel Corp. v. Westinghouse Electric Corp.*, 127 Cal. Rptr. 838 (Cal. 1976).

[2] Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 402A(i).

- [3] *Borel v. Fibreboard Paper Products Corp.*, 493 F.2d 1076 (5th Cir. 1973).
- [4] *In re Johns-Manville Corp.*, 36 R.R. 727 (So. Dist. N.Y. 1984).
- [5] *Martin v. Ryder Rental, Inc.*, 353 A.2d 581 (Del. 1976).
- [6] *Idaho Power Co. v. Westinghouse Electric Corp.*, 596 F.2d 924, 9CA (1979).
- [7] *Eastman v. Stanley Works*, 907 N.E.2d 768 (Ohio App. 2009).
- [8] *Atlas Air v. General Electric*, 16 A.D.3d 444 (N.Y.A.D. 2005).
- [9] *Duffin v. Idaho Crop Imp. Ass'n*, 895 P.2d 1195 (Idaho 1995).
- [10] Quinlivan Wexler LLP, “The 3rd Restatement of Torts—Shaping the Future of Products Liability Law,” June 1, 1999, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://library.findlaw.com/1999/Jun/1/127691.html>.

## 20.5 Tort Reform

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. See why tort reform is advocated, why it is opposed, and what interests take each side.
2. Understand some of the significant state reforms in the last two decades.
3. Know what federal reforms have been instituted.

### The Cry for Reform

In 1988, The Conference Board published a study that resulted from a survey of more than 500 chief executive officers from large and small companies regarding the effects of products liability on their firms. The study concluded that US companies are less competitive in international business because of these effects and that products-liability laws must be reformed. The reform effort has been under way ever since, with varying degrees of alarms and finger-pointing as to who is to blame for the “tort crisis,” if there even is one. Business and professional groups beat the drums for tort reform as a means to guarantee “fairness” in the courts as well as spur US economic competitiveness in a global marketplace, while plaintiffs’ attorneys and consumer advocates claim that businesses simply want to externalize costs by denying recovery to victims of greed and carelessness.

Each side vilifies the other in very unseemly language: probusiness advocates call consumer-oriented states “judicial hell-holes” and complain of “well-orchestrated campaign[s] by tort lawyer lobbyists and allies to undo years of tort reform at the state level,”<sup>[1]</sup> while pro-plaintiff

interests claim that there is “scant evidence” of any tort abuse.<sup>[2]</sup> It would be more amusing if it were not so shrill and partisan. Perhaps the most one can say with any certainty is that peoples’ perception of reality is highly colored by their self-interest. In any event, there have been reforms (or, as the detractors say, “deforms”).

## **State Reforms**

Prodded by astute lobbying by manufacturing and other business trade associations, state legislatures responded to the cries of manufacturers about the hardships that the judicial transformation of the products-liability lawsuit ostensibly worked on them. Most state legislatures have enacted at least one of some three dozen “reform” proposal pressed on them over the last two decades. Some of these measures do little more than affirm and clarify case law. Among the most that have passed in several states are outlined in the next sections.

### **Statutes of Repose**

Perhaps nothing so frightens the manufacturer as the occasional reports of cases involving products that were fifty or sixty years old or more at the time they injured the plaintiff. Many states have addressed this problem by enacting the so-called statute of repose. This statute establishes a time period, generally ranging from six to twelve years; the manufacturer is not liable for injuries caused by the product after this time has passed.

### **State-of-the-Art Defense**

Several states have enacted laws that prevent advances in technology from being held against the manufacturer. The fear is that a plaintiff will convince a jury a product was defective because it did not use technology that was later available. Manufacturers have often failed to adopt new advances in technology for fear that the change will be held against them in a products-liability suit. These new statutes declare that a manufacturer has a valid defense if it would have been technologically impossible to have used the new and safer technology at the time the product was manufactured.

### **Failure to Warn**

Since it is often easier to prove that an injury resulted because the manufacturer failed to warn against a certain use than it is to prove an injury was caused by a defective design, manufacturers are subjected to a considerable degree of hindsight. Some of the state statutes

limit the degree to which the failure to warn can be used to connect the product and the injury. For example, the manufacturer has a valid defense if it would have been impossible to foresee that the consumer might misuse the product in a certain way.

### **Comparative Fault for Consumer Misuse**

Contributory negligence is generally not a defense in a strict liability action, while assumption of risk is. In states that have enacted so-called comparative fault statutes, the user's damages are pegged to the percentage of responsibility for the injury that the defendant bears. Thus if the consumer's misuse of the product is assessed as having been 20 percent responsible for the accident (or for the extent of the injuries), the consumer is entitled to only 80 percent of damages, the amount for which the defendant manufacturer is responsible.

### **Criminal Penalties**

Not all state reform is favorable to manufacturers. Under the California Corporate Criminal Liability Act, which took effect twenty years ago, companies and managers must notify a state regulatory agency if they know that a product they are selling in California has a safety defect, and the same rule applies under certain federal standards, as Toyota executives were informed by their lawyers following alarms about sudden acceleration in some Toyota automobiles. Failure to provide notice may result in corporate and individual criminal liability.

### **Federal Reform**

Piecemeal reform of products-liability law in each state has contributed to the basic lack of uniformity from state to state, giving it a crazy-quilt effect. In the nineteenth century, this might have made little difference, but today most manufacturers sell in the national market and are subjected to the varying requirements of the law in every state. For years there has been talk in and out of Congress of enacting a federal products-liability law that would include reforms adopted in many states, as discussed earlier. So far, these efforts have been without much success.

Congressional tort legislation is not the only possible federal action to cope with products-related injuries. In 1972, Congress created the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and gave the commission broad power to act to prevent unsafe consumer products. The CPSC can issue mandatory safety standards governing design, construction, contents, performance,



packaging, and labeling of more than 10,000 consumer products. It can recall unsafe products, recover costs on behalf of injured consumers, prosecute those who violate standards, and require manufacturers to issue warnings on hazardous products. It also regulates four federal laws previously administered by other departments: the Flammable Fabrics Act, the Hazardous Substances Act, the Poison Prevention Packaging Act, and the Refrigerator Safety Act. In its early years, the CPSC issued standards for bicycles, power mowers, television sets, architectural glass, extension cords, book matches, pool slides, and space heaters. But the list of products is long, and the CPSC's record is mixed: it has come under fire for being short on regulation and for taking too long to promulgate the relatively few safety standards it has issued in a decade.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Business advocates claim the American tort system—products-liability law included—is broken and corrupted by grasping plaintiffs' lawyers; plaintiffs' lawyers say businesses are greedy and careless and need to be smacked into recognition of its responsibilities to be more careful. The debate rages on, decade after decade. But there have been some reforms at the state level, and at the federal level the Consumer Product Safety Act sets out standards for safe products and requires recalls for defective ones. It is regularly castigated for (1) being officious and meddling or (2) being too timid.

#### EXERCISES

1. Why is it so difficult to determine if there really is a “tort crisis” in the United States?
2. What reforms have been made to state tort law?
3. What federal legislation affects consumer safety?

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[1] American Tort Reform Association website, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.atra.org>.

[2] [http://www.shragerlaw.com/html/legal\\_rights.html](http://www.shragerlaw.com/html/legal_rights.html).

## 20.6 Cases

### Implied Warranty of Merchantability and the Requirement of a “Sale”

*Sheeskin v. Giant Food, Inc.*

318 A.2d 874 (Md. App. 1974)

Davidson, J.

Every Friday for over two years Nathan Seigel, age 73, shopped with his wife at a Giant Food Store. This complex products liability case is before us because on one of these Fridays, 23 October 1970, Mr. Seigel was carrying a six-pack carton of Coca-Cola from a display bin at the Giant to a shopping cart when one or more of the bottles exploded. Mr. Seigel lost his footing, fell to the floor and was injured.

In the Circuit Court for Montgomery County, Mr. Seigel sued both the Giant Food, Inc., and the Washington Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Inc., for damages resulting from their alleged negligence and breach of an implied warranty. At the conclusion of the trial Judge Walter H. Moorman directed a verdict in favor of each defendant....

In an action based on breach of warranty it is necessary for the plaintiff to show the existence of the warranty, the fact that the warranty was broken and that the breach of warranty was the proximate cause of the loss sustained. [UCC] 2-314....The retailer, Giant Food, Inc., contends that appellant failed to prove that an implied warranty existed between himself and the retailer because he failed to prove that there was a sale by the retailer to him or a contract of sale between the two. The retailer maintains that there was no sale or contract of sale because at the time the bottles exploded Mr. Seigel had not yet paid for them. We do not agree.

[UCC] 2-314(1) states in pertinent part:

*Unless excluded or modified, a warranty that the goods shall be merchantable is implied **in a contract for their sale** if the seller is a merchant with respect to goods of that kind. <sup>[1]</sup> (emphasis added)*

Thus, in order for the implied warranties of 2-314 to be applicable there must be a “contract for sale.” In Maryland it has been recognized that neither a completed ‘sale’ nor a fully executed contract for sale is required. It is enough that there be in existence an executory contract for sale....

Here, the plaintiff has the burden of showing the existence of the warranty by establishing that at the time the bottles exploded there was a contract for their sale existing between himself and the Giant. [Citation] Mr. Titus, the manager of the Giant, testified that the retailer is a “self-service” store in which “the only way a customer can buy anything is to select it himself and take

it to the checkout counter.” He stated that there are occasions when a customer may select an item in the store and then change his mind and put the item back. There was no evidence to show that the retailer ever refused to sell an item to a customer once it had been selected by him or that the retailer did not consider himself bound to sell an item to the customer after the item had been selected. Finally, Mr. Titus said that an employee of Giant placed the six-pack of Coca-Cola selected by Mr. Seigel on the shelf with the purchase price already stamped upon it. Mr. Seigel testified that he picked up the six-pack with the intent to purchase it.

We think that there is sufficient evidence to show that the retailer’s act of placing the bottles upon the shelf with the price stamped upon the six-pack in which they were contained manifested an intent to offer them for sale, the terms of the offer being that it would pass title to the goods when Mr. Seigel presented them at the check-out counter and paid the stated price in cash. We also think that the evidence is sufficient to show that Mr. Seigel’s act of taking physical possession of the goods with the intent to purchase them manifested an intent to accept the offer and a promise to take them to the checkout counter and pay for them there.

[UCC] 2-206 provides in pertinent part:

- (1) Unless otherwise unambiguously indicated by the language or circumstances*
- (a) An offer to make a contract shall be construed as inviting acceptance in any manner and by any medium reasonable in the circumstances....*

The Official Comment 1 to this section states:

*Any reasonable manner of acceptance is intended to be regarded as available unless the offeror has made quite clear that it will not be acceptable.*

In our view the manner by which acceptance was to be accomplished in the transaction herein involved was not indicated by either language or circumstances. The seller did not make it clear that acceptance could not be accomplished by a promise rather than an act. Thus it is equally reasonable under the terms of this specific offer that acceptance could be accomplished in any of three ways: 1) by the act of delivering the goods to the check-out counter and paying for them; 2) by the promise to pay for the goods as evidenced by their physical delivery to the check-out counter; and 3) by the promise to deliver the goods to the check-out counter and to pay for them there as evidenced by taking physical possession of the goods by their removal from the shelf.

The fact that customers, having once selected goods with the intent to purchase them, are permitted by the seller to return them to the shelves does not preclude the possibility that a selection of the goods, as evidenced by taking physical possession of them, could constitute a reasonable mode of acceptance. Section 2-106(3) provides:

*“Termination” occurs when either party pursuant to a power created by agreement or law puts an end to the contract otherwise than for its breach. On “termination” all obligations which are still executory on both sides are discharged but any right based on prior breach or performance survives.*

Here the evidence that the retailer permits the customer to “change his mind” indicates only an agreement between the parties to permit the consumer to end his contract with the retailer irrespective of a breach of the agreement by the retailer. It does not indicate that an agreement does not exist prior to the exercise of this option by the consumer....

Here Mr. Seigel testified that all of the circumstances surrounding his selection of the bottles were normal; that the carton in which the bottles came was not defective; that in lifting the carton from the shelf and moving it toward his basket the bottles neither touched nor were touched by anything other than his hand; that they exploded almost instantaneously after he removed them from the shelf; and that as a result of the explosion he fell injuring himself. It is obvious that Coca-Cola bottles which would break under normal handling are not fit for the ordinary use for which they were intended and that the relinquishment of physical control of such a defective bottle to a consumer constitutes a breach of warranty. Thus the evidence was sufficient to show that when the bottles left the retailer’s control they did not conform to the representations of the warranty of merchantability, and that this breach of the warranty was the cause of the loss sustained....

[Judgment in favor of Giant Foods is reversed and the case remanded for a new trial. Judgment in favor of the bottler is affirmed because the plaintiff failed to prove that the bottles were defective when they were delivered to the retailer.]

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. What warranty did the plaintiff complain was breached here?

2. By displaying the soda pop, the store made an offer to its customers. How did the court say such offers might be accepted?
3. Why did the court get into the discussion about “termination” of the contract?
4. What is the controlling rule of law applied in this case?

## Strict Liability and Bystanders

*Embs v. Pepsi-Cola Bottling Co. of Lexington, Kentucky, Inc.*

*528 S.W.2d 703 (Ky. 1975)*

Jukowsky, J.

On the afternoon of July 25, 1970 plaintiff-appellant entered the self-service retail store operated by the defendant-appellee, Stamper’s Cash Market, Inc., for the purpose of “buying soft drinks for the kids.” She went to an upright soft drink cooler, removed five bottles and placed them in a carton. Unnoticed by her, a carton of Seven-Up was sitting on the floor at the edge of the produce counter about one foot from where she was standing. As she turned away from the cooler she heard an explosion that sounded “like a shotgun.” When she looked down she saw a gash in her leg, pop on her leg, green pieces of a bottle on the floor and the Seven-Up carton in the midst of the debris. She did not kick or otherwise come into contact with the carton of Seven-Up prior to the explosion. Her son, who was with her, recognized the green pieces of glass as part of a Seven-Up bottle.

She was immediately taken to the hospital by Mrs. Stamper, a managing agent of the store. Mrs. Stamper told her that a Seven-Up bottle had exploded and that several bottles had exploded that week. Before leaving the store Mrs. Stamper instructed one of her children to clean up the mess. Apparently, all of the physical evidence went out with the trash. The location of the Seven-Up carton immediately before the explosion was not a place where such items were ordinarily kept....

When she rested her case, the defendants-appellees moved for a directed verdict in their favor. The trial court granted the motion on the grounds that the doctrine of strict product liability in tort does not extend beyond users and consumers and that the evidence was insufficient to permit an inference by a reasonably prudent man that the bottle was defective or if it was, when it became so.

In [Citation] we adopted the view of strict product liability in tort expressed in Section 402 A of the American Law Institute's Restatement of Torts 2d.

***402 A. Special Liability of Seller of Product for Physical Harm to User or Consumer***

*(1) One who sells any product in a defective condition unreasonably dangerous to the user or to his property is subject to liability for physical harm thereby caused to the ultimate user or consumer, or to his property, if*

*(a) the seller is engaged in the business of selling such a product, and*

*(b) it is expected to and does reach the user or consumer without substantial change in the condition in which it was sold.*

*(2) The rule stated in Subsection (1) applies although*

*(a) the seller has exercised all possible care in the preparation and sale of his product, and*

*(b) the user or consumer has not bought the product from or entered into any contractual relation with the seller.*

Comment *f* on that section makes it abundantly clear that this rule applies to any person engaged in the business of supplying products for use or consumption, including any manufacturer of such a product and any wholesale or retail dealer or distributor.

Comment *c* points out that on whatever theory, the justification for the rule has been said to be that the seller, by marketing his product for use and consumption, has undertaken and assumed a special responsibility toward any member of the consuming public who may be injured by it; that the public has the right to and does expect that reputable sellers will stand behind their goods; that public policy demands that the burden of accidental injuries caused by products intended for consumption be placed upon those who market them, and be treated as a cost of production against which liability insurance can be obtained; and that the consumer of such products is entitled to the maximum of protection at the hands of someone, and the proper persons to afford it are those who market the products.

The caveat to the section provides that the Institute expresses no opinion as to whether the rule may not apply to harm to persons other than users or consumers. Comment on caveat *o* states

the Institute expresses neither approval nor disapproval of expansion of the rule to permit recovery by casual bystanders and others who may come in contact with the product, and admits there may be no essential reason why such plaintiffs should not be brought within the scope of protection afforded, other than they do not have the same reasons for expecting such protection as the consumer who buys a marketed product, and that the social pressure which has been largely responsible for the development of the rule has been a consumer's pressure, and there is not the same demand for the protection of casual strangers....

The caveat articulates the essential point: Once strict liability is accepted, bystander recovery is *fait accompli*.

Our expressed public policy will be furthered if we minimize the risk of personal injury and property damage by charging the costs of injuries against the manufacturer who can procure liability insurance and distribute its expense among the public as a cost of doing business; and since the risk of harm from defective products exists for mere bystanders and passersby as well as for the purchaser or user, there is no substantial reason for protecting one class of persons and not the other. The same policy requires us to maximize protection for the injured third party and promote the public interest in discouraging the marketing of products having defects that are a menace to the public by imposing strict liability upon retailers and wholesalers in the distributive chain responsible for marketing the defective product which injures the bystander. The imposition of strict liability places no unreasonable burden upon sellers because they can adjust the cost of insurance protection among themselves in the course of their continuing business relationship.

We must not shirk from extending the rule to the manufacturer for fear that the retailer or middleman will be impaled on the sword of liability without regard to fault. Their liability was already established under Section 402 A of the Restatement of Torts 2d. As a matter of public policy the retailer or middleman as well as the manufacturer should be liable since the loss for injuries resulting from defective products should be placed on those members of the marketing chain best able to pay the loss, who can then distribute such risk among themselves by means of insurance and indemnity agreements. [Citation]...

The result which we reach does not give the bystander a “free ride.” When products and consumers are considered in the aggregate, bystanders, as a class, purchase most of the same products to which they are exposed as bystanders. Thus, as a class, they indirectly subsidize the liability of the manufacturer, middleman and retailer and in this sense do pay for the insurance policy tied to the product....

For the sake of clarity we restate the extension of the rule. The protections of Section 402 A of the Restatement of Torts 2d extend to bystanders whose injury from the defective product is reasonably foreseeable....

The judgment is reversed and the cause is remanded to the Clark Circuit Court for further proceedings consistent herewith.

Stephenson, J. (dissenting):

I respectfully dissent from the majority opinion to the extent that it subjects the seller to liability. Every rule of law in my mind should have a rational basis. I see none here.

Liability of the seller to the user, or consumer, is based upon warranty. Restatement, Second, Torts s 403A. To extend this liability to injuries suffered by a bystander is to depart from any reasonable basis and impose liability by judicial fiat upon an otherwise innocent defendant. I do not believe that the expression in the majority opinion which justifies this rule for the reason that the seller may procure liability insurance protection is a valid legal basis for imposing liability without fault. I respectfully dissent.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why didn't the plaintiff here use warranty as a theory of recovery, as Mr. Seigel did in the previous case?
2. The court offers a rationale for the doctrine of strict products liability. What is it?
3. Restatement, Section 402A, by its terms extends protection “to the ultimate user or consumer,” but Mrs. Embs [plaintiff-appellant] was not that. What rationale did the court give for expanding the protection here?
4. Among the entities in the vertical distribution chain—manufacturer, wholesaler, retailer—who is liable under this doctrine?
5. What argument did Judge Stephenson have in dissent? Is it a good one?



6. What is the controlling rule of law developed in this case?

## Failure to Warn

*Laaperi v. Sears, Roebuck & Co., Inc.*

*787 F.2d 726 C.A.1 (Mass. 1986)*

Campbell, J.

In March 1976, plaintiff Albin Laaperi purchased a smoke detector from Sears. The detector, manufactured by the Pittway Corporation, was designed to be powered by AC (electrical) current. Laaperi installed the detector himself in one of the two upstairs bedrooms in his home. Early in the morning of December 27, 1976, a fire broke out in the Laaperi home. The three boys in one of the upstairs bedrooms were killed in the blaze. Laaperi's 13-year-old daughter Janet, who was sleeping in the other upstairs bedroom, received burns over 12 percent of her body and was hospitalized for three weeks.

The uncontroverted testimony at trial was that the smoke detector did not sound an alarm on the night of the fire. The cause of the fire was later found to be a short circuit in an electrical cord that was located in a cedar closet in the boys' bedroom. The Laaperi home had two separate electrical circuits in the upstairs bedrooms: one which provided electricity to the outlets and one which powered the lighting fixtures. The smoke detector had been connected to the outlet circuit, which was the circuit that shorted and cut off. Because the circuit was shorted, the AC-operated smoke detector received no power on the night of the fire. Therefore, although the detector itself was in no sense defective (indeed, after the fire the charred detector was tested and found to be operable), no alarm sounded.

Laaperi brought this diversity action against defendants Sears and Pittway, asserting negligent design, negligent manufacture, breach of warranty, and negligent failure to warn of inherent dangers. The parties agreed that the applicable law is that of Massachusetts. Before the claims went to the jury, verdicts were directed in favor of defendants on all theories of liability other than failure to warn....

Laaperi's claim under the failure to warn theory was that he was unaware of the danger that the very short circuit which might ignite a fire in his home could, at the same time, incapacitate the smoke detector. He contended that had he been warned of this danger, he would have purchased

a battery-powered smoke detector as a back-up or taken some other precaution, such as wiring the detector to a circuit of its own, in order better to protect his family in the event of an electrical fire.

The jury returned verdicts in favor of Laaperi in all four actions on the failure to warn claim. The jury assessed damages in the amount of \$350,000 [\$1,050,000, or about \$3,400,000 in 2010 dollars] each of the three actions brought on behalf of the deceased sons, and \$750,000 [about \$2,500,000 in 2010 dollars] in the action brought on behalf of Janet Laaperi. The defendants' motions for directed verdict and judgment notwithstanding the verdict were denied, and defendants appealed.

Defendants ask us to declare that the risk that an electrical fire could incapacitate an AC-powered smoke detector is so obvious that the average consumer would not benefit from a warning. This is not a trivial argument; in earlier—some might say sounder—days, we might have accepted it.... Our sense of the current state of the tort law in Massachusetts and most other jurisdictions, however, leads us to conclude that, today, the matter before us poses a jury question; that “obviousness” in a situation such as this would be treated by the Massachusetts courts as presenting a question of fact, not of law. To be sure, it would be obvious to anyone that an electrical outage would cause this smoke detector to fail. But the average purchaser might not comprehend the specific danger that a fire-causing electrical problem can simultaneously knock out the circuit into which a smoke detector is wired, causing the detector to fail at the very moment it is needed. Thus, while the failure of a detector to function as the result of an electrical malfunction due, say, to a broken power line or a neighborhood power outage would, we think, be obvious as a matter of law, the failure that occurred here, being associated with the very risk—fire—for which the device was purchased, was not, or so a jury could find....

Finally, defendants contend that the award of \$750,000 [\$2.5 million in 2010 dollars] in damages to Janet Laaperi was excessive, and should have been overturned by the district court....

Janet Laaperi testified that on the night of the fire, she woke up and smelled smoke. She woke her friend who was sleeping in her room, and they climbed out to the icy roof of the house. Her father grabbed her from the roof and took her down a ladder. She was taken to the hospital.

Although she was in “mild distress,” she was found to be “alert, awake, [and] cooperative.” Her chest was clear. She was diagnosed as having first and second degree burns of her right calf, both buttocks and heels, and her left lower back, or approximately 12 percent of her total body area. She also suffered from a burn of her tracheobronchial mucosa (i.e., the lining of her airway) due to smoke inhalation, and multiple superficial lacerations on her right hand.

The jury undoubtedly, and understandably, felt a great deal of sympathy for a young girl who, at the age of 13, lost three brothers in a tragic fire. But by law the jury was only permitted to compensate her for those damages associated with her own injuries. Her injuries included fright and pain at the time of and after the fire, a three-week hospital stay, some minor discomfort for several weeks after discharge, and a permanent scar on her lower back. Plaintiff has pointed to no cases, and we have discovered none, in which such a large verdict was sustained for such relatively minor injuries, involving no continuing disability.

The judgments in favor of Albin Laaperi in his capacity as administrator of the estates of his three sons are affirmed. In the action on behalf of Janet Laaperi, the verdict of the jury is set aside, the judgment of the district court vacated, and the cause remanded to that court for a new trial limited to the issue of damages.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. The “C.A. 1” under the title of the case means it is a US Court of Appeals case from the First Circuit in Massachusetts. Why is this case in federal court?
2. Why does the court talk about its “sense of the current state of tort law in Massachusetts” and how this case “would be treated by the Massachusetts courts,” as if it were not in the state at all but somehow outside?
3. What rule of law is in play here as to the defendants’ liability?
4. This is a tragic case—three boys died in a house fire. Speaking dispassionately—if not heartlessly—though, did the fire actually cost Mr. Laaperi, or did he lose \$3.4 million (in 2010 dollars) as the result of his sons’ deaths? Does it make sense that he should become a millionaire as a result? Who ends up paying this amount? (The lawyers’ fees probably took about half.)

5. Is it likely that smoke-alarm manufactures and sellers changed the instructions as a result of this case?

[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2-316.

## 20.7 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Products liability describes a type of claim—for injury caused by a defective product—and not a separate theory of liability. In the typical case, three legal doctrines may be asserted: (1) warranty, (2) negligence, and (3) strict liability.

If a seller asserts that a product will perform in a certain manner or has certain characteristics, he has given an express warranty, and he will be held liable for damages if the warranty is breached—that is, if the goods do not live up to the warranty. Not every conceivable claim is an express warranty; the courts permit a certain degree of “puffing.”

An implied warranty is one created by law. Goods sold by a merchant-seller carry an implied warranty of merchantability, meaning that they must possess certain characteristics, such as being of average quality for the type described and being fit for the ordinary purposes for which they are intended.

An implied warranty of fitness for a particular purpose is created whenever a seller knows or has reason to know that the buyer is relying on the seller’s knowledge and skill to select a product for the buyer’s particular purposes.

Under UCC Article 2, the seller also warrants that he is conveying good title and that the goods are free of any rightful claim by a third person.

UCC Article 2 permits sellers to exclude or disclaim warranties in whole or in part. Thus a seller may exclude express warranties. He may also disclaim many implied warranties—for example, by noting that the sale is “as is.” The Magnuson-Moss Act sets out certain types of information that must be included in any written warranty. The act requires the manufacturer or seller to label the warranty as either “full” or “limited” depending on what types of defects are covered

and what the customer must do to obtain repair or replacement. The act also abolishes “phantom warranties.”

Privity once stood as a bar to recovery in suits brought by those one or more steps removed in the distribution chain from the party who breached a warranty. But the nearly universal trend in the state courts has been to abolish privity as a defense.

Because various impediments stand in the way of warranty suits, courts have adopted a tort theory of strict liability, under which a seller is liable for injuries resulting from the sale of any product in a defective condition if it is unreasonably dangerous to the user or consumer. Typical issues in strict liability cases are these: Is the defendant a seller engaged in the business of selling? Was the product sold in a defective condition? Was it unreasonably dangerous, either on its face or because of a failure to warn? Did the product reach the consumer in an unchanged condition? Strict liability applies regardless of how careful the seller was and regardless of his lack of contractual relation with the consumer or user.

Manufacturers can also be held liable for negligence—most often for faulty design of products and inadequate warnings about the hazards of using the product.

The products-liability revolution prompted many state legislatures to enact certain laws limiting to some degree the manufacturer’s responsibility for defective products. These laws include statutes of repose and provide a number of other defenses.

## EXERCISES

1. Ralph’s Hardware updated its accounting system and agreed to purchase a computer system from a manufacturer, Bits and Bytes (BB). During contract negotiations, BB’s sales representative promised that the system was “A-1” and “perfect.” However, the written contract, which the parties later signed, disclaimed all warranties, express and implied. After installation the computer produced only random numbers and letters, rather than the desired accounting information. Is BB liable for breaching an express warranty? Why?
2. Kate owned a small grocery store. One day John went to the store and purchased a can of chip dip that was, unknown to Kate or John, adulterated. John became seriously ill after eating the dip and sued Kate for damages on the grounds that she breached an implied warranty of merchantability. Is Kate liable? Why?

3. Carrie visited a neighborhood store to purchase some ham, which a salesperson cut by machine in the store. The next day she made a ham sandwich. In eating the sandwich, Carrie bit into a piece of cartilage in the ham. As a result, Carrie lost a tooth, had to undergo root canal treatments, and must now wear a full-coverage crown to replace the tooth. Is the store liable for the damage? Why?
4. Clarence, a business executive, decided to hold a garage sale. At the sale, his neighbor Betty mentioned to Clarence that she was the catcher on her city-league baseball team and was having trouble catching knuckleball pitches, which required a special catcher's mitt. Clarence pulled an old mitt from a pile of items that were on sale and said, "Here, try this." Betty purchased the mitt but discovered during her next game that it didn't work. Has Clarence breached an express or implied warranty? Why?
5. Sarah purchased several elegant picture frames to hang in her dorm room. She also purchased a package of self-sticking hangers. Late one evening, while Sarah was studying business law in the library, the hangers came loose and her frames came crashing to the floor. After Sarah returned to her room and discovered the rubble, she examined the box in which the hangers were packaged and found the following language: "There are no warranties except for the description on this package and specifically there is NO IMPLIED WARRANTY OF MERCHANTABILITY." Assuming the hangers are not of fair, average, ordinary quality, would the hanger company be liable for breaching an implied warranty of merchantability? Why?
6. A thirteen-year-old boy received a Golfing Gizmo—a device for training novice golfers—as a gift from his mother. The label on the shipping carton and the cover of the instruction booklet urged players to "drive the ball with full power" and further stated: "COMPLETELY SAFE BALL WILL NOT HIT PLAYER." But while using the device, the boy was hit in the eye by the ball. Should lack of privity be a defense to the manufacturer? The manufacturer argued that the Gizmo was a "completely safe" training device only when the ball is hit squarely, and—the defendant argued—plaintiffs could not reasonably expect the Gizmo to be "completely safe" under all circumstances, particularly those in which the player hits beneath the ball. What legal argument is this, and is it valid?

7. A bank repossessed a boat and sold it to Donald. During the negotiations with Donald, Donald stated that he wanted to use the boat for charter service in Florida. The bank officers handling the sale made no representations concerning the boat during negotiations. Donald later discovered that the boat was defective and sued the bank for breach of warranty. Is the bank liable? Why?
8. Tom Anderson, the produce manager at the Thriftway Market in Pasco, Washington, removed a box of bananas from the top of a stack of produce. When he reached for a lug of radishes that had been under the bananas, a six-inch spider—*Heteropoda venatoria*, commonly called a banana spider—leaped from some wet burlap onto his left hand and bit him. Nine months later he died of heart failure. His wife brought an action against Associated Grocers, parent company of Thriftway Market, on theories of (1) strict products liability under Restatement, Section 402(a); (2) breach of the implied warranty of merchantability; and (3) negligence. The trial court ruled against the plaintiff on all three theories. Was that a correct ruling? Explain.
9. A broken water pipe flooded a switchboard at RCA's office. The flood tripped the switchboard circuit breakers and deactivated the air-conditioning system. Three employees were assigned to fix it: an electrical technician with twelve years on-the-job training, a licensed electrician, and an electrical engineer with twenty years of experience who had studied power engineering in college. They switched on one of the circuit breakers, although the engineer said he knew that one was supposed to test the operation of a wet switchboard before putting it back into use. There was a "snap" and everyone ran from the room up the stairs and a "big ball of fire" came after them up the stairs. The plaintiffs argued that the manufacturer of the circuit breaker had been negligent in failing to give RCA adequate warnings about the circuit breakers. How should the court rule, and on what theory should it rule?
10. Plaintiff's business was to convert vans to RVs, and for this purpose it had used a 3M adhesive to laminate carpeting to the van walls. This adhesive, however, failed to hold the fabric in place in hot weather, so Plaintiff approached Northern Adhesive Co., a manufacturer of adhesives, to find a better one. Plaintiff told Northern why it wanted the adhesive, and

Northern—Defendant—sent several samples to Plaintiff to experiment with. Northern told Plaintiff that one of the adhesives, Adhesive 7448, was “a match” for the 3M product that previously failed. Plaintiff tested the samples in a cool plant and determined that Adhesive 7448 was better than the 3M product. Defendant had said nothing except that “what they would ship would be like the sample. It would be the same chemistry.” Plaintiff used the adhesive during the fall and winter; by spring complaints of delamination came in: Adhesive 7448 failed just as the 3M product had. Over 500 vans had to be repaired. How should the court rule on Plaintiff’s claims of breach of (1) express warranty, (2) implied warranty of merchantability, and (3) implied warranty of fitness for a particular purpose?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. In a products-liability case

- a. only tort theories are typically asserted
- b. both tort and contract theories are typically asserted
- c. strict liability is asserted only when negligence is not asserted
- d. breach of warranty is not asserted along with strict liability

An implied warranty of merchantability

- a. is created by an express warranty
- b. is created by law
- c. is impossible for a seller to disclaim
- d. can be disclaimed by a seller only if the disclaimer is in writing

A possible defense to breach of warranty is

- a. lack of privity
- b. absence of an express warranty
- c. disclaimer of implied warranties
- d. all of the above

Under the strict liability rule in Restatement, Section 402A, the seller is liable for all injuries resulting from a product

- a. even though all possible care has been exercised
- b. regardless of the lack of a contract with the user



- c. in both of the above situations
- d. in none of the above situations

An individual selling her car could be liable

- a. for breaching the implied warranty of merchantability
- b. under the strict liability theory
- c. for breaching the implied warranty of fitness
- d. under two of the above

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. b
- 2. b
- 3. d
- 4. c
- 5. d

# Chapter 21

## Bailments and the Storage, Shipment, and Leasing of Goods

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. What the elements of a bailment are
2. What the bailee's liability is
3. What the bailor's liability is
4. What other rights and duties—compensation, bailee's liens, casualty to goods—arise
5. What special types of bailments are recognized: innkeepers, warehousing
6. What rules govern the shipment of goods
7. How commodity paper is negotiated and transferred

## 21.1 Introduction to Bailment Law

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what a bailment is, and why the law of bailment is important.
2. Recognize how bailments compare with sales.
3. Point out the elements required to create a bailment.

Finally, we turn to the legal relationships that buyers and sellers have with warehousemen and carriers—the parties responsible for physically transferring goods from seller to buyer. This topic introduces a new branch of law—that of bailments; we'll examine it before turning directly to warehousemen and carriers.

### Overview of Bailments

A bailment is the relationship established when someone entrusts his property temporarily to someone else without intending to give up title. Although bailment has often been said to arise only through a contract, the modern definition does not require that there be an agreement. One widely quoted definition holds that a bailment is “the rightful possession of goods by one who is not the owner. It is the element of lawful possession, however created, and the duty to account

for the thing as the property of another, that creates the bailment, regardless of whether such possession is based upon contract in the ordinary sense or not.” <sup>[1]</sup>

The word *bailment* derives from a Latin verb, *bajulare*, meaning “to bear a burden,” and then from French, *bailler*, which means “to deliver” (i.e., into the hands or possession of someone). The one who bails out a boat, filling a bucket and emptying it overboard, is a water-bearer. The one who bails someone out of jail takes on the burden of ensuring that the one sprung appears in court to stand trial; he also takes on the risk of loss of bond money if the jailed party does not appear in court. The one who is a bailee takes on the burden of being responsible to return the goods to their owner.

The law of bailments is important to virtually everyone in modern society: anyone who has ever delivered a car to a parking lot attendant, checked a coat in a restaurant, deposited property in a safe-deposit box, rented tools, or taken items clothes or appliance in to a shop for repair. In commercial transactions, bailment law governs the responsibilities of warehousemen and the carriers, such as UPS and FedEx, that are critical links in the movement of goods from manufacturer to the consumer. Bailment law is an admixture of common law (property and tort), state statutory law (in the Uniform Commercial Code; UCC), federal statutory law, and—for international issues—treaty. <sup>[2]</sup>

## **Bailments Compared with Sales**

### **Bailment versus Sales**

In a sale, the buyer acquires title and must pay for the goods. In a bailment, the bailee acquires possession and must return the identical object. In most cases the distinction is clear, but difficult borderline cases can arise. Consider the sad case of the leased cows: *Carpenter v. Griffen* (N.Y. 1841). Carpenter leased a farm for five years to Spencer. The lease included thirty cows. At the end of the term, Spencer was to give Carpenter, the owner, “cows of equal age and quality.” Unfortunately, Spencer fell into hard times and had to borrow money from one Griffin. When the time came to pay the debt, Spencer had no money, so Griffin went to court to levy against the cows (i.e., he sought a court order giving him the cows in lieu of the money owed). Needless to say, this threatened transfer of the cows upset Carpenter, who went to court to stop Griffin from taking the cows. The question was whether Spencer was a bailee, in which case the

cows would still belong to Carpenter (and Griffin could not levy against them), or a purchaser, in which case Spencer would own the cows and Griffin could levy against them. The court ruled that title had passed to Spencer—the cows were his. Why? The court reasoned that Spencer was not obligated to return the identical cows to Carpenter, hence Spencer was not a bailee. <sup>[3]</sup> Section 2-304(1) of the UCC confirms this position, declaring that whenever the price of a sale is payable in goods, each party is a seller of the goods that he is to transfer.

Note the implications that flow from calling this transaction a sale. Creditors of the purchaser can seize the goods. The risk of loss is on the purchaser. The seller cannot recover the goods (to make up for the buyer's failure to pay him) or sell them to a third party.

### **Fungible Goods**

Fungible goods (goods that are identical, like grain in a silo) present an especially troublesome problem. In many instances the goods of several owners are mingled, and the identical items are not intended to be returned. For example, the operator of a grain elevator agrees to return an equal quantity of like-quality grain but not the actual kernels deposited there. Following the rule in Carpenter's cow case, this might seem to be a sale, but it is not. Under the UCC, Section 2-207, the depositors of fungible goods are "tenants in common" of the goods; in other words, the goods are owned by all. This distinction between a sale and a bailment is important. When there is a loss through natural causes—for example, if the grain elevator burns—the depositors must share the loss on a pro rata basis (meaning that no single depositor is entitled to take all his grain out; if 20 percent of the grain was destroyed, then each depositor can take out no more than 80 percent of what he deposited).

### **Elements of a Bailment**

As noted, bailment is defined as "the rightful possession of goods by one who is not the owner." For the most part, this definition is clear (and note that it does not dictate that a bailment be created by contract). Bailment law applies to the delivery of goods—that is, to the delivery of personal property. Personal property is usually defined as anything that can be owned other than real estate. As we have just seen in comparing bailments to sales, the definition implies a duty to return the identical goods when the bailment ends.

But one word in the definition is both critical and troublesome: possession. Possession requires both a physical and a mental element. We examine these in turn.

### **Possession: Physical Control**

In most cases, physical control is proven easily enough. A car delivered to a parking garage is obviously within the physical control of the garage. But in some instances, physical control is difficult to conceptualize. For example, you can rent a safe-deposit box in a bank to store valuable papers, stock certificates, jewelry, and the like. The box is usually housed in the bank's vault. To gain access, you sign a register and insert your key after a bank employee inserts the bank's key. You may then inspect, add to, or remove contents of the box in the privacy of a small room maintained in the vault for the purpose. Because the bank cannot gain access to the box without your key and does not know what is in the box, it might be said to have no physical control. Nevertheless, the rental of a safe-deposit box is a bailment. In so holding, a New York court pointed out that if the bank was not in possession of the box renter's property "it is difficult to know who was. Certainly [the renter] was not, because she could not obtain access to the property without the consent and active participation of the defendant. She could not go into her safe unless the defendant used its key first, and then allowed her to open the box with her own key; thus absolutely controlling [her] access to that which she had deposited within the safe. The vault was the [company's] and was in its custody, and its contents were under the same conditions." <sup>[4]</sup> Statutes in some states, however, provide that the relationship is not a bailment but that of a landlord and tenant, and many of these statutes limit the bank's liability for losses.

### **Possession: Intent to Possess**

In addition to physical control, the bailee must have had an intent to possess the goods; that is, to exercise control over them. This mental condition is difficult to prove; it almost always turns on the specific circumstances and, as a fact question, is left to the jury to determine. To illustrate the difficulty, suppose that one crisp fall day, Mimi goes to Sally Jane's Boutique to try on a jacket. The sales clerk hands Mimi a jacket and watches while Mimi takes off her coat and places it on a nearby table. A few minutes later, when Mimi is finished inspecting herself in the mirror, she goes to retrieve her coat, only to discover it is missing. Who is responsible for the loss? The answer depends on whether the store is a bailee. In some sense the boutique had physical

control, but did it intend to exercise that control? In a leading case, the court held that it did, even though no one said anything about guarding the coat, because a store invites its patrons to come in. Implicit in the act of trying on a garment is the removal of the garment being worn. When the customer places it in a logical place, with the knowledge of and without objection from the salesperson, the store must exercise some care in its safekeeping. <sup>[5]</sup>

Now suppose that when Mimi walked in, the salesperson told her to look around, to try on some clothes, and to put her coat on the table. When the salesperson was finished with her present customer, she said, she would be glad to help Mimi. So Mimi tried on a jacket and minutes later discovered her coat gone. Is this a bailment? Many courts, including the New York courts, would say no. The difference? The salesperson was helping another customer. Therefore, Mimi had a better opportunity to watch over her own coat and knew that the salesperson would not be looking out for it. This is a subtle distinction, but it has been sufficient in many cases to change the ruling. <sup>[6]</sup>

Questions of intent and control frequently arise in parking lot cases. As someone once said, “The key to the problem is the key itself.” The key is symbolic of possession and intent to possess. If you give the attendant your key, you are a bailor and he (or the company he works for) is the bailee. If you do not give him the key, no bailment arises. Many parking lot cases do not fall neatly within this rule, however. Especially common are cases involving self-service airport parking lots. The customer drives through a gate, takes a ticket dispensed by a machine, parks his car, locks it, and takes his key. When he leaves, he retrieves the car himself and pays at an exit gate. As a general rule, no bailment is created under these circumstances. The lot operator does not accept the vehicle nor intend to watch over it as bailee. In effect, the operator is simply renting out space. <sup>[7]</sup> But a slight change of facts can alter this legal conclusion. Suppose, for instance, that the lot had an attendant at the single point of entrance and exit, that the attendant jotted down the license number on the ticket, one portion of which he retained, and that the car owner must surrender the ticket when leaving or prove that he owns the car. These facts have been held to add up to an intention to exercise custody and control over the cars in the lot, and hence to have created a bailment. <sup>[8]</sup>

For a bailment to exist, the bailee must know or have reason to know that the property exists. When property is hidden within the main object entrusted to the bailee, lack of notice can defeat the bailment in the hidden property. For instance, a parking lot is not responsible for the disappearance of valuable golf clubs stored in the trunk of a car, nor is a dance hall cloak room responsible for the disappearance of a fur wrap inside a coat, if they did not know of their existence. <sup>[9]</sup> This result is usually justified by observing that when a person is unaware that goods exist or does not know their value, it is inequitable to hold him responsible for their loss since he cannot take steps to prevent it. This rule has been criticized: trunks are meant to hold things, and if the car was within the garage's control, surely its contents were too. Some courts soften the impact of the rule by holding that a bailee is responsible for goods that he might reasonably expect to be present, like gloves in a coat checked at a restaurant or ordinary baggage in a car checked at a hotel.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

A bailment arises when one person (a bailee) rightfully holds property belonging to another (a bailor). The law of bailments addresses the critical links in the movement of goods from the manufacturer to the end user in a consumer society: to the storage and transportation of goods. Bailments only apply to personal property; a bailment requires that the bailor deliver physical control of the goods to the bailee, who has an intention to possess the goods and a duty to return them.

#### EXERCISES

1. Dennis takes his Mercedes to have the GPS system repaired. In the trunk of his car is a briefcase containing \$5,000 in cash. Is the cash bailed goods?
2. Marilyn wraps up ten family-heirloom crystal goblets, packages them carefully in a cardboard box, and drops the box off at the local UPS store. Are the goblets bailed goods?
3. Bob agrees to help his friend Roger build a deck at Roger's house. Bob leaves some of his tools—without Bob's noticing—around the corner of the garage at the foot of a rhododendron bush. The tools are partly hidden. Are they bailed goods?

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[1] *Zuppa v. Hertz*, 268 A.2d 364 (N.J. 1970).

[2] Here is a link to a history of bailment law: Globusz Publishing, “Lecture v. the Bailee at Common Law,” accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.globusz.com/ebooks/CommonLaw/00000015.htm>.

[3] *Carpenter v. Spencer & Griffin*, 37 Am. Dec. 396 (N.Y. 1841).

[4] *Lockwood v. Manhattan Storage & Warehouse Co.*, 50 N.Y.S. 974 (N.Y. 1898).

[5] *Bunnell v. Stern*, 25 N.E. 910 (N.Y. 1890).

[6] *Wamser v. Browning, King & Co.*, 79 N.E. 861 (N.Y. 1907).

[7] *Wall v. Airport Parking Co. of Chicago*, 244 N.E.2d 190 (Ill. 1969).

[8] *Continental Insurance Co. v. Meyers Bros. Operations, Inc.*, 288 N.Y.S.2d 756 (Civ. Ct. N.Y. 1968).

[9] *Samples v. Geary*, 292 S.W. 1066 (Mo. App. 1927).

## 21.2 Liability of the Parties to a Bailment

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how the bailee’s liability arises and operates.
2. Recognize the cases in which the bailee can disclaim liability, and what limits are put on such disclaimers.
3. Understand what duty and liability the bailor has.
4. Know other rights and duties that arise in a bailment.
5. Understand the extent to which innkeepers—hotel and motels—are liable for their guests’ property.

### Liability of the Bailee

#### Duty of Care

The basic rule is that the bailee is expected to return to its owner the bailed goods when the bailee’s time for possession of them is over, and he is presumed liable if the goods are not returned. But that a bailee has accepted delivery of goods does not mean that he is responsible for their safekeeping no matter what. The law of bailments does not apply a standard of absolute liability: the bailee is not an insurer of the goods’ safety; her liability depends on the circumstances.

#### The Ordinary Care Rule



Some courts say that the bailee’s liability is the straightforward standard of “ordinary care under the circumstances.” The question becomes whether the bailee exercised such care. If she did, she is not liable for the loss.

**The Benefit-of-the-Bargain Rule**

Most courts use a complex (some say annoying) tripartite division of responsibility. If the bailment is for the sole benefit of the owner (the bailor), the bailee is answerable only for gross neglect or fraud: the duty of care is slight. For example, imagine that your car breaks down on a dark night and you beg a passing motorist to tow it to a gas station; or you ask your neighbor if you can store your utility trailer in her garage.

On the other hand, if the goods are entrusted to the bailee for his sole benefit, then he owes the bailor extraordinary care. For example, imagine that your neighbor asks you to let him borrow your car to go to the grocery store downtown because his car is in the shop; or a friend asks if she can borrow your party canopy.

If the bailment is for the mutual benefit of bailee and bailor, then the ordinary negligence standard of care will govern. For example, imagine you park your car in a commercial parking lot, or you take your suit jacket to a dry cleaner (see /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch21\_s02\_s01\_s01\_s02\_f01).

*Figure 21.1 Duty of Care*

Bailment for	Duty of Care
1. Benefit of Owner	Slight
2. Benefit of Bailee	Extraordinary
3. Mutual Benefit	Ordinary

One problem with using the majority approach is the inherent ambiguity in the standards of care. What constitutes “gross” negligence as opposed to “ordinary” negligence? The degree-of-care approach is further complicated by the tendency of the courts to take into account the value of the goods; the lesser the value of the goods, the lesser the obligation of the bailee to watch out for them. To some degree, this approach makes sense, because it obviously behooves a person



guarding diamonds to take greater precautions against theft than one holding three paperback books. But the value of the goods ought not to be the whole story: some goods obviously have great value to the owner, regardless of any lack of intrinsic value.

Another problem in using the majority approach to the standard of care is determining whether or not a benefit has been conferred on the bailee when the bailor did not expressly agree to pay compensation. For example, a bank gives its customers free access to safe-deposit boxes. Is the bank a “gratuitous bailee” that owes its bailor only a slight degree of care, or has it made the boxes available as a commercial matter to hold onto its customers? Some courts cling to one theory, some to the other, suggesting the difficulty with the tripartite division of the standard of care. However, in many cases, whatever the formal theory, the courts look to the actual benefits to be derived. Thus when a customer comes to an automobile showroom and leaves her car in the lot while she test-drives the new car, most courts would hold that two bailments for mutual benefit have been created: (1) the bailment to hold the old car in the lot, with the customer as the bailor; and (2) the bailment to try out the new car, with the customer as the bailee.

### **Burden of Proof**

In a bailment case, the plaintiff bailor has the burden of proving that a loss was caused by the defendant bailee’s failure to exercise due care. However, the bailor establishes a prima facie (“at first sight”—on first appearance, but subject to further investigation) case by showing that he delivered the goods into the bailee’s hands and that the bailee did not return them or returned them damaged. At that point, a presumption of negligence arises, and to avoid liability the defendant must rebut that presumption by showing affirmatively that he was not negligent. The reason for this rule is that the bailee usually has a much better opportunity to explain why the goods were not returned or were returned damaged. To put this burden on the bailor might make it impossible for him to win a meritorious case.

### **Liability of the Bailor**

As might be expected, most bailment cases involve the legal liability of bailees. However, a body of law on the liability of bailors has emerged.

### **Negligence of Bailor**

A bailor may be held liable for negligence. If the bailor receives a benefit from the bailment, then he has a duty to inform the bailee of known defects and to make a reasonable inspection for other defects. Suppose the Tranquil Chemical Manufacturing Company produces an insecticide that it wants the Plattsville Chemical Storage Company to keep in tanks until it is sold. One of the batches is defectively acidic and oozes out of the tanks. This acidity could have been discovered through a routine inspection, but Tranquil neglects to inspect the batch. The tanks leak and the chemical builds up on the floor until it explodes. Since Tranquil, the bailor, received a benefit from the storage, it had a duty to warn Plattsville, and its failure to do so makes it liable for all damages caused by the explosion.

If the bailor does not receive any benefit, however, then his only duty is to inform the bailee of known defects. Your neighbor asks to borrow your car. You have a duty to tell her that the brakes are weak, but you do not need to inspect the car beforehand for unknown defects.

### **Other Types of Liability**

The theory of products liability discussed in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch20 extends to bailors. Both warranty and strict liability theories apply. The rationale for extending liability in the absence of sale is that in modern commerce, damage can be done equally by sellers or lessors of equipment. A rented car can inflict substantial injury no less than a purchased one.

In several states, when an automobile owner (bailor) lends a vehicle to a friend (bailee) who causes an accident, the owner is liable to third persons injured in the accident.

### **Disclaimers of Liability**

#### **Bailee's Disclaimer**

Bailees frequently attempt to disclaim their liability for loss or damage. But courts often refuse to honor the disclaimers, usually looking to one of two justifications for invalidating them.

#### **Lack of Notice**

The disclaimer must be brought to the attention of the bailor and must be unambiguous. Thus posted notices and receipts disclaiming or limiting liability must set forth clearly and legibly the legal effects intended. Most American courts follow the rule that the defendant bailee must show that the bailor in fact knew about the disclaimer. Language printed on the back side of a receipt will not do.

## Public Policy Exception

Even if the bailor reads the disclaimer, some courts will nevertheless hold the bailee liable on public policy grounds, especially when the bailee is a “business bailee,” such as a warehouse or carrier. Indeed, to the extent that a business bailee attempts to totally disclaim liability, he will probably fail in every American jurisdiction. But the Restatement (Second) of Contracts, Section 195(2)(b), does not go quite this far for most nonbusiness bailees. They may disclaim liability as long as the disclaimer is read and does not relieve the bailee from wanton carelessness.

## Bailor’s Disclaimer

Bailors most frequently attempt to disclaim liability in rental situations. For example, in *Zimmer v. Mitchell and Ness*, the plaintiff went to the defendant’s rental shop at the Camelback ski area to rent skis, boots, and poles. <sup>[1]</sup> He signed a rental agreement before accepting the ski equipment. He was a lessee and a bailee. Later, while descending the beginners’ slope, he fell. The bindings on his skis did not release, thereby causing him to sustain numerous injuries. The plaintiff sued the defendant and Camelback Ski Corporation, alleging negligence, violation of Section 402A of the Restatement (Second) of Torts, and breach of warranty. The defendant filed an answer and claimed that the plaintiff signed a rental agreement that fully released the defendant from liability. In his reply, the plaintiff admitted signing the agreement but generally denied that it released the defendant from liability. The defendant won on summary judgment.

On appeal, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court held for the defendant and set out the law: “The test for determining the validity of exculpatory clauses, admittedly not favored in the law, is set out in [Citation]. The contract must not contravene any policy of the law. It must be a contract between individuals relating to their private affairs. Each party must be a free bargaining agent, not simply one drawn into an adhesion contract, with no recourse but to reject the entire transaction....We must construe the agreement strictly and against the party asserting it [and], the agreement must spell out the intent of the parties with the utmost particularity.” The court here was satisfied with the disclaimer.

## Other Rights and Duties

### Compensation

If the bailor hires the bailee to perform services for the bailed property, then the bailee is entitled to compensation. Remember, however, that not every bailment is necessarily for compensation. The difficult question is whether the bailee is entitled to compensation when nothing explicit has been said about incidental expenses he has incurred to care for the bailed property—as, for example, if he were to repair a piece of machinery to keep it running. No firm rule can be given. Perhaps the best generalization that can be made is that, in the absence of an express agreement, ordinary repairs fall to the bailee to pay, but extraordinary repairs are the bailor’s responsibility. An express agreement between the parties detailing the responsibilities would solve the problem, of course.

### **Bailee’s Lien**

*Lien* is from the French, originally meaning “line,” “string,” or “tie.” In law a lien is the hold that someone has over the property of another. It is akin, in effect, to a security interest. A common type is the mechanic’s lien (“mechanic” here means one who works with his hands). For example, a carpenter builds a room on your house and you fail to pay him; he can secure a lien on your house, meaning that he has a property interest in the house and can start foreclosure proceedings if you still fail to pay. Similarly, a bailee is said to have a lien on the bailed property in his possession and need not redeliver it to the bailor until he has been paid. Try to take your car out of a parking lot without paying and see what happens. The attendant’s refusal to give you the car is entirely lawful under a common-law rule now more than a century and a half old. As the rule is usually stated, the common law confers the lien on the bailee if he has added value to the property through his labor, skill, or materials. But that statement of the rule is somewhat deceptive, since the person who has simply housed the goods is entitled to a lien, as is a person who has altered or repaired the goods without measurably adding value to them. Perhaps a better way of stating the rule is this: a lien is created when the bailee performs some special benefit to the goods (e.g., preserving them or repairing them).

Many states have enacted statutes governing various types of liens. In many instances, these have broadened the bailee’s common-law rights. This book discusses two types of liens in great detail: the liens of warehousemen and those of common carriers. Recall that a *lease* creates a

type of bailment: the lessor is the bailor and the lessee is the bailee. This book references the UCC's take on leasing in its discussion of the sale of goods. <sup>[2]</sup>

### **Rights When Goods Are Taken or Damaged by a Third Party**

The general rule is that the bailee can recover damages in full if the bailed property is damaged or taken by a third party, but he must account in turn to the bailor. A delivery service is carrying parcels—bailed goods entrusted to the trucker for delivery—when the truck is struck from behind and blows up. The carrier may sue the third person who caused the accident and recover for the total loss, including the value of the packages. The bailor may also recover for damages to the parcels, but not if the bailee has already recovered a judgment. Suppose the bailee has sued and lost. Does the bailor have a right to sue independently on the same grounds? Ordinarily, the principle of *res judicata* would prevent a second suit, but if the bailor did not know of and cooperate in the bailee's suit, he probably has the right to proceed on his own suit.

### **Innkeepers' Liability**

The liability of an innkeeper—a type of bailor—is thought to have derived from the warlike conditions that prevailed in medieval England, where brigands and bandits roamed the countryside and the innkeeper himself might not have been above stealing from his guests. The innkeeper's liability extended not merely to loss of goods through negligence. His was an insurer's liability, extending to any loss, no matter how occasioned, and even to losses that occurred in the guest's room, a place where the guest had the primary right of possession. The only exception was for losses due to the guest's own negligence.

Most states have enacted statutes providing exceptions to this extraordinarily broad common-law duty. Typically, the statutes exempt the hotel keeper from insurer's liability if the hotelier furnishes a safe in which the guests can leave their jewels, money, and other valuables and if a notice is posted a notice advising the guests of the safe's availability. The hotelier might face liability for valuables lost or stolen from the safe but not from the rooms.

### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

If the bailee fails to redeliver the goods to the bailor, a presumption of negligence arises, but the bailee can rebut the presumption by showing that she exercised appropriate care. What is "appropriate care" depends on the test used in the jurisdiction: some courts use the

“ordinary care under the circumstances,” and some determine how much care the bailee should have exercised based on the extent to which she was benefited from the transaction compared to the bailor. The bailor can be liable too for negligently delivering goods likely to cause damage to the bailee. In either case reasonable disclaimers of liability are allowed. If the bailed goods need repair while in the bailee’s possession, the usual rule is that ordinary repairs are the bailee’s responsibility, extraordinary ones the bailor’s. Bailees are entitled to liens to enforce payment owing to them. In common law, innkeepers were insurers of their guests’ property, but hotels and motels today are governed mostly by statute: they are to provide a safe for their guests’ valuables and are not liable for losses from the room.

### EXERCISES

1. What is the “ordinary care under the circumstances” test for a bailee’s liability when the bailed goods are not returned?
2. What is the tripartite test?
3. What liability does a bailor have for delivering defective goods to a bailee?
4. Under what circumstances are disclaimers of liability by the bailee or bailor acceptable?
5. Jason takes his Ford Mustang to a repair shop but fails to pay for the repairs. On what theory can the shop keep and eventually sell the car to secure payment?

[1] *Zimmer v. Mitchell and Ness*, 385 A.2d 437 (Penn. 1978).

[2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 2A.

## 21.3 The Storage and Shipping of Goods

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand a warehouse’s liability for losing goods, what types of losses a warehouse is liable for, and what rights the warehouse has concerning the goods.
2. Know the duties, liabilities, and exceptions to liability a carrier of freight has, and what rights the carrier has.
3. Understand the liability that is imposed on entities whose business it is to carry passengers.

### Storage of Goods

Warehousing has been called the “second oldest profession,” stemming from the biblical story of Joseph, who stored grain during the seven good years against the famine of the seven bad years. Whatever its origins, warehousing is today a big business, taking in billions of dollars to stockpile foods and other goods. As noted previously, the source of law governing warehousing is Article 7 of the UCC, but noncode law also can apply. Section 7-103 of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) specifically provides that any federal statute or treaty and any state regulation or tariff supersedes the provisions of Article 7. A federal example is the United States Warehouse Act, which governs receipts for stored agricultural products. Here we take up, after some definitions, the warehouseer’s liabilities and rights. A warehouseer is a special type of bailee.

### **Definitions**

A warehouseer is defined in UCC, Section 7-102(h), as “a person engaged in the business of storing goods for hire,” and under Section 1-201(45) a warehouse receipt is any receipt issued by a warehouseer. The warehouse receipt is an important document because it can be used to transfer title to the goods, even while they remain in storage: it is worth money. No form is prescribed for the warehouse receipt, but unless it lists in its terms the following nine items, the warehouseer is liable to anyone who is injured by the omission of any of them:

1. Location of the warehouse
2. Date receipt was issued
3. Consecutive number of the receipt
4. Statement whether the goods will be delivered to bearer, to a specified person, or “to a specified person or his order”
5. The rate of storage and handling charges
6. Description of the goods or the packages containing them
7. Signature of the warehouseer, which his or her authorized agent may make
8. The warehouseer’s ownership of the goods, if he or she has a sole or part ownership in them
9. The amount (if known, otherwise the fact) of advances made and liabilities incurred for which the warehouseer claims a lien or security interest

### **General Duty of Care**



The warehouseer's general duty of care is embodied in the tort standard for measuring negligence: he is liable for any losses or injury to the goods caused by his failure to exercise "such care in regard to them as a reasonably careful man would exercise under like circumstances."<sup>[1]</sup> However, subsection 4 declares that this section does not repeal or dilute any other state statute that imposes a higher responsibility on a warehouseer. Nor does the section invalidate contractual limitations otherwise permissible under Article 7. The warehouseer's duty of care under this section is considerably weaker than the carrier's duty. Determining when a warehouseer becomes a carrier, if the warehouseer is to act as shipper, can become an important issue.

### **Limitation of Liability**

The warehouseer may limit the amount of damages she will pay by so stating in the warehouse receipt, but she must strictly observe that section's requirements, under which the limitation must be stated "per article or item, or value per unit of weight."<sup>[2]</sup> Moreover, the warehouseer cannot force the bailor to accept this limitation: the bailor may demand in writing increased liability, in which event the warehouseer may charge more for the storage. If the warehouseer converts the goods to her own UCC, the limitation of liability does not apply.

### **Specific Types of Liability and Duties**

Several problems recur in warehousing, and the law addresses them.

#### **Nonreceipt or Misdescription**

Under UCC Section 7-203, a warehouseer is responsible for goods listed in a warehouse receipt that were not in fact delivered to the warehouse (or were misdescribed) and must pay damages to a good-faith purchaser or party to a document of title. To avoid this liability, the issuer must conspicuously note on the document that he does not know whether the goods were delivered or are correctly described. One simple way is to mark on the receipt that "contents, condition, and quality are unknown."

#### **Delivery to the Wrong Party**

The bailee is obligated to deliver the goods to any person with documents that entitle him to possession, as long as the claimant pays any outstanding liens and surrenders the document so that it can be marked "cancelled" (or can be partially cancelled in the case of partial delivery).

The bailee can avoid liability for no delivery by showing that he delivered the goods to someone with a claim to possession superior to that of the claimant, that the goods were lost or destroyed through no fault of the bailee, or that certain other lawful excuses apply. <sup>[3]</sup> Suppose a thief deposits goods he has stolen with a warehouse. Discovering the theft, the warehouse turns the goods over to the rightful owner. A day later the thief arrives with a receipt and demands delivery. Because the rightful owner had the superior claim, the warehouse is not liable in damages to the thief.

Now suppose you are moving and have placed your goods with a local storage company. A few weeks later, you accidentally drop your wallet, which contains the receipt for the goods and all your identification. A thief picks up the wallet and immediately heads for the warehouse, pretending to be you. Having no suspicion that anything is amiss—it's a large place and no one can be expected to remember what you look like—the warehouse releases the goods to the thief. This time you are probably out of luck. Section 7-404 says that “a bailee who in good faith including observance of reasonable commercial standards has received goods and delivered...them according to the terms of the document of title...is not liable.” This rule is true even though the person to whom he made delivery had no authority to receive them, as in the case of the thief. However, if the warehouse had a suspicion and failed to take precautions, then he might be liable to the true owner.

### **Duty to Keep Goods Separate**

Except for fungible goods, like grain, the warehouse must keep separate goods covered by each warehouse receipt. The purpose of this rule, which may be negated by explicit language in the receipt, is to permit the bailor to identify and take delivery of his goods at any time.

### **Rights of the Warehouse**

The warehouse has certain rights concerning the bailed goods.

### **Termination**

A warehouse is not obligated to store goods indefinitely. Many warehouse receipts will specify the period of storage. At the termination of the period, the warehouse may notify the bailor to pay and to recover her goods. If no period is fixed in the receipt or other document of title, the warehouse may give notice to pay and remove within no less than thirty days. The bailor's

failure to pay and remove permits the warehouse to sell the goods for her fee. Suppose the goods begin to deteriorate. Sections 7-207(2) and 7-207(3) of the UCC permit the warehouse to sell the goods early if necessary to recover the full amount of her lien or if the goods present a hazard. But if the rightful owner demands delivery before such a sale, the warehouse is obligated to do so.

## **Liens**

Section 7-209(1) of the UCC provides that a warehouse has a lien on goods covered by a warehouse receipt to recover the following charges and expenses: charges for storage or transportation, insurance, labor, and expenses necessary to preserve the goods. The lien is not discharged if the bailor transfers his property interest in the goods by negotiating a warehouse receipt to a purchaser in good faith, although the warehouse is limited then to an amount or a rate fixed in the receipt or to a reasonable amount or rate if none was stated. The lien attaches automatically and need not be spelled out in the warehouse receipt.

The warehouse may enforce the lien by selling the goods at a public or private sale, as long as she does so in a commercially reasonable manner, as defined in Section 7-210. All parties known to be claiming an interest in the goods must be notified of the sale and told the amount due, the nature of the sale, and its time and place. Any person who in good faith purchases the goods takes them free of any claim by the bailor, even if the warehouse failed to comply with the requirements of Section 7-210. However, her failure to comply subjects her to damages, and if she has willfully violated the provisions of this section she is liable to the bailor for conversion.

## **Shipment of Goods**

### **Introduction and Terminology**

The shipment of goods throughout the United States and abroad is a very big business, and many specialized companies have been established to undertake it, including railways, air cargo operations, trucking companies, and ocean carriers. Article 7 of the UCC applies to carriage of goods as it does to warehousing, but federal law is more important. The Federal Bill of Lading Act (FBLA) covers bills of lading issued by common carriers for transportation of goods in interstate or foreign commerce (i.e., from one state to another; in federal territory; or to foreign countries). The Carmack Amendment was enacted in 1906 as an amendment to the Interstate

Commerce Act of 1887, and it is now part of the Interstate Commerce Commission Termination Act of 1995; it covers liability of interstate carriers for loss, destruction, and damage to goods.

The shipper is the entity hiring the one who transports the goods: if you send your sister crystal goblets for her birthday, you are the shipper.

Two terms are particularly important in discussing shipment of goods. One is common carrier; the common carrier is “one who undertakes for hire or reward to transport the goods of such as chooses to employ him, from place to place.”<sup>[4]</sup> This definition contains three elements: (1) the carrier must hold itself out for all in common for hire—the business is not restricted to particular customers but is open to all who apply for its services; (2) it must charge for his services—it is for hire; (3) the service in question must be carriage. Included within this tripartite definition are numerous types of carriers: household moving companies, taxicabs, towing companies, and even oil and gas pipelines. Note that to be a common carrier it is not necessary to be in the business of carrying every type of good to every possible point; common carriers may limit the types of goods or the places to which they will transport them.

A bill of lading is any document that evidences “the receipt of goods for shipment issued by a person engaged in the business of transporting or forwarding goods.”<sup>[5]</sup> This is a comprehensive definition and includes documents used by contract carriers—that is, carriers who are not common carriers. An example of a bill of lading is depicted in [Figure 21.2 "A Bill of Lading Form"](#).

*Figure 21.2 A Bill of Lading Form*



[Face Side]

UNIFORM ORDER BILL OF LADING ORIGINAL

Shipper's No. \_\_\_\_\_  
Agent's No. \_\_\_\_\_

Company \_\_\_\_\_

RECEIVED, subject to the classifications and tariffs in effect on the date of the issue of this Bill of Lading at \_\_\_\_\_, 20 \_\_\_\_\_

from \_\_\_\_\_ the property described below, in apparent good order, except as noted (contents and condition of contents of packages unknown), marked, consigned, and destined to indicated below, which said company (the word company being understood throughout this contract as meaning any person or corporation in possession of the property under the contract) agrees to carry to its usual place of delivery at said destination, if on its own road or on its own water line, otherwise to deliver to another carrier on the route to said destination. It is mutually agreed, as to each carrier of all or any of said property over all or any portion of said route to destination, and as to each part at any time interested in all or any of said property, that every service to be performed hereunder shall be subject to all the conditions not prohibited by law whether printed or written, herein contained, including the conditions on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to by the shipper and accepted for himself and his assigns.

The surrender of this Original ORDER Bill of Lading properly indorsed shall be required before the delivery of the property. Inspection of property covered by this bill of lading will not be permitted unless provided by law or unless permission is indorsed on this original bill of lading or given in writing by the shipper.

Consigned to ORDER of \_\_\_\_\_  
Destination \_\_\_\_\_ State of \_\_\_\_\_ County of \_\_\_\_\_  
Notify \_\_\_\_\_  
At \_\_\_\_\_ State of \_\_\_\_\_ County of \_\_\_\_\_  
Route \_\_\_\_\_  
Delivering Carrier \_\_\_\_\_ Car Initial \_\_\_\_\_ Car No. \_\_\_\_\_

No. Pack-ages	Description of Articles, Special Marks, and Exceptions	* Weight (Subject to Correction)	Class or Rate	Check Column

Subject to Section 7 of conditions, if this shipment is to be delivered to the consignee without recourse on the consignor, the consignor shall sign the following statement:  
The carrier shall not make delivery of this shipment without payment of freight and all other lawful charges.

(Signature of consignor.)

If charges are to be prepaid, write or stamp here, "To be Prepaid."

Received \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to apply in prepayment of the charges on the property described hereon.

Agent or Cashier  
Per \_\_\_\_\_  
(The signature here acknowledges only the amount prepaid.)

\$ \_\_\_\_\_

\* If the shipment moves between two ports by a carrier by water, the law requires that the bill of lading shall state whether it is "carrier's or shipper's weight."

Note.— Where the rate is dependent on value, shippers are required to state specifically in writing the agreed or declared value of the property.  
The agreed or declared value of the property is hereby specifically stated by the shipper to be not exceeding \_\_\_\_\_ Per \_\_\_\_\_

Shipper \_\_\_\_\_ Agent  
Per \_\_\_\_\_ per \_\_\_\_\_  
Permanent postoffice address of shipper \_\_\_\_\_

Source: Form 3 from UCC Section 7-301

Duties and Liabilities



The transportation of goods has been an important part of all evolved economic systems for a long time, and certainly it is critical to the development and operation of any capitalistic system. The law regarding it is well developed.

### **Absolute Liability**

Damage, destruction, and loss are major hazards of transportation for which the carrier will be liable. Who will assert the claim against the carrier depends on who bears the risk of loss. The rules governing risk of loss (examined in [Chapter 18 "Title and Risk of Loss"](#)) determine whether the buyer or seller will be the plaintiff. But whoever is the plaintiff, the common carrier defendant faces absolute liability. With five exceptions explored two paragraphs on, the common carrier is an insurer of goods, and regardless of the cause of damage or loss—that is, whether or not the carrier was negligent—it must make the owner whole. This ancient common-law rule is codified in state law, in the federal Carmack Amendment, and in the UCC, Section 7-309(1), all of which hold the common carrier to absolute liability to the extent that the common law of the state had previously done so.

Absolute liability was imposed in the early cases because the judges believed such a rule was necessary to prevent carriers from conspiring with thieves. Since it is difficult for the owner, who was not on the scene, to prove exactly what happened, the judges reasoned that putting the burden of loss on the carrier would prompt him to take extraordinary precautions against loss (and would certainly preclude him from colluding with thieves). Note that the rules in this section govern only common carriers; contract carriers that do not hold themselves out for transport for hire are liable as ordinary bailees.

### **Exceptions to Absolute Liability**

In general, the burden of proof rests on the carrier in favor of the shipper. The shipper (or consignee of the shipper) can make out a prima facie case by showing that it delivered the goods to the carrier in good condition and that the goods either did not arrive or arrived damaged in a specified amount. Thereafter the carrier has the burden of proving that it was not negligent and that the loss or damage was caused by one of the five following recognized exceptions to the rule of absolute liability.

### **Act of God**

No one has ever succeeded in defining precisely what constitutes an act of God, but the courts seem generally agreed that it encompasses acts that are of sudden and extraordinary natural, as opposed to human, origin. Examples of acts of God are earthquakes, hurricanes, and fires caused by lightning against which the carrier could not have protected itself. Rapid River Carriers contracts to transport a refrigerated cargo of beef down the Mississippi River on the *SS Rapid*. When the ship is en route, it is hit by a tornado and sinks. This is an act of God. But a contributing act of negligence by a carrier overcomes the act of God exception. If it could be shown that the captain was negligent to set sail when the weather warned of imminent tornados, the carrier might be liable.

### **Act of Public Enemy**

This is a narrow exception that applies only to acts committed by pirates at high sea or by the armed forces of enemies of the state to which the carrier owes allegiance. American ships at sea that are sunk during wartime by enemy torpedoes would not be liable for losses to the owners of cargo. Moreover, public enemies do not include lawless mobs or criminals listed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list, even if federal troops are required, as in the Pullman Strike of 1894, to put down the violence. After the Pullman Strike, carriers were held liable for property destroyed by violent strikers.

### **Act of Public Authority**

When a public authority—a sheriff or federal marshal, for example—through lawful process seizes goods in the carrier's possession, the carrier is excused from liability. Imagine that federal agents board the *SS Rapid* in New Orleans and, as she is about to sail, show the captain a search warrant and seize several boxes of cargo marked "beef" that turn out to hold cocaine. The owner or consignee of this illegal cargo will not prevail in a suit against the carrier to recover damages. Likewise, if the rightful owner of the goods obtains a lawful court order permitting him to attach them, the carrier is obligated to permit the goods to be taken. It is not the carrier's responsibility to contest a judicial writ or to face the consequences of resisting a court order. The courts generally agree that the carrier must notify the owner whenever goods are seized.

### **Act of Shipper**



When goods are lost or damaged because of the shipper's negligence, the shipper is liable, not the carrier. The usual situation under this exception arises from defective packing. The shipper who packs the goods defectively is responsible for breakage unless the defect is apparent and the carrier accepts the goods anyway. For example, if you ship your sister crystal goblets packed loosely in the box, they will inevitably be broken when driven in trucks along the highways. The trucker who knowingly accepts boxes in this condition is liable for the damage. Likewise, the carrier's negligence will overcome the exception and make him absolutely liable. A paper supplier ships several bales of fine stationery in thin cardboard boxes susceptible to moisture. Knowing their content, SS *Rapid* accepts the bales and exposes them to the elements on the upper deck. A rainstorm curdles the stationery. The carrier is liable.

### **Inherent Nature of the Goods**

The fifth exception to the rule of absolute liability is rooted in the nature of the goods themselves. If they are inherently subject to deterioration or their inherent characteristics are such that they might be destroyed, then the loss must lie on the owner. Common examples are chemicals that can explode spontaneously and perishable fruits and vegetables. Of course, the carrier is responsible for seeing that foodstuffs are properly stored and cared for, but if they deteriorate naturally and not through the carrier's negligence, he is not liable.

### **Which Carrier Is Liable?**

The transportation system is complex, and few goods travel from portal to portal under the care of one carrier only. In the nineteenth century, the shipper whose goods were lost had a difficult time recovering their value. Initial carriers blamed the loss on subsequent carriers, and even if the shipper could determine which carrier actually had possession of the goods when the damage or loss occurred, diverse state laws made proof burdensome. The Carmack Amendment ended the considerable confusion by placing the burden on the initial carrier; connecting carriers are deemed agents of the initial carrier. So the plaintiff, whether seller or buyer, need sue only the initial carrier, no matter where the loss occurred. Likewise, Section 7-302 of the UCC fastens liability on an initial carrier for damages or loss caused by connecting carriers.

### **When Does Carrier Liability Begin and End?**

When a carrier's liability begins and ends is an important issue because the same company can act both to store the goods and to carry them. The carrier's liability is more stringent than the warehouse's. So the question is, when does a warehouse become a carrier and vice versa?

The basic test for the beginning of carrier liability is whether the shipper must take further action or give further instructions to the carrier before its duty to transport arises. Suppose that Cotton Picking Associates delivers fifty bales of cotton to Rapid River Carriers for transport on the *SS Rapid*. The *SS Rapid* is not due back to port for two more days, so Rapid River Carrier stores the cotton in its warehouse, and on the following day the warehouse is struck by lightning and burns to the ground. Is Rapid River Carriers liable in its capacity as a carrier or warehouse? Since nothing was left for the owner to do, and Rapid River was storing the cotton for its own convenience awaiting the ship's arrival, it was acting as a carrier and is liable for the loss. Now suppose that when Cotton Picking Associates delivered the fifty bales it said that another fifty bales would be coming in a week and the entire lot was to be shipped together. Rapid River stores the first fifty bales and lightning strikes. Since more remained for Cotton Picking to do before Rapid River was obligated to ship, the carrier was acting in its warehousing capacity and is not liable.

The carrier's absolute liability ends when it has delivered the goods to the consignee's residence or place of business, unless the agreement states otherwise (as it often does). By custom, certain carriers—notably rail carriers and carriers by water—are not required to deliver the goods to the consignee (since rail lines and oceans do not take the carrier to the consignee's door). Instead, consignees must take delivery at the dock or some other place mutually agreed on or established by custom.

When the carrier must make personal delivery to the consignee, carrier liability continues until the carrier has made reasonable efforts to deliver. An express trucking company cannot call on a corporate customer on Sunday or late at night, for instance. If reasonable efforts to deliver fail, it may store the goods in its own warehouse, in which case its liability reverts to that of a warehouse.

If personal delivery is not required (e.g., as in shipment by rail), the states use different approaches for determining when the carrier's liability terminates. The most popular intrastate

approach provides that the carrier continues to be absolutely responsible for the goods until the consignee has been notified of their arrival and has had a reasonable opportunity to take possession of them.

Interstate shipments are governed by the Carmack Amendment, which generally provides that liability will be determined by language in the bill of lading. The typical bill of lading (or “BOL” and “B/L”) provides that if the consignee does not take the goods within a stated period of time after receiving notice of their arrival, the carrier will be liable as warehouse only.

### **Disclaimers**

The apparently draconian liability of the carrier—as an insurer of the goods—is in practice easily minimized. Under neither federal nor state law may the carrier disclaim its absolute liability, but at least as to commercial transactions it may limit the damages payable under certain circumstances. Both the Carmack Amendment and Section 7-309 of the UCC permit the carrier to set alternate tariffs, one costing the shipper more and paying full value, the other costing less and limited to a dollar per pound or some other rate less than full value. The shipper must have a choice; the carrier may not impose a lesser tariff unilaterally on the shipper, and the loss must not be occasioned by the carrier’s own negligence.

### **Specific Types of Liability**

The rules just discussed relate to the general liability of the carrier for damages to the goods. There are two specific types of liability worth noting.

#### **Nonreceipt or Misdescription**

Under the UCC, Section 7-301(1), the owner of the goods (e.g., a consignee) described in a bill of lading may recover damages from the issuer of the bill (the carrier) if the issuer did not actually receive the goods from the shipper, if the goods were misdescribed, or if the bill was misdated. The issuer may avoid liability by reciting in the bill of lading that she does not know whether the goods were received or if they conform to the description; the issuer may avoid liability also by marking the goods with such words as “contents or condition of contents unknown.” Even this qualifying language may be ineffective. For instance, a common carrier may not hide behind language indicating that the description was given by the shipper; the carrier must actually count the packages of goods or ascertain the kind and quantity of bulk freight. Just because the

carrier is liable to the consignee for errors in description does not mean that the shipper is free from blame. Section 7-301(5) requires the shipper to indemnify the carrier if the shipper has inaccurately described the goods in any way (including marks, labels, number, kind, quantity, condition, and weight).

### **Delivery to the Wrong Party**

The rule just discussed for warehouse applies to carriers under both state and federal law: carriers are absolutely liable for delivering the goods to the wrong party. In the classic case of *Southern Express Co. v. C. L. Ruth & Son*, a clever imposter posed as the representative of a reputable firm and tricked the carrier into delivering a diamond ring.<sup>[6]</sup> The court held the carrier liable, even though the carrier was not negligent and there was no collusion. The UCC contains certain exceptions; under Section 7-303(1), the carrier is immune from liability if the holder, the consignor, or (under certain circumstances) the consignee gives instructions to deliver the goods to someone other than a person named in the bill of lading.

### **Carrier's Right to Lien and Enforcement of Lien**

Just as the warehouse can have a lien, so too can the carrier. The lien can cover charges for storage, transportation, and preservation of goods. When someone has purchased a negotiable bill of lading, the lien is limited to charges stated in the bill, allowed under applicable tariffs, or, if none are stated, to a reasonable charge. A carrier who voluntarily delivers or unjustifiably refuses to deliver the goods loses its lien. The carrier has rights paralleling those of the warehouse to enforce the lien.

### **Passengers**

In addition to shipping goods, common carriers also transport passengers and their baggage. The carrier owes passengers a high degree of care; in 1880 the Supreme Court described the standard as “the utmost caution characteristic of very careful prudent men.”<sup>[7]</sup> This duty implies liability for a host of injuries, including mental distress occasioned by insults (“lunatic,” “whore,” “cheap, common scalawag”) and by profane or indecent language. In *Werndli v. Greyhound*,<sup>[8]</sup> Mrs. Werndli deboarded the bus at her destination at 2:30 a.m.; finding the bus station closed, she walked some distance to find a bathroom. While doing so, she became the victim of an assault. The court held Greyhound liable: it should have known the station was

closed at 2:30 a.m. and that it was located in a area that became dangerous after hours. The case illustrates the degree to which a carrier is responsible for its passengers' safety and comfort. The baggage carrier is liable as an insurer unless the baggage is not in fact delivered to the carrier. A passenger who retains control over his hand luggage by taking it with him to his seat has not delivered the baggage to the carrier, and hence the carrier has no absolute liability for its loss or destruction. The carrier remains liable for negligence, however. When the passenger does deliver his luggage to the carrier, the question often arises whether the property so delivered is "baggage." If it is not, the carrier does not have an insurer's liability toward it. Thus a person who transports household goods in a suitcase would not have given the carrier "baggage," as that term is usually defined (i.e., something transported for the passenger's personal use or convenience). At most, the carrier would be responsible for the goods as a gratuitous bailee.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The storage of goods is a special type of bailment. People who store goods can retrieve them or transfer ownership of them by transferring possession of the warehouse receipt: whoever has rightful possession of the receipt can take the goods, and the warehouser is liable for misdelivery or for mixing up goods. The warehouser has a right to a lien to secure his fee, enforceable by selling the goods in a commercially reasonable way. The shipping of goods is of course an important business. Common carriers (those firms that hire out their trucks, airplanes, ships, or trains to carry cargo) are strictly liable to ensure the proper arrival of the goods to their destination, with five exceptions (act of God, public enemy, public authority, shipper; inherent nature of the goods); the first carrier to receive them is liable—others who subsequently carry are that carrier's agents. The carrier may also store goods: if it does so for its own convenience it is liable as a carrier; if it does so for the shipper's convenience, it is liable as a warehouser. As with warehousers, the carrier is liable for misdelivery and is entitled to a lien to enforce payment. Carriers also carry people, and the standard of care they owe to passengers is very high. Carrying passengers' baggage, the carrier is liable as an insurer—it is strictly liable.

#### EXERCISES

1. How are warehousers any different from the more generic bailees?
2. How do the duties and liabilities of warehousers differ from those of carriers?

3. What rights do warehousemen and carriers have to ensure their payment?
4. May a carrier limit its liability for losses not its fault?

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- [1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 7-204(1).
  - [2] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 7-204(2).
  - [3] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 7-403(1).
  - [4] *Ace High Dresses v. J. C. Trucking Co.*, 191 A. 536 (Conn. 1937).
  - [5] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 1-206(6).
  - [6] *Southern Express Co. v. C. L. Ruth & Son*, 59 So. 538 (Ala. Ct. App. 1912).
  - [7] *Pennsylvania Co. v. Roy*, 102 US 451 (1880).
  - [8] *Werndli v. Greyhound Corp.*, 365 So.2d 177 (Fla. Ct. App., 1978)

## 21.4 Negotiation and Transfer of Documents of Title (or Commodity Paper)

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how commodity paper operates in the sale of goods.
2. Recognize when the transferee of a properly negotiated document of title gets better rights than her transferor had and the exceptions to this principle.

### Overview of Negotiability

We have discussed in several places the concept of a document of title (also called commodity paper). That is a written description, identification, or declaration of goods authorizing the holder—usually a bailee—to receive, hold, and dispose of the document and the goods it covers. Examples of documents of title are warehouse receipts, bills of lading, and delivery orders. The document of title, properly negotiated (delivered), gives its holder ownership of the goods it represents. It is much easier to pass around a piece of paper representing the ownership interest in goods than it is to pass around the goods themselves. It is a basic feature of our legal system that a person cannot transfer more rights to property than he owns. It would follow here that no holder of a document of title has greater rights in the goods than the holder's transferor—the one from whom she got the document (and thus the

goods). But there are certain exceptions to this rule; for example, [Chapter 17 "Introduction to Sales and Leases"](#) discusses the power of a merchant in certain circumstances to transfer title to goods, even though the merchant himself did not have title to them. To conclude this chapter, we discuss the rule as it applies to documents of title, sometimes known as commodity paper.

## **The Elements and Effect of Negotiation**

If a document of title is “negotiable” and is “duly negotiated,” the purchaser can obtain rights greater than those of the storer or shipper. In the following discussion, we refer only to the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), although federal law also distinguishes between negotiable and nonnegotiable documents of title (some of the technical details in the federal law may differ, but these are beyond the scope of this book).

### ***Negotiable Defined***

Any document of title, including a warehouse receipt and a bill of lading, is negotiable or becomes negotiable if by its terms the goods are to be delivered “to bearer or to the order of” a named person. <sup>[1]</sup> All other documents of title are nonnegotiable. Suppose a bill of lading says that the goods are consigned to Tom Thumb but that they may not be delivered unless Tom signs a written order that they be delivered. Under Section 7-104(2), that is not a negotiable document of title. A negotiable document of title must bear words such as “Deliver to the bearer” or “deliver to the order of Tom Thumb.” These are the “magic words” that create a negotiable document.

### **Duly Negotiated**

To transfer title effectively through **negotiation** of the document of title, it must be “duly negotiated.” In general terms, under Section 7-501 of the UCC, a negotiable document of title is duly negotiated when the person named in it indorses (signs it over—literally “on the back of”) and delivers it to a holder who purchases it in good faith and for value, without any notice that someone else might have a claim against the goods, assuming the transaction is in the regular course of business or financing. Note that last part: assuming the transaction is in the regular course of business. If you gave your roommate a negotiable document of title in payment for a car you bought from her, your roommate would have something of value, but it would not have been duly negotiated. Paper made out “to bearer” (bearer paper) is negotiated by delivery alone;

no indorsement is needed. A holder is anyone who possesses a document of title that is drawn to his order, indorsed to him, or made out “to bearer.”

### **Effect**

As a general rule, if these requirements are not met, the transferee acquires only those rights that the transferor had and nothing more. And if a nonnegotiable document is sold, the buyer’s rights may be defeated. For example, a creditor of the transferor might be entitled to treat the sale as void.

Under Section 7-502 of the UCC, however, if the document is duly negotiated, then the holder acquires (1) title to the document, (2) title to the goods, (3) certain rights to the goods delivered to the bailee after the document itself was issued, and (4) the right to have the issuer of the document of title hold the goods or deliver the goods free of any defense or claim by the issuer.

To contrast the difference between sale of goods and negotiation of the document of title, consider the plight of Lucy, the owner of presidential campaign pins and other political memorabilia. Lucy plans to hold them for ten years and then sell them for many times their present value. She does not have the room in her cramped apartment to keep them, so she crates them up and takes them to a friend for safekeeping. The friend gives her a receipt that says simply: “Received from Lucy, five cartons; to be stored for ten years at \$25 per year.” Although a document of title, the receipt is not negotiable. Two years later, a browser happens on Lucy’s crates, discovers their contents, and offers the friend \$1,000 for them. Figuring Lucy will forget all about them, the friend sells them. As it happens, Lucy comes by a week later to check on her memorabilia, discovers what her former friend has done, and sues the browser for their return. Lucy would prevail. Now suppose instead that the friend, who has authority from Lucy to store the goods, takes the cartons to the Trusty Storage Company, receives a negotiable warehouse receipt (“deliver to bearer five cartons”), and then negotiates the receipt. This time Lucy would be out of luck. The bona fide purchaser from her friend would cut off Lucy’s right to recover the goods, even though the friend never had good title to them.

A major purpose of the concept is to allow banks and other creditors to loan money with the right to the goods as represented on the paper as collateral. They can, in effect, accept the paper as collateral without fear that third parties will make some claim on the goods.



But even if the requirements of negotiability are met, the document of title still will confer no rights in certain cases. For example, when a thief forges the indorsement of the owner, who held negotiable warehouse receipts, the bona fide purchaser from the thief does not obtain good title. Only if the receipts were in bearer form would the purchaser prevail in a suit by the owner. Likewise, if the owner brought his goods to a repair shop that warehoused them without any authority and then sold the negotiable receipts received for them, the owner would prevail over the subsequent purchaser.

Another instance in which an apparent negotiation of a document of title will not give the bona fide purchaser superior rights occurs when a term in the document is altered without authorization. But if blanks are filled in without authority, the rule states different consequences for bills of lading and warehouse receipts. Under Section 7-306 of the UCC, any unauthorized filling in of a blank in a bill of lading leaves the bill enforceable only as it was originally.

However, under Section 7-208, an unauthorized filling in of a blank in a warehouse receipt permits the good-faith purchaser with no notice that authority was lacking to treat the insertion as authorized, thus giving him good title. This section makes it dangerous for a warehouse to issue a receipt with blanks in it, because he will be liable for any losses to the owner if a good-faith purchaser takes the goods.

Finally, note that a purchaser of a document of title who is unable to get his hands on the goods—perhaps the document was forged—might have a breach of warranty action against the seller of the document. Under Section 7-507 of the UCC, a person who negotiates a document of title warrants to his immediate purchaser that the document is genuine, that he has no knowledge of any facts that would impair its validity, and that the negotiation is rightful and effective. Thus the purchaser of a forged warehouse receipt would not be entitled to recover the goods but could sue his transferor for breach of the warranty.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

It is a lot easier to move pieces of paper around than goods in warehouses. Therefore commercial paper, or commodity paper, was invented: the paper represents the goods, and the paper is transferred from one person to another by negotiation. The holder signs on the back of the paper and indicates who its next holder should be (or foolishly leaves that blank);

that person then has rights to the goods and, indeed, better rights. On due negotiation the transferee does not merely stand in the transferor's shoes: the transferee takes free of defects and defenses that could have been available against the transferor. For a document of title to be a negotiable one, it must indicate that the intention of it is that it should be passed on through commerce, with the words "to bearer" or "to the order of [somebody]," and it must be duly negotiated: signed off on by its previous holder (or without any signature needed if it was bearer paper).

## EXERCISES

1. "George Baker deposited five cardboard boxes in my barn's loft, and he can pick them up when he wants." Is this statement a negotiable document of title?
2. "George Baker deposited five cardboard boxes in my barn's loft, and he or anybody to his order can pick them up." Is this statement a negotiable document of title?
3. Why is the concept of being a holder of duly negotiated documents of title important?

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[1] Uniform Commercial Code, Section 7-104(1)(a).

## 21.5 Cases

### Bailments and Disclaimers of Bailee's Liability

*Carr v. Hoosier Photo Supplies, Inc.*

*441 N.E.2d 450 (Ind. 1982)*

Givan, J.

Litigation in this cause began with the filing of a complaint in Marion Municipal Court by John R. Carr, Jr. (hereinafter "Carr"), seeking damages in the amount of \$10,000 from defendants Hoosier Photo Supplies, Inc. (hereinafter "Hoosier") and Eastman Kodak Company (hereinafter "Kodak"). Carr was the beneficiary of a judgment in the amount of \$1,013.60. Both sides appealed. The Court of Appeals affirmed the trial court in its entirety.

The facts were established by stipulation agreement between the parties and thus are not in dispute. In the late spring or early summer of 1970, Carr purchased some Kodak film from a retailer not a party to this action, including four rolls of Kodak Ektachrome-X 135 slide film that

are the subject matter of this dispute. During the month of August, 1970, Carr and his family vacationed in Europe. Using his own camera Carr took a great many photographs of the sites they saw, using among others the four rolls of film referred to earlier. Upon their return to the United States, Carr took a total of eighteen [18] rolls of exposed film to Hoosier to be developed. Only fourteen [14] of the rolls were returned to Carr after processing. All efforts to find the missing rolls or the pictures developed from them were unsuccessful. Litigation commenced when the parties were unable to negotiate a settlement.

The film Carr purchased, manufactured by Kodak, is distributed in boxes on which there is printed the following legend:

***READ THIS NOTICE***

*This film will be replaced if defective in manufacture, labeling, or packaging, or if damaged or lost by us or any subsidiary company even though by negligence or other fault. Except for such replacement, the sale, processing, or other handling of this film for any purpose is without other warranty of liability.*

In the stipulation of facts it was agreed though Carr never read this notice on the packages of film he bought, he knew there was printed on such packages “a limitation of liability similar or identical to the Eastman Kodak limitation of liability.” The source of Carr’s knowledge was agreed to be his years of experience as an attorney and as an amateur photographer.

When Carr took all eighteen [18] rolls of exposed film to Hoosier for processing, he was given a receipt for each roll. Each receipt contained the following language printed on the back side:

*Although film price does not include processing by Kodak, the return of any film or print to us for processing or any other purpose, will constitute an agreement by you that if any such film or print is damaged or lost by us or any subsidiary company, even though by negligence or other fault, it will be replaced with an equivalent amount of Kodak film and processing and, except for such replacement, the handling of such film or prints by us for any purpose is without other warranty or liability.*

Again, it was agreed though Carr did not read this notice he was aware Hoosier “[gave] to their customers at the time of accepting film for processing, receipts on which there are printed

limitations of liability similar or identical to the limitation of liability printed on each receipt received by Carr from Hoosier Photo.”

It was stipulated upon receipt of the eighteen [18] rolls of exposed film only fourteen [14] were returned to Hoosier by Kodak after processing. Finally, it was stipulated the four rolls of film were lost by either Hoosier or Kodak....

That either Kodak or Hoosier breached the bailment contract, by negligently losing the four rolls of film, was established in the stipulated agreement of facts. Therefore, the next issue raised is whether either or both, Hoosier or Kodak, may limit their liability as reflected on the film packages and receipts....

[A] prerequisite to finding a limitation of liability clause in a contract unconscionable and therefore void is a showing of disparity in bargaining power in favor of the party whose liability is thus limited....In the case at bar the stipulated facts foreclose a finding of disparate bargaining power between the parties or lack of knowledge or understanding of the liability clause by Carr. The facts show Carr is an experienced attorney who practices in the field of business law. He is hardly in a position comparable to that of the plaintiff in Weaver, supra. Moreover, it was stipulated he was aware of the limitation of liability on both the film packages and the receipts. We believe these crucial facts belie a finding of disparate bargaining power working to Carr’s disadvantage.

Contrary to Carr’s assertions, he was not in a “take it or leave it position” in that he had no choice but to accept the limitation of liability terms of the contract. As cross-appellants Hoosier and Kodak correctly point out, Carr and other photographers like him do have some choice in the matter of film processing. They can, for one, undertake to develop their film themselves. They can also go to independent film laboratories not a part of the Kodak Company. We do not see the availability of processing as limited to Kodak....

We hold the limitation of liability clauses operating in favor of Hoosier and Kodak were assented to by Carr; they were not unconscionable or void. Carr is, therefore, bound by such terms and is limited in his remedy to recovery of the cost of four boxes of unexposed Kodak Ektachrome-X 135 slide film.

The Court of Appeals' opinion in this case is hereby vacated. The cause is remanded to the trial court with instructions to enter a judgment in favor of appellant, John R. Carr, Jr., in the amount of \$13.60, plus interest. Each party is to bear its own costs.

Hunter and Pivarnik, JJ., concur. Prentice, J., concurs in result without opinion.

DeBruler, J., dissenting.

...As a general rule the law does not permit professional bailees to escape or diminish liability for their own negligence by posting signs or handing out receipts. [Citations] The statements on the film box and claim check used by Kodak and Hoosier Photo are in all respects like the printed forms of similar import which commonly appear on packages, signs, chits, tickets, tokens and receipts with which we are all bombarded daily. No one does, or can reasonably be expected, to take the time to carefully read the front, back, and sides of such things. We all know their gist anyway.

The distinguished trial judge below characterizes these statements before us as "mere notices" and concludes that plaintiff below did not "assent" to them so as to render them a binding part of the bailment contract. Implicit here is the recognition of the exception to the general rule regarding such notices, namely, that they may attain the dignity of a special contract limiting liability where the bailor overtly assents to their terms. [Citations] To assent to provisions of this sort requires more than simply placing the goods into the hands of the bailee and taking back a receipt or claim check. Such acts are as probative of ignorance as they are of knowledge.

However, according to the agreed statement of facts, plaintiff Carr "knew" by past experience that the claim checks carried the limitation of liability statements, but he did not read them and was unaware of the specific language in them. There is nothing in this agreed statement that Carr recalled this knowledge to present consciousness at the time of these transactions.

Obviously we all know many things which we do not recall or remember at any given time. The assent required by law is more than this; it is, I believe, to perform an act of understanding.

There is no evidence of that here.

The evidence presented tending to support the award of damages included an actual uncontroverted amount of \$13.60 thereby precluding mere nominal damages. There was further evidence that 150 exposures were lost. The actual award of \$1,014.60 amounted to between

\$6.00 and \$7.00 per picture. Carr provided evidence that the pictures were of exceptional value to him, having been taken in a once-in-a-lifetime European trip costing \$6000 [about \$33,000 in 2110 dollars], including visits arranged there before hand with relatives. The award was fair and just compensation for the loss of value to the owner and does not include sentimental or fanciful value.

The trial court judgment should be affirmed.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Four out of eighteen rolls of film were not returned to the bailor, Mr. Carr. The court here affirmed a judgment for about \$6 per lost image. How could an image taken by an amateur photographer be worth \$6 a piece?
2. The European trip cost him \$6,000 in 1970; he asked for \$10,000 (about \$55,000 in 2010 dollars). Upon what basis could such damages be arrived? What did he apparently want?
3. What argument did the plaintiff make as to why the limitation of liability should not be enforced? What response did the court have to that?
4. Would it have made a difference if the plaintiff were not himself a business attorney? Why or why not?
5. Why did the dissent think the court of appeals' decision to award the plaintiff \$1,000 was correct and the majority's opinion incorrect?

### Bailed Goods of Sentimental Value

*Mieske v. Bartell Drug Co.*

*593 P.2d 1308 (Wash. 1979)*

Brachtenbach, J.

This case determines the measure of damages for personal property, developed movie film, which is destroyed, and which cannot be replaced or reproduced. It also decides the legal effect of a clause which purports to limit the responsibility of a film processor to replacement of film....

The facts are that over a period of years the plaintiffs had taken movie films of their family activities. The films started with the plaintiffs' wedding and honeymoon and continued through vacations in Mexico, Hawaii and other places, Christmas gatherings, birthdays, Little League

participation by their son, family pets, building of their home and irreplaceable pictures of members of their family, such as the husband's brother, who are now deceased.

Plaintiffs had 32 50-foot reels of such developed film which they wanted spliced together into four reels for convenience of viewing. Plaintiff wife visited defendant Bartell's camera department, with which she had dealt as a customer for at least 10 years. She was told that such service could be performed.

The films were put in the order which plaintiffs desired them to be spliced and so marked. They were then placed in four separate paper bags which in turn were placed in one large bag and delivered to the manager of Bartell. The plaintiff wife explained the desired service and the manner in which the films were assembled in the various bags. The manager placed a film processing packet on the bag and gave plaintiff wife a receipt which contained this language: "We assume no responsibility beyond retail cost of film unless otherwise agreed to in writing." There was no discussion about the language on the receipt. Rather, plaintiff wife told the manager, "Don't lose these. They are my life."

Bartell sent the film package to defendant GAF Corporation, which intended to send them to another processing lab for splicing. Plaintiffs assumed that Bartell did this service and were unaware of the involvement of two other firms.

The bag of films arrived at the processing lab of GAF. The manager of the GAF lab described the service ordered and the packaging as very unusual. Yet it is undisputed that the film was in the GAF lab at the end of one day and gone the next morning. The manager immediately searched the garbage disposal dumpster which already had been emptied. The best guess is that the plaintiffs' film went from GAF's lab to the garbage dumpster to a truck to a barge to an up-Sound landfill where it may yet repose.

After several inquiries to Bartell, plaintiff wife was advised to call GAF. Not surprisingly, after being advised of the complete absence and apparent fatality of plaintiffs' films, this lawsuit ensued....

Two main issues are raised: (1) the measure of damages and (2) the effect of the exclusionary clause appearing on the film receipt.

On damages, the defendants assign error to (a) the court's damages instruction and (b) the court's failure to give their proposed damages instruction.

The standard of recovery for destruction of personal property was summarized in [McCurdy]. We recognized in McCurdy that (1) personal property which is destroyed may have a market value, in which case that market value is the measure of damages; (2) if destroyed property has no market value but can be replaced or reproduced, then the measure is the cost of replacement or reproduction; (3) if the destroyed property has no market value and cannot be replaced or reproduced, then the value to the owner is to be the proper measure of damages. However, while not stated in McCurdy, we have held that in the third McCurdy situation, damages are not recoverable for the sentimental value which the owner places on the property. [Citations]

The defendants argue that plaintiffs' property comes within the second rule of McCurdy, i.e., the film could be replaced and that their liability is limited to the cost of replacement film. Their position is not well taken. Defendants' proposal would award the plaintiffs the cost of acquiring film without pictures imposed thereon. That is not what plaintiffs lost. Plaintiffs lost not merely film able to capture images by exposure but rather film upon which was recorded a multitude of frames depicting many significant events in their lives. Awarding plaintiffs the funds to purchase 32 rolls of blank film is hardly a replacement of the 32 rolls of images which they had recorded over the years. Therefore the third rule of McCurdy is the appropriate measure of damages, i.e., the property has no market value and cannot be replaced or reproduced.

The law, in those circumstances, decrees that the measure of damages is to be determined by the value to the owner, often referred to as the intrinsic value of the property. Restatement of Torts s. 911 (1939).

Necessarily the measure of damages in these circumstances is the most imprecise of the three categories. Yet difficulty of assessment is not cause to deny damages to a plaintiff whose property has no market value and cannot be replaced or reproduced. [Citations]

The fact that damages are difficult to ascertain and measure does not diminish the loss to the person whose property has been destroyed. Indeed, the very statement of the rule suggests the opposite. If one's destroyed property has a market value, presumably its equivalent is available on the market and the owner can acquire that equivalent property. However, if the owner cannot



acquire the property in the market or by replacement or reproduction, then he simply cannot be made whole.

The problem is to establish the value to the owner. Market and replacement values are relatively ascertainable by appropriate proof. Recognizing that value to the owner encompasses a subjective element, the rule has been established that compensation for sentimental or fanciful values will not be allowed. [Citations] That restriction was placed upon the jury in this case by the court's damages instruction....

Under these rules, the court's damages instruction was correct. In essence it allowed recovery for the actual or intrinsic value to the plaintiffs but denied recovery for any unusual sentimental value of the film to the plaintiffs or a fanciful price which plaintiffs, for their own special reasons, might place thereon....

The next issue is to determine the legal effect of the exclusionary clause which was on the film receipt given plaintiff wife by Bartell. As noted above, it read: "We assume no responsibility beyond retail cost of film unless otherwise agreed to in writing."

Is the exclusionary clause valid? Defendants rely upon 2-719(3), a section of the Uniform Commercial Code, which authorizes a limitation or exclusion of consequential damages unless the limitation is unconscionable.

Plaintiffs, on the other hand, argue that the Uniform Commercial Code is not applicable to this transaction....It is now clearly established that the reach of Article 2 goes considerably beyond the confines of that type transaction which the Code itself defines to be a "sale"; namely, the passing of title from a party called the seller to one denominated a buyer for a price. Chief opportunity for this expansion is found in Section 2-102, which states that the article applies to "transactions in goods." "Article 2 sections are finding their way into more and more decisions involving transactions which are not sales, but which are used as substitutes for a sale or which to a court appear to have attributes to which sales principles or at least some of them seem appropriate for application....Most important of these is the application of the Article's warranty provisions to leases, bailments, or construction contracts. Of growing importance is the tendency of courts to find the Section on unconscionability, Section 2-302, appropriate to nonsales deals."

Application of the Uniform Commercial Code to this transaction leads to defendants' next two contentions. First, they urge that the code's recognition of course of dealings and trade usage validates the exclusionary clause. Second, defendants assign error to the grounds upon which the court found the clause to be unconscionable and therefore invalid.

Defendants contend that it is the uniform trade practice of film processors to impose an exclusionary clause similar to that contained in Bartell's film receipt. However, the existence of a trade usage is to be established as a fact [Citation]. It was proved as a usage among film processors, but not as between commercial film processors and their retail customers....Consequently, defendants' reliance on trade usage to uphold the exclusionary clause is not well founded.

As to course of dealings, the record is clear that Mrs. Mieske and the Bartell manager never discussed the exclusionary clause. Mrs. Mieske had never read it, she viewed the numbered slip as merely a receipt. The manager was not "too clear on what it said." There was no showing what was the language on any other receipt given in prior dealings between the parties. In summary, defendants' proof fell short of that required by the express language of 1-205(3). Defendants contend we should apply a course of dealing standard as a matter of law, but cite no authority for such proposition. We decline the invitation.

Defendants next assert that the trial court held the exclusionary clause to be unconscionable without considering the rules laid down in *Schroeder v. Fageol Motors, Inc.*, 544 P.2d 20 (1975). In *Schroeder*, we recognized that the term unconscionable is not defined in the Uniform Commercial Code. We acknowledge that the code mandates the court to determine unconscionability as a matter of law, 2-302(1). *Schroeder* held that numerous factors enter into a determination of unconscionability. No one element is controlling. The court must examine all the circumstances surrounding the transaction, including conspicuousness of the clause, prior course of dealings between the parties, negotiations about the clause, the commercial setting and usage of the trade. Not each element will be applicable factually to every transaction....

The real question is whether the court considered the necessary elements of *Schroeder*. A review of the record convinces us that it did. The court had the facts, the *Schroeder* case was argued,

the criteria set forth therein were discussed by defendants' counsel both on objections and on exceptions. There was no error. Judgment affirmed.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. This case presents pretty much the same fact situation as the previous one, but it comes out the other way. Why? What's the difference?
2. The court said there could be "recovery for the actual or intrinsic value to the plaintiffs but [not for] for any unusual sentimental value of the film to the plaintiffs or a fanciful price which plaintiffs, for their own special reasons, might place thereon." What actual value does a role of film have if not sentimental value, and if the court were not concerned about the sentimental value, why did it mention all the irreplaceable memories recorded on the film—what difference would it make what was on the film if it had an ascertainable "actual value"?
3. Determining that this bailment was governed by the UCC opened up three lines of argument for the defendant. What were they?
4. Why did the court here say the disclaimer was unconscionable?

### Liability of Carrier; Limitations on Liability

*Calvin Klein Ltd. v. Trylon Trucking Corp.*

*892 F.2d 191C.A.2 (N.Y. 1989)*

Miner, J.

Defendant-appellant Trylon Trucking Corp. ("Trylon") appeals from a judgment...in favor of plaintiff-appellee Calvin Klein Ltd. ("Calvin Klein") for the full value of a lost shipment of clothing. The appeal presents a novel issue under New York law: whether a limitation of liability agreement between a shipper and a carrier is enforceable when the shipment is lost as a result of the carrier's gross negligence.

The district court held that the parties' customary limitation of liability agreement did not extend to the shipment at issue, due to the absence of assent and consideration. The court observed that, had there been such an agreement, the liability of the carrier for its gross negligence would be limited. For the reasons that follow, we reverse the judgment of the district court, find that the parties agreed to the limitation of liability, and determine that the agreement limits Trylon's liability for its gross negligence....

Trylon is a New Jersey trucking firm which engaged in the business of transporting goods from New York City's airports for delivery to its customers' facilities. Calvin Klein, a New York clothing company, had used the services of Trylon for at least three years, involving hundreds of shipments, prior to the lost shipment at issue. In past deliveries Calvin Klein, through its customs broker, would contact Trylon to pick up the shipment from the airport for delivery to Calvin Klein's facility. After completing the carriage, Trylon would forward to Calvin Klein an invoice, which contained a limitation of liability provision as follows:

*In consideration of the rate charged, the shipper agrees that the carrier shall not be liable for more than \$50.00 on any shipment accepted for delivery to one consignee unless a greater value is declared, in writing, upon receipt at time of shipment and charge for such greater value paid, or agreed to be paid, by the shipper.*

A shipment of 2,833 blouses from Hong Kong arrived at John F. Kennedy International Airport for Calvin Klein on March 27, 1986. Calvin Klein arranged for Trylon to pick up the shipment and deliver it to Calvin Klein's New Jersey warehouse. On April 2, Trylon dispatched its driver, Jamahl Jefferson, to pick up this shipment. Jefferson signed a receipt for the shipment from Calvin Klein's broker. By April 2, the parties discovered that Jefferson had stolen Trylon's truck and its shipment. The shipment never was recovered. Calvin Klein sent a claim letter to Trylon for the full value of the lost blouses. In the absence of any response by Trylon, Calvin Klein filed this action...to recover \$150,000, allegedly the value of the lost shipment....

In their stipulation in lieu of a jury trial, the parties agreed that Trylon is liable to Calvin Klein for the loss of the shipment and that Trylon was grossly negligent in the hiring and supervision of Jefferson. They also agreed that "[t]he terms and conditions of [Trylon]'s carriage [were] that liability for loss or damage to cargo is limited to \$50 in accordance with the legend on Trylon's invoice forms." Calvin Klein conceded that it was aware of this limitation of liability, and that it did not declare a value on the blouses at the time of shipment.

The parties left at issue whether the limitation of liability clause was valid and enforceable. Calvin Klein argued in the district court, as it does here, that the limitation clause was not enforceable for two reasons: no agreement existed between Calvin Klein and Trylon as to the

limitation of liability; and, if such an agreement existed, public policy would prevent its enforcement because of Trylon's gross negligence.

The district court applied New York law, finding that the carriage was exempt from the Interstate Commerce Commission's jurisdiction, being entirely within the New York City commercial zone....

A common carrier...under New York law is strictly liable for the loss of goods in its custody.

"Where the loss is not due to the excepted causes [that is, act of God or public enemy, inherent nature of goods, or shipper's fault], it is immaterial whether the carrier was negligent or not...."

[Citations] Even in the case of loss from theft by third parties, liability may be imposed up on a negligent common carrier. [Citation]

A shipper and a common carrier may contract to limit the carrier's liability in cases of loss to an amount agreed to by the parties [Citations], so long as the language of the limitation is clear, the shipper is aware of the terms of the limitation, and the shipper can change the terms by indicating the true value of the goods being shipped. [Citations]...(similar scheme under Interstate Commerce Act). Such a limitation agreement is generally valid and enforceable despite carrier negligence. The limitation of liability provision involved here clearly provides that, at the time of delivery, the shipper may increase the limitation by written notice of the value of the goods to be delivered and by payment of a commensurately higher fee.

The parties stipulated to the fact that the \$50 limitation of liability was a term and condition of carriage and that Calvin Klein was aware of that limitation. This stipulated fact removes the first issue, namely whether an agreement existed as to a liability limitation between the parties, from this case. Calvin Klein's argument that it never previously acknowledged this limitation by accepting only \$50 in settlement of a larger loss does not alter this explicit stipulation. "[A] stipulation of fact that is fairly entered into is controlling on the parties and the court is bound to enforce it." [Citations] Neither party here has argued that the stipulation was unfairly entered into....

The remaining issue concerns the enforceability of the limitation clause in light of Trylon's conceded gross negligence. The district court considered that, assuming an agreement between

the parties as to Trylon's liability, Trylon's gross negligence would not avoid the enforcement of a limitation clause.

The district court found that New York law, as opposed to federal interstate commerce law, applies in this case. The parties do not seriously contest this choice of law. With the choice thus unchallenged, we must apply both established New York law as well as our belief of how the New York Court of Appeals would rule if this case were before it....

Although the New York Court of Appeals has addressed a limitation of liability provision in the context of a contract between an airline and a passenger, [Citation] (refusing to enforce unilateral limitation provision for death of passenger due to defendant's negligence), that court has never been called upon to enforce a limitation provision in the case of a grossly negligent common carrier of goods. The various departments of the Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court have addressed whether gross negligence bars enforcement of limitations of liability in the context of contracts for the installation, maintenance and monitoring of burglar alarm systems and are divided on the issue. Compare [Citation] (enforcing limitation despite gross negligence) and [Citation] (even if gross negligence were established, plaintiff's recovery would be limited by limitation clause) with [Citation] (limitation clause cannot limit liability for gross negligence) and [Citation] (finding "no significant distinction" between complete exculpation and limitation "to a nominal sum," therefore limitation is ineffective). The First Department distinguished between exculpatory provisions and limitation provisions, indicating that the latter would be effective even if the former are unenforceable due to the contracting party's gross negligence. [Citations]....The other departments which have considered the question applied the holding of [Citation], that "[a]greements which purport to exempt a party from liability for willful or grossly negligent acts are contrary to public policy and are void."...

Absent a rule of decision formulated by the New York Court of Appeals, we are not bound by the opinions issued by the state's lower courts....

In the absence of direct New York authority, we must make our best estimate as to how New York's highest court would rule in this case. In making that determination, we are free to consider all the resources the highest court of the state could use, including decisions reached in

other jurisdictions....We believe that the New York Court of Appeals would not differentiate between gross negligence and ordinary negligence in recognizing the validity of the limitation of liability in this case.

Since carriers are strictly liable for loss of shipments in their custody and are insurers of these goods, the degree of carrier negligence is immaterial. [Citation] The common carrier must exercise reasonable care in relation to the shipment in its custody. U.C.C. § 7-309(1). Carriers can contract with their shipping customers on the amount of liability each party will bear for the loss of a shipment, regardless of the degree of carrier negligence. See U.C.C. § 7-309(2) (allowing limitation of liability for losses from any cause save carrier conversion). Unlike the parachute school student, see [Citation], or the merchant acquiring a burglar alarm, the shipper can calculate the specific amount of its potential damages in advance, declare the value of the shipment based on that calculation, and pay a commensurately higher rate to carry the goods, in effect buying additional insurance from the common carrier.

In this case, Calvin Klein and Trylon were business entities with an on-going commercial relationship involving numerous carriages of Calvin Klein's goods by Trylon. Where such entities deal with each other in a commercial setting, and no special relationship exists between the parties, clear limitations between them will be enforced. [Citation]. Here, each carriage was under the same terms and conditions as the last, including a limitation of Trylon's liability. See [Citation] (court enforced limitation on shipper who possessed over five years of the carrier's manifests which included the \$50 limitation). This is not a case in which the shipper was dealing with the common carrier for the first time or contracting under new or changed terms. Calvin Klein was aware of the terms and was free to adjust the limitation upon a written declaration of the value of a given shipment, but failed to do so with the shipment at issue here. Since Calvin Klein failed to adjust the limitation, the limitation applies here, and no public policy that dictates otherwise can be identified.

Calvin Klein now argues that the limitation is so low as to be void....This amount is immaterial because Calvin Klein had the opportunity to negotiate the amount of coverage by declaring the value of the shipment....Commercial entities can easily negotiate the degree of risk each party will bear and which party will bear the cost of insurance. That this dispute actually involves who

will bear the cost of insurance is illustrated by the fact that this case has been litigated not by the principal parties, but by their insurers. Calvin Klein could have increased Trylon's coverage by declaring the value of its shipment, but did not do so. Calvin Klein had the opportunity to declare a higher value and we find all of its arguments relating to the unreasonableness of the limitation to be without merit.

We reverse and remand to the district court with instructions to enter judgment against defendant in the sum of \$50.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Why is the federal court here trying to figure out what the New York high court would do if it had this case in front of it?
2. Did the federal court find direct New York State law to apply?
3. What is the legal issue here?
4. What argument did Calvin Klein make as to why the \$50 limitation should not be valid?
5. The common-law rule was that carriers were strictly liable. Why didn't the court apply that rule?
6. Would this case have come out differently if the shipper (a) were an unsophisticated in matters of relevant business or (b) if it had never done business with Trylon before?

## 21.6 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Ownership and sale of goods are not the only important legal relationships involving goods. In a modern economy, possession of goods is often temporarily surrendered without surrendering title. This creates a bailment, which is defined as the lawful possession of goods by one who is not the owner.

To create a bailment, the goods must be in the possession of the bailee. Possession requires physical control and intent. Whether the owner or someone else must bear a loss often hinges on whether the other person is or is not a bailee.

The bailee's liability for loss depends on the circumstances. Some courts use a straightforward standard of ordinary care. Others use a tripartite test, depending on whether the bailment was for the benefit of the owner (the standard then is gross negligence), for the bailee (extraordinary



care), or for both (ordinary care). Bailees may disclaim liability unless they have failed to give adequate notice or unless public policy prohibits disclaimers. A bailee who converts the property will be held liable as an insurer.

A bailor may have liability toward the bailee—for example, for negligent failure to warn of hazards in the bailed property and for strict liability if the injury was caused by a dangerous object in a defective condition.

Special bailments arise in the cases of innkeepers (who have an insurer's liability toward their guests, although many state statutes provide exceptions to this general rule), warehouses, carriers, and leases.

A warehouse is defined as a person engaged in the business of storing goods for hire. The general standard of care is the same as that of ordinary negligence. Many states have statutes imposing a higher standard.

A common carrier—one who holds himself out to all for hire to transport goods—has an insurer's liability toward the goods in his possession, with five exceptions: act of God, act of public enemy, act of public authority, negligence of shipper, and inherent nature of the goods. Because many carriers are involved in most commercial shipments of goods, the law places liability on the initial carrier. The carrier's liability begins once the shipper has given all instructions and taken all action required of it. The carrier's absolute liability ends when it has delivered the goods to the consignee's place of business or residence (unless the agreement states otherwise) or, if no delivery is required, when the consignee has been notified of the arrival of the goods and has had a reasonable opportunity to take possession.

Commodity paper—any document of title—may be negotiated; that is, through proper indorsements on the paper, title may be transferred without physically touching the goods. A duly negotiated document gives the holder title to the document and to the goods, certain rights to the goods delivered to the bailee after the document was issued, and the right to take possession free of any defense or claim by the issuer of the document of title. Certain rules limit the seemingly absolute right of the holder to take title better than that held by the transferor.

## EXERCISES

1. Joe Andrews delivered his quarter horse I'll Call Ya (worth about \$319,000 in 2010 dollars) to Harold Stone for boarding and stabling. Later he asked Stone if Stone could arrange for the horse's transportation some distance, and Stone engaged the services of the Allen brothers for that purpose. Andrews did not know the Allens, but Stone had previously done business with them. On the highway the trailer with I'll Call Ya in it became disengaged from the Allens' truck and rolled over. The mare, severely injured, "apparently lingered for several hours on the side of the road before she died without veterinary treatment." The evidence was that the Allens had properly secured the horse's head at the front of the trailer and used all other equipment that a reasonably prudent person would use to secure and haul the horse; that the ball was the proper size and in good condition; that the ball was used without incident to haul other trailers after the accident; that Ronny Allen was driving at a safe speed and in a safe manner immediately before the accident; that after the accident the sleeve of the trailer hitch was still in the secured position; and that they made a reasonable effort to obtain veterinary treatment for the animal after the accident. The court determined this was a mutual-benefit bailment. Are the Allens liable? <sup>[1]</sup>
2. Fisher Corporation, a manufacturer of electronic equipment, delivered VCRs to Consolidated Freightways' warehouse in California for shipment to World Radio Inc., an electronics retailer in Council Bluffs, Iowa. World Radio rejected the shipments as duplicative, and they were returned to Consolidated's terminal in Sarpy County, Nebraska, pending Fisher's instructions. The VCRs were loaded onto a trailer; the doors of the trailer were sealed but not padlocked, and the trailer was parked at the south end of the terminal. Padlocks were not used on any trailers so as not to call attention to a trailer containing expensive cargo. The doors of the trailer faced away from the terminal toward a cyclone fence that encircled the yard. Two weeks later, on Sunday, July 15, a supervisor checked the grounds and found nothing amiss. On Tuesday, July 17, Consolidated's employees discovered a 3 × 5 foot hole had been cut in the fence near the trailer, and half the VCRs were gone; they were never recovered. Consolidated received Fisher's return authorization after the theft occurred. If Consolidated is considered a carrier, it would be strictly liable for the loss; if it is considered a bailee, it is not liable unless negligent. Which is it?

3. Plaintiff purchased a Greyhound bus ticket in St. Petersburg, Florida, for a trip to Fort Meyers. The bus left at 11:30 p.m. and arrived at 4:15 a.m. When Plaintiff got off the bus, she noticed that the station and restrooms were darkened, closed, and locked. She left the terminal to cross at a lighted service station to use the bathroom. As she walked away from the terminal, she was attacked by an unknown person and injured. The terminal was located in a high-crime area of Fort Meyers. Is Greyhound liable?
4. Mrs. Carter, Plaintiff, took her fur coat to Reichlin Furriers for cleaning, glazing, and storage until the next winter season. She was given a printed receipt form on the front of which Furrier's employee had written "\$100" as the coat's value, though Mrs. Carter did not discuss its value with the employee, did not know that such a value had been noted, and didn't read the receipt. A space for the customer's signature on the front of the receipt was blank; below this in prominent type was this notice: "see reverse side for terms and conditions." On the back was a statement that this was a storage contract and the customer would be bound by the terms unless contrary notice was given within ten days. There were fifteen conditions, one of which was the following: "Storage charges are based upon valuation herein declared by the depositor and amount recoverable for loss or damage shall not exceed...the depositor's valuation appearing in this receipt." Six months later, when Mrs. Carter sought to retrieve her coat, she was informed by Furrier that it was lost. Carter sued Furrier for \$450 (about \$2,200 in 2010 dollars); Furrier claimed its liability was limited to \$100. Who wins and why?
5. Michael Capezzaro (Plaintiff) reported to the police that he had been robbed of \$30,000 (in 2010 dollars) at gunpoint by a woman. The next day police arrested a woman with \$9,800 in her possession. Plaintiff identified her as the woman who had robbed him, and the money was impounded as evidence. Two years later the case against her was dismissed because she was determined to have been insane when she committed the crime, and the money in the police property room was released to her. Plaintiff then sued the police department, which claimed it was "obligated to return the money to [the woman] as bailor." Who wins and why?

6. Harley Hightower delivered his Cadillac to Auto Auction, where it was damaged. Auto Auction defended itself against Hightower's claim that it was a negligent bailee by asserting (1) that he had not met the required burden of proof that a proximate cause of the injury was Auto Auction's negligence because it introduced evidence that negligence of a third party was a proximate cause of the damage to his car and (2) that it was entitled to judgment in the absence of evidence of specific acts of negligence of the bailee. There was evidence that a Mrs. Tune drove her automobile onto the lot to sell it and parked it where she was directed to; that the automobiles on said lot for sale were ordinarily lined up and numbered by Auto Auction; that Plaintiff's Cadillac was not so parked by the auction company but was parked so that if Mrs. Tune's automobile continued forward it would strike Hightower's Cadillac broadside; that when Mrs. Tune stopped her Buick and alighted, her car rolled down the incline on the lot toward Hightower's car; that she attempted to stop her car but it knocked her down and continued rolling toward appellee's Cadillac and, finally, struck and damaged it. Who wins and why?
7. Several student radicals led by Richard Doctor, ranked number three on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list, destroyed a shipment of military cargo en route from Colorado to a military shipping facility in Washington State. Should the carrier be liable for the loss?
8. Everlena Mitchell contracted in writing with All American Van & Storage to transport and store her household goods and furnishings, and she was to pay all charges incurred on a monthly basis. As security she granted All American a warehouse's lien giving it the right to sell the property if the charges remained unpaid for three months and if, in the opinion of the company, such action would be necessary to protect accrued charges. Everlena fell eight months in arrears and on October 20 she received notice that the amount owed was to be paid by October 31, 1975. The notice also stated that if payment was not made, her goods and furnishings would be sold on November 7, 1975. Everlena had a pending claim with the Social Security Administration, and advised All American that she would be receiving a substantial sum of money soon from the Social Services Administration; this was confirmed by two government agents. However, All American would not postpone the sale. Everlena's property was sold on November 7, 1975, for \$925.50. Near the end of November 1975,

Everlena received approximately \$5,500 (about \$22,000 in 2010 dollars) from the United States as a disability payment under the Social Security Act, and she sued All American for improperly selling her goods. The trial court ruled for All American on summary judgment. What result should Everlena obtain on appeal?

9. Roland delivered a shipment of desks to Security Warehouse and received from Security a negotiable receipt. Peter broke into Roland's office, stole the document, and forged Roland's signature as an indorsement, making Peter himself the holder. Peter then indorsed the document over to Billings, who knew nothing of the theft. Does Billings get good title to the desks?
10. Baker's Transfer & Storage Company, Defendant, hauled household goods and personal effects by trucks "anywhere for hire." Its trucks did not travel on regular routes or between established terminals; it hauled household goods and personal effects on private contracts with the owners as and when the opportunity presented itself. Baker contracted to haul the Klein family's household goods from Bakersfield, California, to Hollywood. En route the goods were destroyed by fire without Baker's negligence. Baker's contract provided it would redeliver the property "damage by the elements excepted." If Baker were a common carrier, its liability would be statutorily limited to less than the amount ordered by the trial court; if it were a private carrier, its liability would be either based on ordinary negligence or as the parties' contract provided. Working with both points, what result obtains here?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. In a bailment, the bailee

- a. must return similar goods
- b. must return identical goods
- c. acquires title to the goods
- d. must pay for the goods

In a bailment for the benefit of a bailee, the bailee's duty of care is

- a. slight
- b. extraordinary
- c. ordinary

A disclaimer of liability by a bailee is

- a. never allowed
- b. sometimes allowed
- c. always allowed
- d. unheard of in business

A bailor may be held liable to the bailee on

- a. a negligence theory
- b. a warranty theory
- c. a strict liability theory
- d. all of the above

The highest duty of care is imposed on which of the following?

- a. a common carrier
- b. a lessee
- c. a warehouse
- d. an innkeeper

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. b
- 2. b
- 3. b
- 4. d
- 5. a

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[1] *Andrews v. Allen*, 724 S.W.2d 893 (Tex. Ct. App., 1987).

## Chapter 22

# Intellectual Property

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

- 1. The principal kinds of intellectual property

2. The difference between patents and trade secrets, and why a company might choose to rely on trade secrets rather than obtain a patent
3. What copyrights are, how to obtain them, and how they differ from trademarks
4. Why some “marks” may not be eligible for trademark protection, and how to obtain trademark protection for those that are

Few businesses of any size could operate without being able to protect their rights to a particular type of intangible personal property: intellectual property. The major forms of intellectual property are patents, copyrights, and trademarks. Unlike tangible personal property (machines, inventory) or real property (land, office buildings), intellectual property is formless. It is the product of the human intellect that is embodied in the goods and services a company offers and by which the company is known.

A patent is a grant from government that gives an inventor the exclusive right to make, use, and sell an invention for a period of twenty years from the date of filing the application for a patent.

A copyright is the right to exclude others from using or marketing forms of expression.

A trademark is the right to prevent others from using a company’s product name, slogan, or identifying design. Other forms of intellectual property are trade secrets (particular kinds of information of commercial use to a company that created it) and right of publicity (the right to exploit a person’s name or image). Note that the property interest protected in each case is not the tangible copy of the invention or writing—not the machine with a particular serial number or the book lying on someone’s shelf—but the invention or words themselves. That is why intellectual property is said to be intangible: it is a right to exclude any others from gaining economic benefit from your own intellectual creation. In this chapter, we examine how Congress, the courts, and the Patent and Trademark Office have worked to protect the major types of intellectual property.

## 22.1 Patents

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain why Congress would grant exclusive monopolies (patents) for certain periods of time.

2. Describe what kinds of things may be patentable and what kinds of things may not be patentable.
3. Explain the procedures for obtaining a patent, and how patent rights may be an issue where the invention is created by an employee.
4. Understand who can sue for patent infringement, on what basis, and with what potential remedies.

## Source of Authority and Duration

Patent and copyright law are federal, enacted by Congress under the power given by Article I of the Constitution “to promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.” Under current law, a patent gives an inventor exclusive rights to make, use, or sell an invention for twenty years. (If the patent is a design patent—protecting the appearance rather than the function of an item—the period is fourteen years.) In return for this limited monopoly, the inventor must fully disclose, in papers filed in the US Patent and Trademark Office (PTO), a complete description of the invention.

## Patentability

### What May Be Patented

The patent law says that “any new and useful process, machine, manufacture, or composition of matter, or any new and useful improvement thereof” may be patented.<sup>[1]</sup> A process is a “process, art or method, and includes a new use of a known process, machine, manufacture, composition of matter, or material.”<sup>[2]</sup> A process for making rolled steel, for example, qualifies as a patentable process under the statute. A machine is a particular apparatus for achieving a certain result or carrying out a distinct process—lathes, printing presses, motors, and the cotton gin are all examples of the hundreds of thousands of machines that have received US patents since the first Patent Act in 1790. A manufacture is an article or a product, such as a television, an automobile, a telephone, or a lightbulb. A composition of matter is a new arrangement of elements so that the resulting compound, such as a metal alloy, is not found in nature. In *Commissioner of Patents v. Chakrabarty*,<sup>[3]</sup> the Supreme Court said that even living organisms—in particular, a new “genetically engineered” bacterium that could “eat” oil spills—



could be patented. The *Chakrabarty* decision has spawned innovation: a variety of small biotechnology firms have attracted venture capitalists and other investors.

According to the PTO, gene sequences are patentable subject matter, provided they are isolated from their natural state and processed in a way that separates them from other molecules naturally occurring with them. Gene patenting, always controversial, generated new controversy when the PTO issued a patent to Human Genome Sciences, Inc. for a gene found to serve as a platform from which the AIDS virus can infect cells of the body. Critics faulted the PTO for allowing “ownership” of a naturally occurring human gene and for issuing patents without requiring a showing of the gene’s utility. New guidelines from the PTO followed in 2000; these focused on requiring the applicant to make a strong showing on the utility aspect of patentability and somewhat diminished the rush of biotech patent requests.

There are still other categories of patentable subjects. An improvement is an alteration of a process, machine, manufacture, or composition of matter that satisfies one of the tests for patentability given later in this section. New, original ornamental designs for articles of manufacture are patentable (e.g., the shape of a lamp); works of art are not patentable but are protected under the copyright law. New varieties of cultivated or hybridized plants are also patentable, as are genetically modified strains of soybean, corn, or other crops.

### **What May Not Be Patented**

Many things can be patented, but not (1) the laws of nature, (2) natural phenomena, and (3) abstract ideas, including algorithms (step-by-step formulas for accomplishing a specific task). One frequently asked question is whether patents can be issued for computer software. The PTO was reluctant to do so at first, based on the notion that computer programs were not “novel”—the software program either incorporated automation of manual processes or used mathematical equations (which were not patentable). But in 1998, the Supreme Court held in *Diamond v. Diehr*<sup>[4]</sup> that patents could be obtained for a process that incorporated a computer program if the process itself was patentable.

A business process can also be patentable, as the US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit ruled in 1998 in *State Street Bank and Trust v. Signature Financial Group, Inc.*<sup>[5]</sup> Signature Financial had a patent for a computerized accounting system that determined share prices

through a series of mathematical calculations that would help manage mutual funds. State Street sued to challenge that patent. Signature argued that its model and process was protected, and the court of appeals upheld it as a “practical application of a mathematical, algorithm, formula, or calculation,” because it produces a “useful, concrete and tangible result.” Since *State Street*, many other firms have applied for business process patents. For example, Amazon.com obtained a business process patent for its “one-click” ordering system, a method of processing credit-card orders securely. (But see *Amazon.com v. Barnesandnoble.com*,<sup>[6]</sup> in which the court of appeals rejected Amazon’s challenge to Barnesandnoble.com using its Express Land one-click ordering system.)

### **Tests for Patentability**

Just because an invention falls within one of the categories of patentable subjects, it is not necessarily patentable. The Patent Act and judicial interpretations have established certain tests that must first be met. To approve a patent application, the PTO (as part of the Department of Commerce) will require that the invention, discovery, or process be novel, useful, and nonobvious in light of current technology.

Perhaps the most significant test of patentability is that of obviousness. The act says that no invention may be patented “if the differences between the subject matter sought to be patented and the prior art are such that the subject matter as a whole would have been obvious at the time the invention was made to a person having ordinary skill in the art to which said subject matter pertains.” This provision of the law has produced innumerable court cases, especially over improvement patents, when those who wish to use an invention on which a patent has been issued have refused to pay royalties on the grounds that the invention was obvious to anyone who looked.

### **Procedures for Obtaining a Patent**

In general, the United States (unlike many other countries) grants a patent right to the first person to invent a product or process rather than to the first person to file for a patent on that product or process. As a practical matter, however, someone who invents a product or process but does not file immediately should keep detailed research notes or other evidence that would document the date of invention. An inventor who fails to apply for a patent within a year of that

date would forfeit the rights granted to an inventor who had published details of the invention or offered it for sale. But until the year has passed, the PTO may not issue a patent to X if Y has described the invention in a printed publication here or abroad or the invention has been in public use or on sale in this country.

An inventor cannot obtain a patent automatically; obtaining a patent is an expensive and time-consuming process, and the inventor will need the services of a patent attorney, a highly specialized practitioner. The attorney will help develop the required specification, a description of the invention that gives enough detail so that one skilled in the art will be able to make and use the invention. After receiving an application, a PTO examiner will search the records and accept or reject the claim. Usually, the attorney will negotiate with the examiner and will rewrite and refine the application until it is accepted. A rejection may be appealed, first to the PTO's Board of Appeals and then, if that fails, to the federal district court in the District of Columbia or to the US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, the successor court to the old US Court of Customs and Patent Appeals.

Once a patent application has been filed, the inventor or a company to which she has assigned the invention may put the words "patent pending" on the invention. These words have no legal effect. Anyone is free to make the invention as long as the patent has not yet been issued. But they do put others on notice that a patent has been applied for. Once the patent has been granted, infringers may be sued even if the infringer has made the product and offered it for sale before the patent was granted.

In today's global market, obtaining a US patent is important but is not usually sufficient protection. The inventor will often need to secure patent protection in other countries as well. Under the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property (1883), parties in one country can file for patent or trademark protection in any of the other member countries (172 countries as of 2011). The World Trade Organization's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) established standards for protecting intellectual property rights (patents, trademarks, and copyrights) and provides that each member nation must have laws that protect intellectual property rights with effective access to judicial systems for pursuing civil and criminal penalties for violations of such rights.

## Patent Ownership

The patent holder is entitled to make and market the invention and to exclude others from doing so. Because the patent is a species of property, it may be transferred. The inventor may assign part or all of his interest in the patent or keep the property interest and license others to manufacture or use the invention in return for payments known as royalties. The license may be exclusive with one licensee, or the inventor may license many to exploit the invention. One important limitation on the inventor's right to the patent interest is the so-called shop right. This is a right created by state courts on equitable grounds giving employers a nonexclusive royalty-free license to use any invention made by an employee on company time and with company materials. The shop right comes into play only when a company has no express or implied understanding with its employees. Most corporate laboratories have contractual agreements with employees about who owns the invention and what royalties will be paid.

## Infringement and Invalidity Suits

Suits for patent infringement can arise in three ways: (1) the patent holder may seek damages and an injunction against the infringer in federal court, requesting damages for royalties and lost profits as well; (2) even before being sued, the accused party may take the patent holder to court under the federal Declaratory Judgment Act, seeking a court declaration that the patent is invalid; (3) the patent holder may sue a licensee for royalties claimed to be due, and the licensee may counterclaim that the patent is invalid. Such a suit, if begun in state court, may be removed to federal court.

In a federal patent infringement lawsuit, the court may grant the winning party reimbursement for attorneys' fees and costs. If the infringement is adjudged to be intentional, the court can triple the amount of damages awarded. Prior to 2006, courts were typically granting permanent injunctions to prevent future infringement. Citing *Bay, Inc. v. Merc Exchange, LLC*,<sup>[7]</sup> the Supreme Court ruled that patent holders are not automatically entitled to a permanent injunction against infringement during the life of the patent. Courts have the discretion to determine whether justice requires a permanent injunction, and they may conclude that the public interest and equitable principles may be better satisfied with compensatory damages only.

Proving infringement can be a difficult task. Many companies employ engineers to “design around” a patent product—that is, to seek ways to alter the product to such an extent that the substitute product no longer consists of enough of the elements of the invention safeguarded by the patent. However, infringing products, processes, or machines need not be identical; as the Supreme Court said in *Sanitary Refrigerator Co. v. Winers*,<sup>[8]</sup> “one device is an infringement of another...if two devices do the same work in substantially the same way, and accomplish substantially the same result...even though they differ in name, form, or shape.” This is known as the doctrine of equivalents. In an infringement suit, the court must choose between these two extremes: legitimate “design around” and infringement through some equivalent product. An infringement suit can often be dangerous because the defendant will almost always assert in its answer that the patent is invalid. The plaintiff patent holder thus runs the risk that his entire patent will be taken away from him if the court agrees. In ruling on validity, the court may consider all the tests, such as prior art and obviousness, discussed in [Section 22.1.2](#) “Patentability” and rule on these independently of the conclusions drawn by the PTO.

## Patent Misuse

Although a patent is a monopoly granted to the inventor or his assignee or licensee, the monopoly power is legally limited. An owner who misuses the patent may find that he will lose an infringement suit. One common form of misuse is to tie the patented good to some unpatented one—for example, a patented movie projector that will not be sold unless the buyer agrees to rent films supplied only by the manufacturer of the movie projector, or a copier manufacturer that requires buyers to purchase plain paper from it. As we will see in [Chapter 23](#) “Antitrust Law”, various provisions of the federal antitrust laws, including, specifically, Section 3 of the Clayton Act, outlaw certain kinds of tying arrangements. Another form of patent misuse is a provision in the licensing agreement prohibiting the manufacturer from also making competing products. Although the courts have held against several other types of misuse, the general principle is that the owner may not use his patent to restrain trade in unpatented goods.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Many different “things” are patentable, include gene sequences, business processes, and any other “useful invention.” The US Patent and Trademark Office acts on initial applications and

may grant a patent to an applicant. The patent, which allows a limited-time monopoly, is for twenty years. The categories of patentable things include processes, machines, manufactures, compositions of matter, and improvements. Ideas, mental processes, naturally occurring substances, methods of doing business, printed matter, and scientific principles cannot be patented. Patent holders may sue for infringement and royalties from an infringer user.

## EXERCISES

1. Calera, Inc. discovers a way to capture carbon dioxide emissions at a California power plant and use them to make cement. This is a win for the power company, which needs to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions, and a win for Calera. Calera decides to patent this invention. What kind of patent would this be? A machine? A composition of matter? A manufacture?
2. In your opinion, what is the benefit of allowing companies to isolate genetic material and claim a patent? What kind of patent would this be? A machine? A composition of matter? A manufacture?
3. How could a “garage inventor,” working on her own, protect a patentable invention while yet demonstrating it to a large company that could bring the invention to market?

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[1] 35 United States Code, Section 101.

[2] 35 United States Code, Section 101.

[3] *Commissioner of Patents v. Chakrabarty*, 444 U.S. 1028 (1980).

[4] *Diamond v. Diehr*, 450 U.S. 175 (1981).

[5] *State Street Bank and Trust v. Signature Financial Group, Inc.*, 149 F.3d 1368 (Fed. Cir. 1998).

[6] *Amazon.com v. Barnesandnoble.com, Inc.*, 239 F.3d 1343 (Fed. Cir. 2001).

[7] *eBay, Inc. v. Merc Exchange, LLC*, 546 U.S. 388 (2006).

[8] *Sanitary Refrigerator Co. v. Winers*, 280 U.S. 30 (1929).

## 22.2 Trade Secrets

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the difference between trade secrets and patents, and explain why a firm might prefer keeping a trade secret rather than obtaining a patent.
2. Understand the dimensions of corporate espionage and the impact of the federal Economic Espionage Act.

## Definition of Trade Secrets

A patent is an invention publicly disclosed in return for a monopoly. A trade secret is a means to a monopoly that a company hopes to maintain by preventing public disclosure. Why not always take out a patent? There are several reasons. The trade secret might be one that is not patentable, such as a customer list or an improvement that does not meet the tests of novelty or nonobviousness. A patent can be designed around; but if the trade secret is kept, its owner will be the exclusive user of it. Patents are expensive to obtain, and the process is extremely time consuming. Patent protection expires in twenty years, after which anyone is free to use the invention, but a trade secret can be maintained for as long as the secret is kept.

However, a trade secret is valuable only so long as it is kept secret. Once it is publicly revealed, by whatever means, anyone is free to use it. The critical distinction between a patent and a trade secret is this: a patent gives its owner the right to enjoin anyone who infringes it from making use of it, whereas a trade secret gives its “owner” the right to sue only the person who improperly took it or revealed it.

According to the Restatement of Torts, Section 757, Comment b, a trade secret may consist of *any formula, pattern, device or compilation of information which is used in one's business, and which gives him an opportunity to obtain an advantage over competitors who do not know or use it. It may be a formula for a chemical compound, a process of manufacturing, treating or preserving materials, a pattern for a machine or other device, or a list of customers....A trade secret is a process or device for continuous use in the operation of a business. Generally it relates to the production of goods, as, for example, a machine or formula for the production of an article.*

Other types of trade secrets are customer information, pricing data, marketing methods, sources of supply, and secret technical know-how.

## Elements of Trade Secrets

To be entitled to protection, a trade secret must be (1) original and (2) secret.

### Originality

The trade secret must have a certain degree of originality, although not as much as would be necessary to secure a patent. For example, a principle or technique that is common knowledge does not become a protectable trade secret merely because a particular company taught it to one of its employees who now wants to leave to work for a competitor.

### Secrecy

Some types of information are obviously secret, like the chemical formula that is jealously guarded through an elaborate security system within the company. But other kinds of information might not be secret, even though essential to a company's business. For instance, a list of suppliers that can be devised easily by reading through the telephone directory is not secret. Nor is a method secret simply because someone develops and uses it, if no steps are taken to guard it. A company that circulates a product description in its catalog may not claim a trade secret in the design of the product if the description permits someone to do "reverse engineering." A company that hopes to keep its processes and designs secret should affirmatively attempt to do so—for example, by requiring employees to sign a nondisclosure agreement covering the corporate trade secrets with which they work. However, a company need not go to every extreme to guard a trade secret.

Trade-secrets espionage has become a big business. To protect industrial secrets, US corporations spend billions on security arrangements. The line between competitive intelligence gathering and espionage can sometimes be difficult to draw. The problem is by no means confined to the United States; companies and nations all over the world have become concerned about theft of trade secrets to gain competitive advantage, and foreign governments are widely believed to be involved in espionage and cyberattacks.

### Economic Espionage Act

The Economic Espionage Act (EEA) of 1996 makes the theft or misappropriation of a trade secret a federal crime. The act is aimed at protecting commercial information rather than classified national defense information. Two sorts of activities are criminalized. The first section



of the act <sup>[1]</sup> criminalizes the misappropriation of trade secrets (including conspiracy to misappropriate trade secrets and the subsequent acquisition of such misappropriated trade secrets) with the knowledge or intent that the theft will benefit a foreign power. Penalties for violation are fines of up to US\$500,000 per offense and imprisonment of up to fifteen years for individuals, and fines of up to US\$10 million for organizations.

The second section <sup>[2]</sup> criminalizes the misappropriation of trade secrets related to or included in a product that is produced for or placed in interstate (including international) commerce, with the knowledge or intent that the misappropriation will injure the owner of the trade secret. Penalties for violation are imprisonment for up to ten years for individuals (no fines) and fines of up to US\$5 million for organizations.

In addition to these specific penalties, the fourth section of the EEA <sup>[3]</sup> also requires criminal forfeiture of (1) any proceeds of the crime and property derived from proceeds of the crime and (2) any property used, or intended to be used, in commission of the crime.

The EEA authorizes civil proceedings by the Department of Justice to enjoin violations of the act but does not create a private cause of action. This means that anyone believing they have been victimized must go through the US attorney general in order to obtain an injunction.

The EEA is limited to the United States and has no extraterritorial application unless (1) the offender is a US company or a citizen operating from abroad against a US company or (2) an act in furtherance of the espionage takes place in the United States. Other nations lack such legislation, and some may actively support industrial espionage using both their national intelligence services. The US Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive publishes an annual report, mandated by the US Congress, on foreign economic collection and industrial espionage, which outlines these espionage activities of many foreign nations.

### **Right of Employees to Use Trade Secrets**

A perennial source of lawsuits in the trade secrets arena is the employee who is hired away by a competitor, allegedly taking trade secrets along with him. Companies frequently seek to prevent piracy by requiring employees to sign confidentiality agreements. An agreement not to disclose particular trade secrets learned or developed on the job is generally enforceable. Even without an agreement, an employer can often prevent disclosure under principles of agency law. Sections

395 and 396 of the Restatement (Second) of Agency suggest that it is an actionable breach of duty to disclose to third persons information given confidentially during the course of the agency. However, every person is held to have a right to earn a living. If the rule were strictly applied, a highly skilled person who went to another company might be barred from using his knowledge and skills. The courts do not prohibit people from using elsewhere the general knowledge and skills they developed on the job. Only specific trade secrets are protected. To get around this difficulty, some companies require their employees to sign agreements not to compete. But unless the agreements are limited in scope and duration to protect a company against only specific misuse of trade secrets, they are unenforceable.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Trade secrets, if they can be kept, have indefinite duration and thus greater potential value than patents. Trade secrets can be any formula, pattern, device, process, or compilation of information to be used in a business. Customer information, pricing data, marketing methods, sources of supply, and technical know-how could all be trade secrets. State law has protected trade secrets, and federal law has provided criminal sanctions for theft of trade secrets. With the importance of digitized information, methods of theft now include computer hacking; theft of corporate secrets is a burgeoning global business that often involves cyberattacks.

#### EXERCISES

1. Wu Dang, based in Hong Kong, hacks into the Hewlett-Packard database and “steals” plans and specifications for HP’s latest products. The HP server is located in the United States. He sells this information to a Chinese company in Shanghai. Has he violated the US Economic Espionage Act?
2. What are the advantages of keeping a formula as a trade secret rather than getting patent protection?

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[1] Economic Espionage Act, 18 United States Code, Section 1831(a) (1996)

[2] Economic Espionage Act, 18 United States Code, Section 1832 (1996).

[3] Economic Espionage Act, 18 United States Code, Section 1834 (1996).

## 22.3 Copyright

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

3. Describe and explain copyrights, how to obtain one, and how they differ from trademarks.
4. Explain the concept of fair use and describe its limits.

### Definition and Duration

Copyright is the legal protection given to “authors” for their “writings.” Copyright law is federal; like patent law, its source lies in the Constitution. Copyright protects the expression of ideas in some tangible form, but it does not protect the ideas themselves. Under the 1976 Copyright Act as amended, a copyright in any work created after January 1, 1978, begins when the work is fixed in tangible form—for example, when a book is written down or a picture is painted—and generally lasts for the life of the author plus 70 years after his or her death. This is similar to copyright protection in many countries, but in some countries, the length of copyright protection is the life of the author plus 50 years. For copyrights owned by publishing houses, done as works for hire, common copyright expires 95 years from the date of publication or 120 years from the date of creation, whichever is first. For works created before 1978, such as many of Walt Disney’s movies and cartoons, the US Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 provided additional protection of up to 95 years from publication date. Thus works created in 1923 by Disney would not enter the public domain until 2019 or after, unless the copyright had expired prior to 1998 or unless the Disney company released the work into the public domain. In general, after expiration of the copyright, the work enters the public domain.

In 1989, the United States signed the Berne Convention, an international copyright treaty. This law eliminated the need to place the symbol © or the word Copyright or the abbreviation Copr. on the work itself. Copyrights can be registered with the US Copyright Office in Washington, DC.

### Protected Expression

The Copyright Act protects a variety of “writings,” some of which may not seem written at all. These include literary works (books, newspapers, and magazines), music, drama, choreography, films, art, sculpture, and sound recordings. Since copyright covers the expression and not the material or physical object, a book may be copyrighted whether it is on paper, microfilm, tape, or computer disk.

## **Rights Protected by the Copyright Act**

### **Preventing Copying**

A copyright gives its holder the right to prevent others from copying his or her work. The copyright holder has the exclusive right to reproduce the work in any medium (paper, film, sound recording), to perform it (e.g., in the case of a play), or to display it (a painting or film). A copyright also gives its holder the exclusive right to prepare derivative works based on the copyrighted work. Thus a playwright could not adapt to the stage a novelist’s book without the latter’s permission.

### **Fair Use**

One major exception to the exclusivity of copyrights is the fair use doctrine. Section 107 of the Copyright Act provides as follows:

*Fair use of a copyrighted work, including such use by reproduction in copies or phonorecords or by any other means specified by section 106 of the copyright, for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research, is not an infringement of copyright. In determining whether the use made of a work in any particular case is a fair use, the factors to be considered shall include—*

*(1) the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes;*

*(2) the nature of the copyrighted work;*

*(3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole; and*

*(4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work.* <sup>[1]</sup>

These are broad guidelines. Accordingly, any copying could be infringement, and fair use could become a question of fact on a case-by-case basis. In determining fair use, however, courts have often considered the fourth factor (effect of the use upon the potential market for the copyrighted work) to be the most important.

Clear examples of fair use would be when book reviewers or writers quote passages from copyrighted books. Without fair use, most writing would be useless because it could not readily be discussed. But the doctrine of fair use grew more troublesome with the advent of plain-paper copiers and is now even more troublesome with electronic versions of copyrighted materials that are easily copied and distributed. The 1976 act took note of the new copier technology, listing “teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use)” as one application of fair use. The Copyright Office follows guidelines specifying just how far the copying may go—for example, multiple copies of certain works may be made for classroom use, but copies may not be used to substitute for copyrighted anthologies.

### **Infringement**

Verbatim use of a copyrighted work is easily provable. The more difficult question arises when the copyrighted work is altered in some way. As in patent law, the standard is one of substantial similarity.

### **Copyrightability Standards**

To be subject to copyright, the writing must be “fixed” in some “tangible medium of expression.” A novelist who composes a chapter of her next book in her mind and tells it to a friend before putting it on paper could not stop the friend from rushing home, writing it down, and selling it (at least the federal copyright law would offer no protection; some states might independently offer a legal remedy, however).

The work also must be creative, at least to a minimal degree. Words and phrases, such as names, titles, and slogans, are not copyrightable; nor are symbols or designs familiar to the public. But an author who contributes her own creativity—like taking a photograph of nature—may copyright the resulting work, even if the basic elements of the composition were not of her making.

Finally, the work must be “original,” which means simply that it must have originated with the author. The law does not require that it be novel or unique. This requirement was summarized pithily by Judge Learned Hand: “If by some magic a man who had never known it were to compose anew Keats’s Ode on a Grecian Urn, he would be an author, and, if he copyrighted it, others might not copy that poem, though they might of course copy Keats’s.”<sup>[2]</sup> Sometimes the claim is made that a composer, for example, just happened to compose a tune identical or strikingly similar to a copyrighted song; rather than assume the unlikely coincidence that Judge Hand hypothesized, the courts will look for evidence that the alleged copier had access to the copyrighted song. If he did—for example, the song was frequently played on the air—he cannot defend the copying with the claim that it was unconscious, because the work would not then have been original.

Section 102 of the Copyright Act excludes copyright protection for any “idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept, principle, or discovery, regardless of the form in which it is described, explained, illustrated, or embodied.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Einstein copyrighted books and monographs he wrote on the theory of relativity, but he could not copyright the famous formula  $E = mc^2$ , nor could he prevent others from writing about the theory. But he could protect the particular way in which his ideas were expressed. In general, facts widely known by the public are not copyrightable, and mathematical calculations are not copyrightable. Compilations of facts may be copyrightable, if the way that they are coordinated or arranged results in a work that shows some originality. For example, compiled information about yachts listed for sale may qualify for copyright protection.<sup>[4]</sup>

One of the most troublesome recent questions concerning expression versus ideas is whether a computer program may be copyrighted. After some years of uncertainty, the courts have accepted the copyrightability of computer programs.<sup>[5]</sup> Now the courts are wrestling with the

more difficult question of the scope of protection: what constitutes an “idea” and what constitutes its mere “expression” in a program.

How far the copyright law will protect particular software products is a hotly debated topic, sparked by a federal district court’s ruling in 1990 that the “look and feel” of Lotus 1-2-3’s menu system is copyrightable and was in fact infringed by Paperback Software’s VP-Planner, a competing spreadsheet. <sup>[6]</sup> The case has led some analysts to “fear that legal code, rather than software code, is emerging as the factor that will determine which companies and products will dominate the 1990s.” <sup>[7]</sup>

### **Who May Obtain a Copyright?**

With one important exception, only the author may hold the initial copyright, although the author may assign it or license any one or more of the rights conveyed by the copyright. This is a simple principle when the author has written a book or painted a picture. But the law is unclear in the case of a motion picture or a sound recording. Is the author the script writer, the producer, the performer, the director, the engineer, or someone else? As a practical matter, all parties involved spell out their rights by contract.

The exception, which frequently covers the difficulties just enumerated, is for works for hire. Any person employed to write—a journalist or an advertising jingle writer, for example—is not the “author.” For purposes of the statute, the employer is the author and may take out the copyright. When the employee is in fact an “independent contractor” and the work in question involves any one of nine types (book, movies, etc.) spelled out in the Copyright Act, the employer and the creator must spell out their entitlement to the copyright in a written agreement. <sup>[8]</sup>

### **Obtaining a Copyright**

Until 1978, a work could not be copyrighted unless it was registered in the Copyright Office or was published and unless each copy of the work carried a copyright notice, consisting of the word Copyright, the abbreviation Copr., or the common symbol ©, together with the date of first publication and the name of the copyright owner. Under the 1976 act, copyright became automatic whenever the work was fixed in a tangible medium of expression (e.g., words on paper, images on film or videotape, sound on tape or compact disc), even if the work remained unpublished or undistributed. However, to retain copyright protection, the notice had to be

affixed once the work was “published” and copies circulated to the public. After the United States entered the Berne Convention, an international treaty governing copyrights, Congress enacted the Berne Implementation Act, declaring that, effective in 1989, notice, even after publication, was no longer required.

Notice does, however, confer certain benefits. In the absence of notice, a copyright holder loses the right to receive statutory damages (an amount stated in the Copyright Act and not required to be proved) if someone infringes the work. Also, although it is no longer required, an application and two copies of the work (for deposit in the Library of Congress) filed with the Copyright Office, in Washington, DC, will enable the copyright holder to file suit should the copyright be infringed. Unlike patent registration, which requires elaborate searching of Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) records, copyright registration does not require a reading of the work to determine whether it is an original creation or an infringement of someone else’s prior work. But copyright registration does not immunize the holder from an infringement suit. If a second work has been unlawfully copied from an earlier work, the second author’s copyright will not bar the infringed author from collecting damages and obtaining an injunction.

### **Computer Downloads and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act**

The ubiquity of the Internet and the availability of personal computers with large capacities have greatly impacted the music business. Sharing of music files took off in the late 1990s with Napster, which lost a legal battle on copyright and had to cease doing business. By providing the means by which individuals could copy music that had been purchased, major record labels were losing substantial profits. Grokster, a privately owned software company based in the West Indies, provided peer-to-peer file sharing from 2001 to 2005 until the US Supreme Court’s decision in *MGM Studios, Inc. v. Grokster, Ltd.* <sup>[9]</sup>

For computers with the Microsoft operating system, the Court disallowed the peer-to-peer file sharing, even though Grokster claimed it did not violate any copyright laws because no files passed through its computers. (Grokster had assigned certain user computers as “root supernodes” that acted as music hubs for the company and was not directly involved in controlling any specific music-file downloads.)



Grokster had argued, based on *Sony v. Universal Studios*,<sup>[10]</sup> that the sale of its copying equipment (like the Betamax videocassette recorders at issue in that case) did not constitute contributory infringement “if the product is widely used for legitimate, unobjectionable purposes.” Plaintiffs successfully argued that the Sony safe-harbor concept requires proof that the noninfringing use is the primary use in terms of the product’s utility.

The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), passed into law in 1998, implements two 1996 treaties of the World Intellectual Property Organization. It criminalizes production and sale of devices or services intended to get around protective measures that control access to copyrighted works. In addition, the DMCA heightens the penalties for copyright infringement on the Internet. The DMCA amended Title 17 of the United States Code to extend the reach of copyright, while limiting the liability of the providers of online services for copyright infringement by their users.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Copyright is the legal protection given to “authors” for their “writings.” It protects ideas in fixed, tangible form, not ideas themselves. Copyright protection can extend as long as 120 years from the date of creation or publication. Expression found in literary works, music, drama, film, art, sculpture, sound recordings, and the like may be copyrighted. The fair use doctrine limits the exclusivity of copyright in cases where scholars, critics, or teachers use only selected portions of the copyrighted material in a way that is unlikely to affect the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work.

#### EXERCISES

- Explain how a list could be copyrightable.
- An author wrote a novel, *Brunch at Bruno’s*, in 1961. She died in 1989, and her heirs now own the copyright. When do the rights of the heirs come to an end? That is, when does *Brunch at Bruno’s* enter the public domain?
- Keith Bradsher writes a series of articles on China for the *New York Times* and is paid for doing so. Suppose he wants to leave the employ of the *Times* and be a freelance writer. Can he compile his best articles into a book, *Changing Times in China*, and publish it without

the New York Times's permission? Does it matter that he uses the word Times in his proposed title?

- What kind of file sharing of music is now entirely legal? Shaunese Collins buys a Yonder Mountain String Band CD at a concert at Red Rocks in Morrison, Colorado. With her iMac, she makes a series of CDs for her friends. She does this six times. Has she committed six copyright violations?

[1] 17 United States Code, Section 107.

[2] Sheldon v. Metro-Goldwyn Pictures Corp., 81 F.2d 49 (2d Cir. 1936).

[3] 17 United States Code, Section 102.

[4] BUC International Corp. v. International Yacht Council, Ltd., 489 F.3d 1129 (11th Cir. 2007).

[5] Apple Computer, Inc. v. Franklin Computer Corp., 714 F.2d 1240 (3d Cir. 1983).

[6] Lotus Development Corp. v. Paperback Software International, 740 F.Supp. 37 (D. Mass. 1990).

[7] Peter H. Lewis, "When Computing Power Is Generated by the Lawyers," New York Times, July 22 1990.

[8] Community for Creative Non-Violence v. Reid, 109 S.Ct. 2166 (1989).

[9] MGM Studios, Inc. v. Grokster, Ltd., 545 U.S. 913 (2005).

[10] Sony v. Universal Studios, 464 U.S. 417 (1984).

## 22.4 Trademarks

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what a trademark is and why it deserves protection.
2. Know why some "marks" may not be eligible for trademark protection, and how to obtain trademark protection for those that are.
3. Explain what "blurring" and "tarnishment" are and what remedies are available to the holder of the mark.

### Definitions of Trademarks

A trademark is defined in the federal Lanham Act of 1946 as “any word, name, symbol, or device or any combination thereof adopted and used by a manufacturer or merchant to identify his goods and distinguish them from goods manufactured or sold by others.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Examples of well-known trademarks are Coca-Cola, Xerox, and Apple. A service mark is used in the sale or advertising of services to identify the services of one person and distinguish them from the services of others. Examples of service marks are McDonald’s, BP, and Hilton.

A certification mark is used in connection with many products “to certify regional or other origin, material, mode of manufacture, quality, accuracy or other characteristics of such goods or services or that the work or labor on the goods or services was performed by members of a union or other organization.” Examples are the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval and UL (Underwriters Laboratories, Inc., approval mark). Unlike other forms of trademark, the owner of the certification mark (e.g., Good Housekeeping, or the Forest Stewardship Council’s FSC mark) is not the owner of the underlying product.

## **Extent of Trademark Protection**

### **Kinds of Marks**

Trademarks and other kinds of marks may consist of words and phrases, pictures, symbols, shapes, numerals, letters, slogans, and sounds. Trademarks are a part of our everyday world: the sounds of a radio or television network announcing itself (NBC, BBC), the shape of a whiskey bottle (Haig & Haig’s Pinch Bottle), a series of initials (GE, KPMG, IBM), or an animal’s warning growl (MGM’s lion).

### **Limitations on Marks**

Although trademarks abound, the law limits the subjects that may fall into one of the defined categories. Not every word or shape or symbol will be protected in an infringement action. To qualify for protection, a trademark must be used to identify and distinguish. The courts employ a four-part test: (1) Is the mark so arbitrary and fanciful that it merits the widest protection? (2) Is it “suggestive” enough to warrant protection without proof of secondary meaning? (3) Is it “descriptive,” warranting protection if secondary meaning is proved? (4) Is the mark generic and thus unprotectable?

These tests do not have mechanical answers; they call for judgment. Some marks are wholly fanciful, clearly identify origin of goods, and distinguish them from others—Kodak, for example. Other marks may not be so arbitrary but may nevertheless be distinctive, either when adopted or as a result of advertising—for example, Crest, as the name of a toothpaste.

Marks that are merely descriptive of the product are entitled to protection only if it can be shown that the mark has acquired secondary meaning. This term reflects a process of identification on the mark in the public mind with the originator of the product. Holiday Inn was initially deemed too descriptive: an inn where people might go on holiday. But over time, travelers came to identify the source of the Great Sign and the name Holiday Inn as the Holiday Inn Corporation in Memphis, and secondary meaning was granted. Holiday Inn could thus protect its mark against other innkeepers, hoteliers, and such; however, the trademark protection for the words Holiday Inn was limited to the corporation's hotel and motel business, and no other.

Certain words and phrases may not qualify at all for trademark protection. These include generic terms like “straw broom” (for a broom made of straw) and ordinary words like “fast food.” In one case, a federal appeals court held that the word “Lite” is generic and cannot be protected by a beer manufacturer to describe a low-calorie brew.<sup>[2]</sup> Donald Trump's effort to trademark “You're fired!” and Paris Hilton's desire to trademark “That's hot!” were also dismissed as being generic.

Deceptive words will not be accepted for registration. Thus the US Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) denied registration to the word *Vynahyde* because it suggested that the plastic material to which it was applied came from animal skin. Geographic terms are descriptive words and may not be used as protected trademarks unless they have acquired a secondary meaning, such as Hershey when used for chocolates. (Hershey's chocolates are made in Hershey, Pennsylvania.) A design that reflects a common style cannot be protected in a trademark to exclude other similar designs in the same tradition. Thus the courts have ruled that a silverware pattern that is a “functional feature” of the “baroque style” does not qualify for trademark protection. Finally, the Lanham Act denies federal registration to certain marks that fall within categories of words and shapes, including the following: the flag; the name, portrait, or signature of any living person

without consent, or of a deceased US president during the lifetime of his widow; and immoral, deceptive, or scandalous matter (in an earlier era, the phrase “Bubby Trap” for brassieres was denied registration).

### **Dilution, Tarnishment, and Blurring**

Under the federal Trademark Dilution Act of 1995, companies with marks that dilute the value of a senior mark may be liable for damages. The act provides that owners of marks of significant value have property rights that should not be eroded, blurred, tarnished, or diluted in any way by another. But as a plaintiff, the holder of the mark must show (1) that it is a famous mark, (2) that the use of a similar mark is commercial, and (3) that such use causes dilution of the distinctive quality of the mark. Thus a T-shirt maker who promotes a red-and-white shirt bearing the mark Buttweiser may be liable to Anheuser-Busch, or a pornographic site called Candyland could be liable to Parker Brothers, the board game company. Interesting cases have already been brought under this act, including a case brought by Victoria’s Secret against a small adult store in Kentucky called Victor’s Little Secret. Notice that unlike most prior trademark law, the purpose is not to protect the consumer from confusion as to the source or origin of the goods or services being sold; for example, no one going to the Candyland site would think that Parker Brothers was the source.

### **Acquiring Trademark Rights**

For the first time in more than forty years, Congress, in 1988, changed the way in which trademarks can be secured. Under the Lanham Act, the fundamental means of obtaining a trademark was through use. The manufacturer or distributor actually must have placed the mark on its product—or on related displays, labels, shipping containers, advertisements, and the like—and then have begun selling the product. If the product was sold in interstate commerce, the trademark was entitled to protection under the Lanham Act (or if not, to protection under the common law of the state in which the product was sold).

Under the Trademark Law Revision Act of 1988, which went into effect in 1989, trademarks can be obtained in advance by registering with the PTO an intention to use the mark within six months (the applicant can gain extensions of up to thirty more months to put the mark into use). Once obtained, the trademark will be protected for ten years (before the 1988 revision, a

federal trademark remained valid for twenty years); if after that time the mark is still being used, the registration can be renewed. Obtaining a trademark registration lies between obtaining patents and obtaining copyrights in difficulty. The PTO will not routinely register a trademark; it searches its records to ensure that the mark meets several statutory tests and does not infringe another mark. Those who feel that their own marks would be hurt by registration of a proposed mark may file an opposition proceeding with the PTO. Until 1990, the office received about 77,000 applications each year. With the change in procedure, some experts predicted that applications would rise by 30 percent.

In many foreign countries, use need not be shown to obtain trademark registration. It is common for some people in these countries to register marks that they expect to be valuable so that they can sell the right to use the mark to the company that established the mark's value. Companies that expect to market abroad should register their marks early.

### **Loss of Rights**

Trademark owners may lose their rights if they abandon the mark, if a patent or copyright expires on which the mark is based, or if the mark becomes generic. A mark is abandoned if a company goes out of business and ceases selling the product. Some marks are based on design patents; when the patent expires, the patent holder will not be allowed to extend the patent's duration by arguing that the design or name linked with the design is a registrable trademark. The most widespread difficulty that a trademark holder faces is the prospect of too much success: if a trademark comes to stand generically for the product itself, it may lose exclusivity in the mark. Famous examples are aspirin, escalator, and cellophane. The threat is a continual one. Trademark holders can protect themselves from their marks' becoming generic in several ways.

1. Use a descriptive term along with the trademark. Look on a jar of Vaseline and you will see that the label refers to the contents as Vaseline petroleum jelly.
2. Protest generic use of the mark in all publications by writing letters and taking out advertisements.
3. Always put the words Trademark, Registered Trademark, or the symbol ® (meaning "registered") next to the mark itself, which should be capitalized.

### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Trademark protection is federal, under the Lanham Act. Branding of corporate logos, names, and products is essential to business success, and understanding trademarks is pivotal to branding. A “mark” must be distinctive, arbitrary, or fanciful to merit protection: this means that it must not be generic or descriptive. Marks can be words, symbols, pictures, slogans, sounds, phrases, and even shapes. In the United States, rights to marks are obtained by registration and intent to use in commerce and must be renewed every ten years.

## EXERCISES

1. How will Google protect its trademark, assuming that people begin using “google” as a verb substitute for “Internet search,” just like people began using the word “cellophane” for all brands of plastic wrap?
2. Do a small amount of web searching and find out what “trade dress” protection is, and how it differs from trademark protection.
3. LexisNexis is a brand for a database collection offered by Mead Data Central. Lexus is a high-end automobile. Can Lexus succeed in getting Mead Data Central to stop using “Lexis” as a mark?

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[1] 15 United States Code, Section 1127.

[2] *Miller Brewing Co. v. Falstaff Brewing Corp.*, 655 F.2d 5 (1st Cir. 1981).

## 22.5 Cases

### Fair Use in Copyright

*Elvis Presley Enterprises et al. v. Passport Video et al.*

*349 F.3d 622 (9th Circuit Court of Appeals, 2003)*

TALLMAN, CIRCUIT JUDGE:

Plaintiffs are a group of companies and individuals holding copyrights in various materials relating to Elvis Presley. For example, plaintiff SOFA Entertainment, Inc., is the registered owner of several Elvis appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Plaintiff Promenade Trust owns the copyright to two television specials featuring Elvis: *The Elvis 1968 Comeback*

*Special* and *Elvis Aloha from Hawaii*....Many Plaintiffs are in the business of licensing their copyrights. For example, SOFA Entertainment charges \$10,000 per minute for use of Elvis' appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Passport Entertainment and its related entities (collectively "Passport") produced and sold *The Definitive Elvis*, a 16-hour video documentary about the life of Elvis Presley. *The Definitive Elvis* sold for \$99 at retail. Plaintiffs allege that thousands of copies were sent to retail outlets and other distributors. On its box, *The Definitive Elvis* describes itself as an all-encompassing, in-depth look at the life and career of a man whose popularity is unrivaled in the history of show business and who continues to attract millions of new fans each year....

*The Definitive Elvis* uses Plaintiffs' copyrighted materials in a variety of ways. With the video footage, the documentary often uses shots of Elvis appearing on television while a narrator or interviewee talks over the film. These clips range from only a few seconds in length to portions running as long as 30 seconds. In some instances, the clips are the subject of audio commentary, while in other instances they would more properly be characterized as video "filler" because the commentator is discussing a subject different from or more general than Elvis' performance on a particular television show. But also significant is the frequency with which the copyrighted video footage is used. *The Definitive Elvis* employs these clips, in many instances, repeatedly. In total, at least 5% to 10% of *The Definitive Elvis* uses Plaintiffs' copyrighted materials.

Use of the video footage, however, is not limited to brief clips....Thirty-five percent of his appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* is replayed, as well as three minutes from *The 1968 Comeback Special*.

\* \* \*

Plaintiffs sued Passport for copyright infringement....Passport, however, asserts that its use of the copyrighted materials was "fair use" under 17 U.S.C. § 107. Plaintiffs moved for a preliminary injunction, which was granted by the district court after a hearing. The district court found that Passport's use of Plaintiffs' copyrighted materials was likely not fair use. The court enjoined Passport from selling or distributing *The Definitive Elvis*. Passport timely appeals.

\* \* \*



We first address the purpose and character of Passport’s use of Plaintiffs’ copyrighted materials. Although not controlling, the fact that a new use is commercial as opposed to non-profit weighs against a finding of fair use. *Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. v. Nation Enters.*, 471 U.S. 539, 562, 85 L. Ed. 2d 588, 105 S.Ct. 2218 (1985). And the degree to which the new user exploits the copyright for commercial gain—as opposed to incidental use as part of a commercial enterprise—affects the weight we afford commercial nature as a factor. More importantly for the first fair-use factor, however, is the “transformative” nature of the new work. Specifically, we ask “whether the new work...merely supersedes the objects of the original creation, or instead adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression, meaning, or message...” The more transformative a new work, the less significant other inquiries, such as commercialism, become.

\* \* \*

The district court below found that the purpose and character of *The Definitive Elvis* will likely weigh against a finding of fair use. We cannot say, based on this record, that the district court abused its discretion.

First, Passport’s use, while a biography, is clearly commercial in nature. But more significantly, Passport seeks to profit directly from the copyrights it uses without a license. One of the most salient selling points on the box of *The Definitive Elvis* is that “Every Film and Television Appearance is represented.” Passport is not advertising a scholarly critique or historical analysis, but instead seeks to profit at least in part from the inherent entertainment value of Elvis’ appearances on such shows as *The Steve Allen Show*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and *The 1968 Comeback Special*. Passport’s claim that this is scholarly research containing biographical comments on the life of Elvis is not dispositive of the fair use inquiry.

Second, Passport’s use of Plaintiffs’ copyrights is not consistently transformative. True, Passport’s use of many of the television clips is transformative because the clips play for only a few seconds and are used for reference purposes while a narrator talks over them or interviewees explain their context in Elvis’ career. But voice-overs do not necessarily transform a work....

It would be impossible to produce a biography of Elvis without showing some of his most famous television appearances for reference purposes. But some of the clips are played without much interruption, if any. The purpose of showing these clips likely goes beyond merely making a reference for a biography, but instead serves the same intrinsic entertainment value that is protected by Plaintiffs' copyrights.

\* \* \*

The third factor is the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole. This factor evaluates both the quantity of the work taken and the quality and importance of the portion taken. Regarding the quantity, copying "may not be excused merely because it is insubstantial with respect to the *infringing work*." *Harper & Row*, 471 U.S. at 565 (emphasis in original). But if the amount used is substantial with respect to the infringing work, it is evidence of the value of the copy-righted work.

Passport's use of clips from television appearances, although in most cases of short duration, were repeated numerous times throughout the tapes. While using a small number of clips to reference an event for biographical purposes seems fair, using a clip over and over will likely no longer serve a biographical purpose. Additionally, some of the clips were not short in length. Passport's use of Elvis' appearance on *The Steve Allen Show* plays for over a minute and many more clips play for more than just a few seconds.

Additionally, although the clips are relatively short when compared to the entire shows that are copyrighted, they are in many instances the heart of the work. What makes these copyrighted works valuable is Elvis' appearance on the shows, in many cases singing the most familiar passages of his most popular songs. Plaintiffs are in the business of licensing these copyrights. Taking key portions extracts the most valuable part of Plaintiffs' copyrighted works. With respect to the photographs, the entire picture is often used. The music, admittedly, is usually played only for a few seconds.

\* \* \*

The last, and "undoubtedly the single most important" of all the factors, is the effect the use will have on the potential market for and value of the copyrighted works. *Harper & Row*, 471 U.S. at 566. We must "consider not only the extent of market harm caused by the particular actions of

the alleged infringer, but also whether unrestricted and widespread conduct of the sort engaged in by the defendant...would result in a substantially adverse impact on the potential market for the original.” *Campbell*, 510 U.S. at 590. The more transformative the new work, the less likely the new work’s use of copyrighted materials will affect the market for the materials. Finally, if the purpose of the new work is commercial in nature, “the likelihood [of market harm] may be presumed.” *A&M Records*, 239 F.3d at 1016 (quoting *Sony*, 464 U.S. at 451).

The district court found that Passport’s use of Plaintiffs’ copyrighted materials likely does affect the market for those materials. This conclusion was not clearly erroneous.

First, Passport’s use is commercial in nature, and thus we can assume market harm. Second, Passport has expressly advertised that *The Definitive Elvis* contains the television appearances for which Plaintiffs normally charge a licensing fee. If this type of use became wide-spread, it would likely undermine the market for selling Plaintiffs’ copyrighted material. This conclusion, however, does not apply to the music and still photographs. It seems unlikely that someone in the market for these materials would purchase *The Definitive Elvis* instead of a properly licensed product. Third, Passport’s use of the television appearances was, in some instances, not transformative, and therefore these uses are likely to affect the market because they serve the same purpose as Plaintiffs’ original works.

\* \* \*

We emphasize that our holding today is not intended to express how we would rule were we examining the case *ab initio* as district judges. Instead, we confine our review to whether the district court abused its discretion when it weighed the four statutory fair-use factors together and determined that Plaintiffs would likely succeed on the merits. Although we might view this case as closer than the district court saw it, we hold there was no abuse of discretion in the court’s decision to grant Plaintiffs’ requested relief.

**AFFIRMED.**

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. How would you weigh the four factors in this case? If the trial court had found fair use, would the appeals court have overturned its ruling?
2. Why do you think that the fourth factor is especially important?

3. What is the significance of the discussion on “transformative” aspects of the defendant’s product?

## Trademark Infringement and Dilution

*Playboy Enterprises v. Welles*

*279 F.3d 796 (9th Circuit Court of Appeals, 2001)*

T. G. NELSON, Circuit Judge:

Terri Welles was on the cover of Playboy in 1981 and was chosen to be the Playboy Playmate of the Year for 1981. Her use of the title “Playboy Playmate of the Year 1981,” and her use of other trademarked terms on her website are at issue in this suit. During the relevant time period, Welles’ website offered information about and free photos of Welles, advertised photos for sale, advertised memberships in her photo club, and promoted her services as a spokesperson. A biographical section described Welles’ selection as Playmate of the Year in 1981 and her years modeling for PEI. The site included a disclaimer that read as follows: “This site is neither endorsed, nor sponsored, nor affiliated with Playboy Enterprises, Inc. PLAYBOY tm PLAYMATE OF THE YEAR tm AND PLAYMATE OF THE MONTH tm are registered trademarks of Playboy Enterprises, Inc.”

Wells used (1) the terms “Playboy ” and “Playmate” in the metatags of the website; (2) the phrase “Playmate of the Year 1981” on the masthead of the website; (3) the phrases “Playboy Playmate of the Year 1981” and “Playmate of the Year 1981” on various banner ads, which may be transferred to other websites; and (4) the repeated use of the abbreviation “PMOY ’81” as the watermark on the pages of the website. PEI claimed that these uses of its marks constituted trademark infringement, dilution, false designation of origin, and unfair competition. The district court granted defendants’ motion for summary judgment. PEI appeals the grant of summary judgment on its infringement and dilution claims. We affirm in part and reverse in part.

### A. Trademark Infringement

Except for the use of PEI’s protected terms in the wallpaper of Welles’ website, we conclude that Welles’ uses of PEI’s trademarks are permissible, nominative uses. They imply no current

sponsorship or endorsement by PEI. Instead, they serve to identify Welles as a past PEI “Playmate of the Year.”

We articulated the test for a permissible, nominative use in *New Kids On The Block v. New America Publishing, Inc.* The band, New Kids On The Block, claimed trademark infringement arising from the use of their trademarked name by several newspapers. The newspapers had conducted polls asking which member of the band New Kids On The Block was the best and most popular. The papers’ use of the trademarked term did not fall within the traditional fair use doctrine. Unlike a traditional fair use scenario, the defendant newspaper was using the trademarked term to describe not its own product, but the plaintiff’s. Thus, the factors used to evaluate fair use were inapplicable. The use was nonetheless permissible, we concluded, based on its nominative nature.

We adopted the following test for nominative use:

*First, the product or service in question must be one not readily identifiable without use of the trademark; second, only so much of the mark or marks may be used as is reasonably necessary to identify the product or service; and third, the user must do nothing that would, in conjunction with the mark, suggest sponsorship or endorsement by the trademark holder.*

We group the uses of PEI’s trademarked terms into three for the purpose of applying the test for nominative use.

#### 1. Headlines and banner advertisements.

...

The district court properly identified Welles’ situation as one which must... be excepted. No descriptive substitute exists for PEI’s trademarks in this context....Just as the newspapers in *New Kids* could only identify the band clearly by using its trademarked name, so can Welles only identify herself clearly by using PEI’s trademarked title.

The second part of the nominative use test requires that “only so much of the mark or marks may be used as is reasonably necessary to identify the product or service[.]” *New Kids* provided the following examples to explain this element: “[A] soft drink competitor would be entitled to compare its product to Coca-Cola or Coke, but would not be entitled to use Coca-Cola’s

distinctive lettering.” Similarly, in a past case, an auto shop was allowed to use the trademarked term “Volkswagen” on a sign describing the cars it repaired, in part because the shop “did not use Volkswagen’s distinctive lettering style or color scheme, nor did he display the encircled ‘VW’ emblem.” Welles’ banner advertisements and headlines satisfy this element because they use only the trademarked words, not the font or symbols associated with the trademarks.

The third element requires that the user do “nothing that would, in conjunction with the mark, suggest sponsorship or endorsement by the trademark holder.” As to this element, we conclude that aside from the wallpaper, which we address separately, Welles does nothing in conjunction with her use of the marks to suggest sponsorship or endorsement by PEI. The marks are clearly used to describe the title she received from PEI in 1981, a title that helps describe who she is. It would be unreasonable to assume that the Chicago Bulls sponsored a website of Michael Jordan’s simply because his name appeared with the appellation “former Chicago Bull.” Similarly, in this case, it would be unreasonable to assume that PEI currently sponsors or endorses someone who describes herself as a “Playboy Playmate of the Year in 1981.” The designation of the year, in our case, serves the same function as the “former” in our example. It shows that any sponsorship or endorsement occurred in the past.

For the foregoing reasons, we conclude that Welles’ use of PEI’s marks in her headlines and banner advertisements is a nominative use excepted from the law of trademark infringement.

## 2. Metatags

Welles includes the terms “playboy” and “playmate” in her metatags. Metatags describe the contents of a website using keywords. Some search engines search metatags to identify websites relevant to a search. Thus, when an internet searcher enters “playboy” or “playmate” into a search engine that uses metatags, the results will include Welles’ site. Because Welles’ metatags do not repeat the terms extensively, her site will not be at the top of the list of search results.

Applying the three-factor test for nominative use, we conclude that the use of the trademarked terms in Welles’ metatags is nominative.

As we discussed above with regard to the headlines and banner advertisements, Welles has no practical way of describing herself without using trademarked terms. In the context of metatags,

we conclude that she has no practical way of identifying the content of her website without referring to PEI's trademarks.

...

Precluding their use would have the unwanted effect of hindering the free flow of information on the internet, something which is certainly not a goal of trademark law. Accordingly, the use of trademarked terms in the metatags meets the first part of the test for nominative use....We conclude that the metatags satisfy the second and third elements of the test as well. The metatags use only so much of the marks as reasonably necessary and nothing is done in conjunction with them to suggest sponsorship or endorsement by the trademark holder. We note that our decision might differ if the metatags listed the trademarked term so repeatedly that Welles' site would regularly appear above PEI's in searches for one of the trademarked terms.

### 3. Wallpaper/watermark.

The background, or wallpaper, of Welles' site consists of the repeated abbreviation "PMOY '81," which stands for "Playmate of the Year 1981." Welles' name or likeness does not appear before or after "PMOY '81." The pattern created by the repeated abbreviation appears as the background of the various pages of the website. Accepting, for the purposes of this appeal, that the abbreviation "PMOY" is indeed entitled to protection, we conclude that the repeated, stylized use of this abbreviation fails the nominative use test.

The repeated depiction of "PMOY '81" is not necessary to describe Welles. "Playboy Playmate of the Year 1981" is quite adequate. Moreover, the term does not even appear to describe Welles—her name or likeness do not appear before or after each "PMOY '81." Because the use of the abbreviation fails the first prong of the nominative use test, we need not apply the next two prongs of the test.

Because the defense of nominative use fails here, and we have already determined that the doctrine of fair use does not apply, we remand to the district court. The court must determine whether trademark law protects the abbreviation "PMOY," as used in the wallpaper.

B. Trademark Dilution [At this point, the court considers and rejects PEI's claim for trademark dilution.]

## Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, we affirm the district court’s grant of summary judgment as to PEI’s claims for trademark infringement and trademark dilution, with the sole exception of the use of the abbreviation “PMOY.” We reverse as to the abbreviation and remand for consideration of whether it merits protection under either an infringement or a dilution theory.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the court’s decision that there is no dilution here?
2. If PMOY is not a registered trademark, why does the court discuss it?
3. What does “nominative use” mean in the context of this case?
4. In business terms, why would PEI even think that it was losing money, or could lose money, based on Welles’s use of its identifying marks?

## 22.6 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

The products of the human mind are at the root of all business, but they are legally protectable only to a certain degree. Inventions that are truly novel may qualify for a twenty-year patent; the inventor may then prohibit anyone from using the art (machine, process, manufacture, and the like) or license it on his own terms. A business may sue a person who improperly gives away its legitimate trade secrets, but it may not prevent others from using the unpatented trade secret once publicly disclosed. Writers or painters, sculptors, composers, and other creative artists may generally protect the expression of their ideas for the duration of their lives plus seventy years, as long as the ideas are fixed in some tangible medium. That means that they may prevent others from copying their words (or painting, etc.), but they may not prevent anyone from talking about or using their ideas. Finally, one who markets a product or service may protect its trademark or service or other mark that is distinctive or has taken on a secondary meaning, but may lose it if the mark becomes the generic term for the goods or services.

### EXERCISES

1. Samuel Morse filed claims in the US Patent Office for his invention of the telegraph and also for the “use of the motive power of the electric or galvanic current...however developed, for



- marking or printing intelligible characters, signs or letters at any distances.” For which claim, if any, was he entitled to a patent? Why?
2. In 1957, an inventor dreamed up and constructed a certain new kind of computer. He kept his invention a secret. Two years later, another inventor who conceived the same machine filed a patent application. The first inventor, learning of the patent application, filed for his own patent in 1963. Who is entitled to the patent, assuming that the invention was truly novel and not obvious? Why?
  3. A large company discovered that a small company was infringing one of its patents. It wrote the small company and asked it to stop. The small company denied that it was infringing. Because of personnel changes in the large company, the correspondence file was lost and only rediscovered eight years later. The large company sued. What would be the result? Why?
  4. Clifford Witter was a dance instructor at the Arthur Murray Dance Studios in Cleveland. As a condition of employment, he signed a contract not to work for a competitor. Subsequently, he was hired by the Fred Astaire Dancing Studios, where he taught the method that he had learned at Arthur Murray. Arthur Murray sued to enforce the noncompete contract. What would be result? What additional information, if any, would you need to know to decide the case?
  5. Greenberg worked for Buckingham Wax as its chief chemist, developing chemical formulas for products by testing other companies’ formulas and modifying them. Brite Products bought Buckingham’s goods and resold them under its own name. Greenberg went to work for Brite, where he helped Brite make chemicals substantially similar to the ones it had been buying from Buckingham. Greenberg had never made any written or oral commitment to Buckingham restricting his use of the chemical formulas he developed. May Buckingham stop Greenberg from working for Brite? May it stop him from working on formulas learned while working at Buckingham? Why?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following cannot be protected under patent, copyright, or trademark law?

- a. a synthesized molecule
- b. a one-line book title
- c. a one-line advertising jingle
- d. a one-word company name

Which of the following does not expire by law?

- a. a closely guarded trade secret not released to the public
- b. a patent granted by the US Patent and Trademark Office
- c. a copyright registered in the US Copyright Office
- d. a federal trademark registered under the Lanham Act

A sculptor casts a marble statue of a three-winged bird. To protect against copying, the sculptor can obtain which of the following?

- a. a patent
- b. a trademark
- c. a copyright
- d. none of the above

A stock analyst discovers a new system for increasing the value of a stock portfolio. He may protect against use of his system by other people by securing

- a. a patent
- b. a copyright
- c. a trademark
- d. none of the above

A company prints up its customer list for use by its sales staff. The cover page carries a notice that says “confidential.” A rival salesman gets a copy of the list. The company can sue to recover the list because the list is

- a. patented
- b. copyrighted
- c. a trade secret
- d. none of the above

## SELF-TEST ANSWERS

1. b
2. a
3. c
4. d
5. c

## Chapter 23

### Antitrust Law

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. The history and basic framework of antitrust laws on horizontal restraints of trade
2. The distinction between vertical restraints of trade and horizontal restraints of trade
3. The various exemptions from antitrust law that Congress has created
4. Why monopolies pose a threat to competitive markets, and what kinds of monopolies are proscribed by the Sherman Act and the Clayton Act

This chapter will describe the history and current status of federal laws to safeguard the US market from anticompetitive practices, especially those of very large companies that may have a monopoly. Companies that have a monopoly in any market segment have the potential to exercise monopoly power in ways that are harmful to consumers and competitors. Economic theory assures us that for the most part, competition is good: that sound markets will offer buyers lots of choices and good information about products and services being sold and will present few barriers to entry for buyers and sellers. By encouraging more, rather than fewer, competitors in a given segment of the market, US antitrust law attempts to preserve consumer choice and to limit barriers to entry, yet it does allow some businesses to achieve considerable size and market share on the belief that size can create efficiencies and pass along the benefits to consumers.

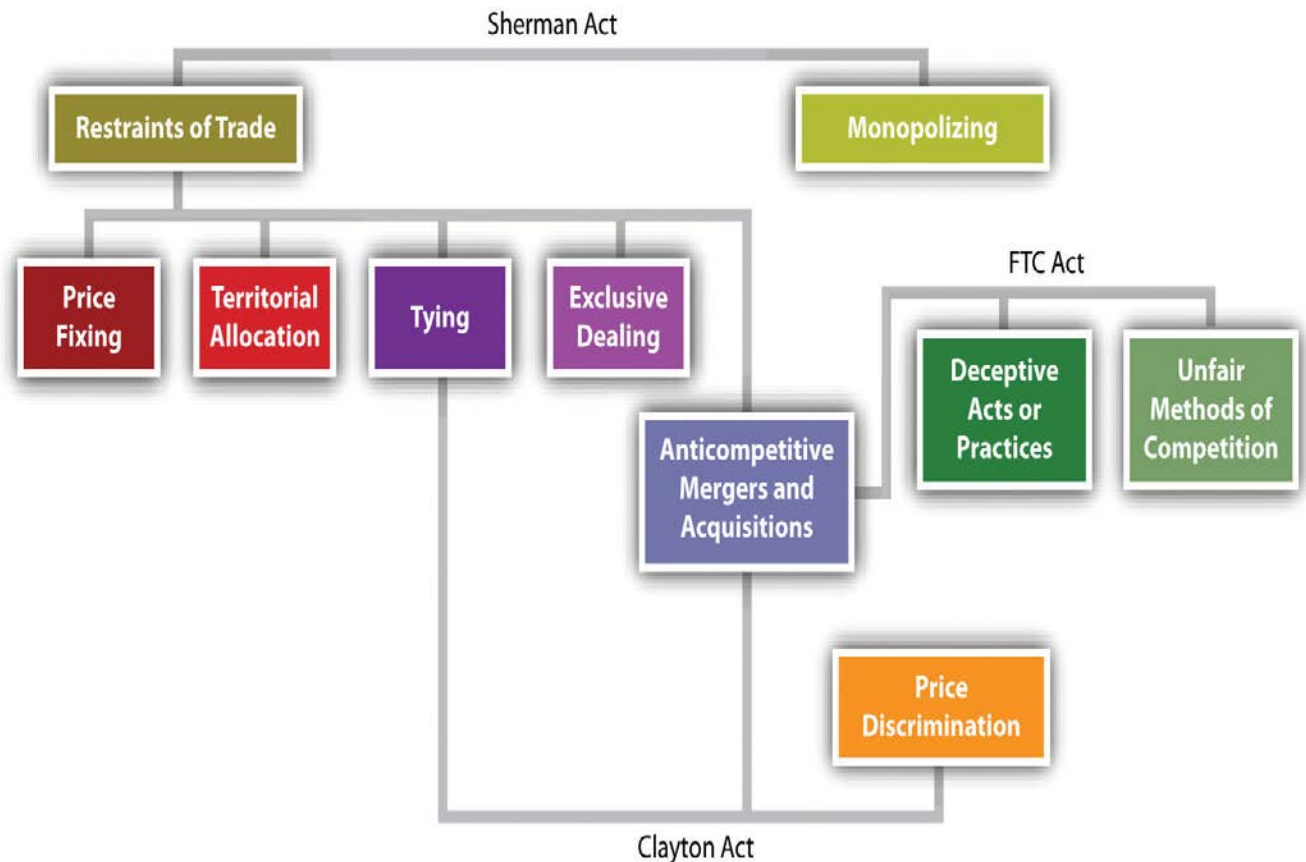
## 23.1 History and Basic Framework of Antitrust Laws in the United States

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know the history and basic framework of antitrust laws in the United States.
2. Understand how US antitrust laws may have international application.
3. Explain how US antitrust laws are enforced and what kinds of criminal and civil penalties may apply.

In this chapter, we take up the origins of the federal antitrust laws and the basic rules governing restraints of trade. <sup>[1]</sup> We also look at concentrations of market power: monopoly and acquisitions and mergers. <sup>[2]</sup> In /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch49, we explore the law of deceptive acts and unfair trade practices, both as administered by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and as regulated at common law.

*Figure 23.1 An Antitrust Schematic*



The antitrust laws are aimed at maintaining competition as the driving force of the US economy. The very word *antitrust* implies opposition to the giant trusts that began to develop after the Civil War. Until then, the economy was largely local; manufacturers, distributors, and retailers were generally small. The Civil War demonstrated the utility of large-scale enterprise in meeting the military's ferocious production demands, and business owners were quick to understand the advantage of size in attracting capital. For the first time, immense fortunes could be made in industry, and adventurous entrepreneurs were quick to do so in an age that lauded the acquisitive spirit.

The first great business combinations were the railroads. To avoid ruinous price wars, railroad owners made private agreements, known as "pools," through which they divided markets and offered discounts to favored shippers who agreed to ship goods on certain lines. The pools discriminated against particular shippers and certain geographic regions, and public resentment grew.

Farmers felt the effects first and hardest, and they organized politically to express their opposition. In time, they persuaded many state legislatures to pass laws regulating railroads. In *Munn v. Illinois*, the Supreme Court rejected a constitutional attack on a state law regulating the transportation and warehousing of grain; the court declared that the “police powers” of the states permit the regulation of property put to public uses.<sup>[3]</sup> But over time, many state railroad laws were struck down because they interfered with interstate commerce, which only Congress may regulate constitutionally. The consequence was federal legislation: the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, establishing the first federal administrative agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission.

In the meantime, the railroads had discovered that their pools lacked enforcement power. Those who nominally agreed to be bound by the pooling arrangement could and often did cheat. The corporate form of business enterprise allowed for potentially immense accumulations of capital to be under the control of a small number of managers; but in the 1870s and 1880s, the corporation was not yet established as the dominant legal form of operation. To overcome these disadvantages, clever lawyers for John D. Rockefeller organized his Standard Oil of Ohio as a common-law *trust*. Trustees were given corporate stock certificates of various companies; by combining numerous corporations into the trust, the trustees could effectively manage and control an entire industry. Within a decade, the Cotton Trust, Lead Trust, Sugar Trust, and Whiskey Trust, along with oil, telephone, steel, and tobacco trusts, had become, or were in the process of becoming, monopolies.

Consumers howled in protest. The political parties got the message: In 1888, both Republicans and Democrats put an antitrust plank in their platforms. In 1889, the new president, Republican Benjamin Harrison, condemned monopolies as “dangerous conspiracies” and called for legislation to remedy the tendency of monopolies that would “crush out” competition.

The result was the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, sponsored by Senator John Sherman of Ohio. Its two key sections forbade combinations in restraint of trade and monopolizing. Senator Sherman and other sponsors declared that the act had roots in a common-law policy that frowned on monopolies. To an extent, it did, but it added something quite important for the future of business and the US economy: the power of the federal government to enforce a

national policy against monopoly and restraints of trade. Nevertheless, passage of the Sherman Act did not end the public clamor, because fifteen years passed before a national administration began to enforce the act, when President Theodore Roosevelt—"the Trustbuster"—sent his attorney general after the Northern Securities Corporation, a transportation holding company. During its seven years, the Roosevelt administration initiated fifty-four antitrust suits. The pace picked up under the Taft administration, which in only four years filed ninety antitrust suits. But the pressure for further reform did not abate, especially when the Supreme Court, in the *Standard Oil* case of 1911, <sup>[4]</sup> declared that the Sherman Act forbids only "unreasonable" restraints of trade. A congressional investigation of US Steel Corporation brought to light several practices that had gone unrestrained by the Sherman Act. It also sparked an important debate, one that has echoes in our own time, about the nature of national economic policy: should it enforce competition or regulate business in a partnership kind of arrangement?

Big business was firmly on the side of regulation, but Congress opted for the policy followed waveringly to the present: competition enforced by government, not a partnership of government and industry, must be the engine of the economy. Accordingly, in 1914, at the urging of President Woodrow Wilson, Congress enacted two more antitrust laws, the Clayton Act and the Federal Trade Commission Act. The Clayton Act outlawed price discrimination, exclusive dealing and tying contracts, acquisition of a company's competitors, and interlocking directorates. The FTC Act outlawed "unfair methods" of competition, established the FTC as an independent administrative agency, and gave it power to enforce the antitrust laws alongside the Department of Justice.

The Sherman, Clayton, and FTC Acts remain the basic texts of antitrust law. Over the years, many states have enacted antitrust laws as well; these laws govern intrastate competition and are largely modeled on the federal laws. The various state antitrust laws are beyond the scope of this textbook.

Two additional federal statutes were adopted during the next third of a century as amendments to the Clayton Act. Enacted in the midst of the Depression in 1936, the Robinson-Patman Act prohibits various forms of price discrimination. The Celler-Kefauver Act, strengthening the Clayton Act's prohibition against the acquisition of competing companies, was enacted in 1950

in the hopes of stemming what seemed to be a tide of corporate mergers and acquisitions. We will examine these laws in turn.

## The Sherman Act

Section 1 of the Sherman Act declares, “Every contract, combination in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy, in restraint of trade or commerce among the several states, or with foreign nations, is declared to be illegal.” This is sweeping language. What it embraces seems to depend entirely on the meaning of the words “restraint of trade or commerce.” Whatever they might mean, *every* such restraint is declared unlawful. But in fact, as we will see, the proposition cannot be stated quite so categorically, for in 1911 the Supreme Court limited the reach of this section to *unreasonable* restraints of trade.

What does “restraint of trade” mean? The Sherman Act’s drafters based the act on a common-law policy against monopolies and other infringements on competition. But common law regarding restraints of trade had been developed in only rudimentary form, and the words have come to mean whatever the courts say they mean. In short, the antitrust laws, and the Sherman Act in particular, authorize the courts to create a federal “common law” of competition.

Section 2 of the Sherman Act prohibits monopolization: “Every person who shall monopolize, or attempt to monopolize, or combine or conspire with any other person or persons, to monopolize any part of the trade or commerce among the several states, or with foreign nations, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor.” In 1976, Congress upped the ante: violations of the Sherman Act are now felonies. Unlike Section 1, Section 2 does not require a combination between two or more people. A single company acting on its own can be guilty of monopolizing or attempting to monopolize.

## The Clayton Act

The Clayton Act was enacted in 1914 to plug what many in Congress saw as loopholes in the Sherman Act. Passage of the Clayton Act was closely linked to that of the FTC Act. Unlike the Sherman Act, the Clayton Act is not a criminal statute; it merely declares certain defined practices as unlawful and leaves it to the government or to private litigants to seek to enjoin those practices. But unlike the FTC Act, the Clayton Act does spell out four undesirable practices. Violations of the Sherman Act require an *actual* adverse impact on competition,



whereas violations of the Clayton Act require merely a *probable* adverse impact. Thus the enforcement of the Clayton Act involves a prediction that the defendant must rebut in order to avoid an adverse judgment.

The four types of proscribed behavior are these:

1. Discrimination in prices charged different purchasers of the same commodities.
2. Conditioning the sale of one commodity on the purchaser's refraining from using or dealing in commodities of the seller's competitors. <sup>[5]</sup>
3. Acquiring the stock of a competing corporation. <sup>[6]</sup> Because the original language did not prohibit various types of acquisitions and mergers that had grown up with modern corporate law and finance, Congress amended this section in 1950 (the Celler-Kefauver Act) to extend its prohibition to a wide variety of acquisitions and mergers.
4. Membership by a single person on more than one corporate board of directors if the companies are or were competitors. <sup>[7]</sup>

## The Federal Trade Commission Act

Like the Clayton Act, the FTC Act is a civil statute, involving no criminal penalties. Unlike the Clayton Act, its prohibitions are broadly worded. Its centerpiece is Section 5, which forbids "unfair methods of competition in commerce, and unfair or deceptive acts or practices in commerce." We examine Section 5 in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch49.

## Enforcement of Antitrust Laws

### General Enforcement

There are four different means of enforcing the antitrust laws.

First, the US Department of Justice may bring civil actions to enjoin violations of any section of the Sherman and Clayton Acts and may institute criminal prosecutions for violations of the Sherman Act. Both civil and criminal actions are filed by the offices of the US attorney in the appropriate federal district, under the direction of the US attorney general. In practice, the Justice Department's guidance comes through its Antitrust Division in Washington, headed by an assistant attorney general. With several hundred lawyers and dozens of economists and other professionals, the Antitrust Division annually files fewer than one hundred civil and criminal actions combined. On average, far more criminal cases are filed than civil cases. In 2006, thirty-

four criminal cases and twelve civil cases were filed; in 2007, forty criminal cases and six civil cases; in 2008, fifty-four criminal cases and nineteen civil cases; and in 2009, seventy-two criminal cases and nine civil cases.

The number of cases can be less important than the complexity and size of a particular case. For example, *U.S. v. American Telephone & Telegraph* and *U.S. v. IBM* were both immensely complicated, took years to dispose of, and consumed tens of thousands of hours of staff time and tens of millions of dollars in government and defense costs.

Second, the FTC hears cases under the Administrative Procedure Act, as described in /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch05. The commission's decisions may be appealed to the US courts of appeals. The FTC may also promulgate "trade regulation rules," which define fair practices in specific industries. The agency has some five hundred lawyers in Washington and a dozen field offices, but only about half the lawyers are directly involved in antitrust enforcement. The government's case against Microsoft was, like the cases against AT&T and IBM, a very complex case that took a large share of time and resources from both the government and Microsoft.

Third, in the Antitrust Improvements Act of 1976, Congress authorized state attorneys general to file antitrust suits in federal court for damages on behalf of their citizens; such a suit is known as a *parens patriae* claim. Any citizen of the state who might have been injured by the defendant's actions may opt out of the suit and bring his or her own private action. The states have long had the authority to file antitrust suits seeking injunctive relief on behalf of their citizens.

Fourth, private individuals and companies may file suits for damages or injunctions if they have been directly injured by a violation of the Sherman or Clayton Act. Private individuals or companies may not sue under the FTC Act, no matter how unfair or deceptive the behavior complained of; only the FTC may do so. In the 1980s, more than 1,500 private antitrust suits were filed in the federal courts each year, compared with fewer than 100 suits filed by the Department of Justice. More recently, from 2006 to 2008, private antitrust suits numbered above 1,000 but dropped significantly, to 770, in 2009. The pace was even slower for the first half of 2010. Meanwhile, the Department of Justice filed 40 or fewer criminal antitrust cases

from 2006 to 2008; that pace has quickened under the Obama administration (72 cases in 2009).

### **Enforcement in International Trade**

The Sherman and Clayton Acts apply when a company's activities affect US commerce. This means that these laws apply to US companies that agree to fix the price of goods to be shipped abroad and to the acts of a US subsidiary of a foreign company. It also means that non-US citizens and business entities can be prosecuted for violations of antitrust laws, even if they never set foot in the United States, as long as their anticompetitive activities are aimed at the US market. For example, in November of 2010, a federal grand jury in San Francisco returned an indictment against three former executives in Taiwan. They had conspired to fix prices on color display tubes (CDTs), a type of cathode-ray tube used in computer monitors and other specialized applications.

The indictment charged Seung-Kyu "Simon" Lee, Yeong-Ug "Albert" Yang, and Jae-Sik "J. S." Kim with conspiring with unnamed coconspirators to suppress and eliminate competition by fixing prices, reducing output, and allocating market shares of CDTs to be sold in the United States and elsewhere. Lee, Yang, and Kim allegedly participated in the conspiracy during various time periods between at least as early as January 2000 and as late as March 2006. The conspirators met in Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, China, and elsewhere, but not in the United States. They allegedly met for the purpose of exchanging CDT sales, production, market share, and pricing information for the purpose of implementing, monitoring, and enforcing their agreements. Because the intended effects of their actions were to be felt in the United States, the US antitrust laws could apply.

### **Criminal Sanctions**

Until 1976, violations of the Sherman Act were misdemeanors. The maximum fine was \$50,000 for each count on which the defendant was convicted (only \$5,000 until 1955), and the maximum jail sentence was one year. But in the CDT case just described, each of the three conspirators was charged with violating the Sherman Act, which carries a maximum penalty of ten years in prison and a \$1 million fine for individuals. The maximum fine may be increased to

twice the gain derived from the crime or twice the loss suffered by the victims if either of those amounts is greater than the statutory maximum fine of \$1 million.

### **Forfeitures**

One provision in the Sherman Act, not much used, permits the government to seize any property in transit in either interstate or foreign commerce if it was the subject of a contract, combination, or conspiracy outlawed under Section 1.

### **Injunctions and Consent Decrees**

The Justice Department may enforce violations of the Sherman and Clayton Acts by seeking injunctions in federal district court. The injunction can be a complex set of instructions, listing in some detail the practices that a defendant is to avoid and even the way in which it will be required to conduct its business thereafter. Once an injunction is issued and affirmed on appeal, or the time for appeal has passed, it confers continuing jurisdiction on the court to hear complaints by those who say the defendant is violating it. In a few instances, the injunction or a consent decree is in effect the basic “statute” by which an industry operates. A 1956 decree against American Telephone & Telegraph Company (AT&T) kept the company out of the computer business for a quarter-century, until the government’s monopoly suit against AT&T was settled and a new decree issued in 1983. The federal courts also have the power to break up a company convicted of monopolizing or to order divestiture when the violation consists of unlawful mergers and acquisitions.

The FTC may issue cease and desist orders against practices condemned under Section 5 of the FTC Act—which includes violations of the Sherman and Clayton Acts—and these orders may be appealed to the courts.

Rather than litigate a case fully, defendants may agree to consent decrees, in which, without admitting guilt, they agree not to carry on the activity complained of. Violations of injunctions, cease and desist orders, and consent decrees subject companies to a fine of \$10,000 a day for every day the violation continues. Companies frequently enter into consent decrees—and not just because they wish to avoid the expense and trouble of trial. Section 5 of the Clayton Act says that whenever an antitrust case brought by the federal government under either the Clayton Act or the Sherman Act goes to final judgment, the judgment can be used, in a private suit in which

the same facts are at issue, as prima facie evidence that the violation was committed. This is a powerful provision, because it means that a private plaintiff need prove only that the violation in fact injured him. He need not prove that the defendant committed the acts that amount to antitrust violations. Since this provision makes it relatively easy for private plaintiffs to prevail in subsequent suits, defendants in government suits have a strong inducement to enter into consent decrees, because these are not considered judgments. Likewise, a guilty plea in a criminal case gives the plaintiff in a later private civil suit prima facie evidence of the defendant's liability. However, a plea of nolo contendere will avoid this result. Section 5 has been the spur for a considerable proportion of all private antitrust suits. For example, the government's price-fixing case against the electric equipment industry that sent certain executives of General Electric to jail in the 1950s led to more than 2,200 private suits.

### **Treble Damages**

The crux of the private suit is its unique damage award: any successful plaintiff is entitled to collect *three times* the amount of damages actually suffered—treble damages, as they are known—and to be paid the cost of his attorneys. These fees can be huge: defendants have had to pay out millions of dollars for attorneys' fees alone in single cases. The theory of treble damages is that they will serve as an incentive to private parties to police industry for antitrust violations, thus saving the federal government the immense expense of maintaining an adequate staff for that job.

### **Class Actions**

One of the most important developments in antitrust law during the 1970s was the rise of the class action. Under liberalized rules of federal procedure, a single plaintiff may sue on behalf of the entire class of people injured by an antitrust violation. This device makes it possible to bring numerous suits that would otherwise never have been contemplated. A single individual who has paid one dollar more than he would have been charged in a competitive market obviously will not file suit. But if there are ten million consumers like him, then in a class action he may seek—on behalf of the entire class, of course—\$30 million (\$10 million trebled), plus attorneys' fees. Critics charge that the class action is a device that in the antitrust field benefits only the lawyers, who have a large incentive to find a few plaintiffs willing to have their names used in a

suit run entirely by the lawyers. Nevertheless, it is true that the class action permits antitrust violations to be rooted out that could not otherwise be attacked privately. During the 1970s, suits against drug companies and the wallboard manufacturing industry were among the many large-scale antitrust class actions.

## Interpreting the Laws

### Vagueness

The antitrust laws, and especially Section 1 of the Sherman Act, are exceedingly vague. As Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes once put it, “The Sherman Act, as a charter of freedom, has a generality and adaptability comparable to that found to be desirable in constitutional provisions.”<sup>[8]</sup> Without the sweeping but vague language, the antitrust laws might quickly have become outdated. As written, they permit courts to adapt the law to changing circumstances. But the vagueness can lead to uncertainty and uneven applications of the law.

### The “Rule of Reason”

Section 1 of the Sherman Act says that “every” restraint of trade is illegal. But is a literal interpretation really possible? No, for as Justice Louis Brandeis noted in 1918 in one of the early price-fixing cases, “Every agreement concerning trade, every regulation of trade restrains. To bind, to restrain, is of their very essence.”<sup>[9]</sup> When a manufacturing company contracts to buy raw materials, trade in those goods is restrained: no one else will have access to them. But to interpret the Sherman Act to include such a contract is an absurdity. Common sense says that “every” cannot really mean *every* restraint.

Throughout this century, the courts have been occupied with this question. With the hindsight of thousands of cases, the broad outlines of the answer can be confidently stated. Beginning with *Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey v. United States*, the Supreme Court has held that only *unreasonable* restraints of trade are unlawful.<sup>[10]</sup>

Often called the rule of reason, the interpretation of Section 1 made in *Standard Oil* itself has two possible meanings, and they have been confused over the years. The rule of reason could mean that a restraint is permissible only if it is *ancillary* to a legitimate business purpose. The standard example is a covenant not to compete. Suppose you decide to purchase a well-regarded bookstore in town. The proprietor is well liked and has developed loyal patrons. He says he is

going to retire in another state. You realize that if he changed his mind and stayed in town to open another bookstore, your new business would suffer considerably. So you negotiate as a condition of sale that he agrees not to open another bookstore within ten miles of the town for the next three years. Since your intent is not to prevent him from going into business—as it would be if he had agreed never to open a bookstore anywhere—but merely to protect the value of your purchase, this restraint of trade is ancillary to your business purpose. The rule of reason holds that this is not an unlawful restraint of trade.

Another interpretation of the rule of reason is even broader. It holds that agreements that might directly impair competition are not unlawful unless the particular impairment itself is unreasonable. For example, several retailers of computer software are distraught at a burgeoning price war that will possibly reduce prices so low that they will not be able to offer their customers proper service. To avert this “cutthroat competition,” the retailers agree to set a price floor—a floor that, under the circumstances, is reasonable. Chief Justice Edward White, who wrote the *Standard Oil* opinion, might have found that such an agreement was reasonable because, in view of its purposes, it was not *unduly* restrictive and did not unduly restrain trade. But this latter view is not the law. Almost any business agreement could enhance the market power of one or more parties to the agreement, and thus restrain trade. “The true test of legality,” Justice Brandeis wrote in 1918 in *Chicago Board of Trade*, “is whether the restraint imposed is such as merely regulates and perhaps thereby promotes competition or whether it is such as may suppress or even destroy competition.”<sup>[11]</sup> Section 1 violations analyzed under the rule of reason will look at several factors, including the purpose of the agreement, the parties’ power to implement the agreement to achieve that purpose, and the effect or potential effect of the agreement on competition. If the parties could have used less restrictive means to achieve their purpose, the Court would more likely have seen the agreement as unreasonable.<sup>[12]</sup>

### “Per Se” Rules

Not every act or commercial practice needs to be weighed by the rule of reason. Some acts have come to be regarded as intrinsically or necessarily impairing competition, so that no further analysis need be made if the plaintiff can prove that the defendant carried them out or attempted or conspired to do so. Price-fixing is an example. Price-fixing is said to

be per se illegal under the Sherman Act—that is, unlawful on its face. The question in a case alleging price-fixing is not whether the price was reasonable or whether it impaired or enhanced competition, but whether the price in fact was fixed by two sellers in a market segment. Only that question can be at issue.

### Under the Clayton Act

The rule of reason and the per se rules apply to the Sherman Act. The Clayton Act has a different standard. It speaks in terms of acts that may tend substantially to lessen competition. The courts must construe these terms too, and in the sections that follow, we will see how they have done so.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

The preservation of competition is an important part of public policy in the United States. The various antitrust laws were crafted in response to clear abuses by companies that sought to claim easier profits by avoiding competition through the exercise of monopoly power, price-fixing, or territorial agreements. The Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission have substantial criminal and civil penalties to wield in their enforcement of the various antitrust laws.

### EXERCISES

1. Why did industries become so much larger after the US Civil War, and how did this lead to abusive practices? What role did politics play in creating US laws fostering competition?
2. Go to the Department of Justice website and see how many antitrust enforcement actions have taken place since 2008.
3. Consider whether the US government should break up the biggest US banks. Why or why not? If the United States does so, and other nations have very large government banks, or have very large private banks, can US banks remain competitive?

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[1] Sherman Act, Section 1; Clayton Act, Section 3.

[2] Sherman Act, Section 2; Clayton Act, Section 7.

[3] *Munn v. Illinois*, 94 U.S. 113 (1877).



[4] *Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey v. United States*, 221 U.S. 1 (1911).

[5] Clayton Act, Section 3.

[6] Clayton Act, Section 7.

[7] Clayton Act, Section 8.

[8] *Appalachian Coals v. United States*, 288 U.S. 344, 359 (1933).

[9] *Chicago Board of Trade v. United States*, 246 U.S. 231 (1918).

[10] *Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey v. United States*, 221 U.S. 1 (1911).

[11] *Chicago Board of Trade v. United States*, 246 U.S. 231 (1918).

[12] *Chicago Board of Trade v. United States*, 246 U.S. 231 (1918).

## 23.2 Horizontal Restraints of Trade

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know why competitors are the likely actors in horizontal restraints of trade.
2. Explain what it means when the Supreme Court declares a certain practice to be a per se violation of the antitrust laws.
3. Describe at least three ways in which otherwise competing parties can fix prices.
4. Recognize why dividing territories is a horizontal restraint of trade.

Classification of antitrust cases and principles is not self-evident because so many cases turn on complex factual circumstances. One convenient way to group the cases is to look to the relationship of those who have agreed or conspired. If the parties are competitors—whether competing manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, or others—there could be a horizontal restraint of trade. If the parties are at different levels of the distribution chain—for example, manufacturer and retailer—their agreement is said to involve a vertical restraint of trade. These categories are not airtight: a retailer might get competing manufacturers to agree not to supply a competitor of the retailer. This is a vertical restraint with horizontal effects.

### Price-Fixing

#### Direct Price-Fixing Agreements

Price-fixing agreements are per se violations of Section 1 of the Sherman Act. The per se rule was announced explicitly in *United States v. Trenton Potteries*.<sup>[1]</sup> In that case, twenty individuals and twenty-three corporations, makers and distributors of 82 percent of the vitreous pottery bathroom fixtures used in the United States, were found guilty of having agreed to establish and adhere to a price schedule. On appeal, they did not dispute that they had combined to fix prices. They did argue that the jury should have been permitted to decide whether what they had done was reasonable. The Supreme Court disagreed, holding that any fixing of prices is a clear violation of the Sherman Act.

Twenty-four years later, the Court underscored this categorical per se rule in *Kiefer-Stewart Co. v. Joseph E. Seagram & Sons*.<sup>[2]</sup> The defendants were distillers who had agreed to sell liquor only to those wholesalers who agreed to resell it for no more than a *maximum* price set by the distillers. The defendants argued that setting maximum prices did not violate the Sherman Act because such prices promoted rather than restrained competition. Again, the Supreme Court disagreed: “[S]uch agreements, no less than those to fix minimum prices, cripple the freedom of traders and thereby restrain their ability to sell in accordance with their own judgment.”

The per se prohibition against price-fixing is not limited to agreements that directly fix prices. Hundreds of schemes that have the effect of controlling prices have been tested in court and found wanting, some because they were per se restraints of trade, others because their effects were unreasonable—that is, because they impaired competition—under the circumstances. In the following sections, we examine some of these cases briefly.

### **Exchanging Price Information**

Knowledge of competitors’ prices can be an effective means of controlling prices throughout an industry. Members of a trade association of hardwood manufacturers adopted a voluntary “open competition” plan. About 90 percent of the members adhered to the plan. They accounted for one-third of the production of hardwood in the United States. Under the plan, members reported daily on sales and deliveries and monthly on production, inventory, and prices. The association, in turn, sent out price, sales, and production reports to the participating members. Additionally, members met from time to time to discuss these matters, and they were exhorted to refrain from excessive production in order to keep prices at profitable levels. In *American*

*Column and Lumber Company v. United States*, the Supreme Court condemned this plan as a per se violation of Section 1 of the Sherman Act. <sup>[3]</sup>

Not every exchange of information is necessarily a violation, however. A few years after *American Column and Lumber*, in *Maple Flooring Manufacturers' Association v. United States*, the Court refused to find a violation in the practice of an association of twenty-two hardwood-floor manufacturers in circulating a list to all members of average costs and freight rates, as well as summaries of sales, prices, and inventories. <sup>[4]</sup> The apparent difference between *American Column and Lumber* and *Maple Flooring* was that in the latter, the members did not discuss prices at their meetings, and their rules permitted them to charge individually whatever they wished. It is not unlawful, therefore, for members of an industry to meet to discuss common problems or to develop statistical information about the industry through a common association, as long as the discussions do not border on price or on techniques of controlling prices, such as by restricting output. Usually, it takes evidence of collusion to condemn the exchange of prices or other data.

### **Controlling Output**

Competitors also fix prices by controlling an industry's output. For example, competitors could agree to limit the amount of goods each company makes or by otherwise limiting the amount that comes to market. This latter technique was condemned in *United States v. Socony-Vacuum Oil Co.* <sup>[5]</sup> To prevent oil prices from dropping, dominant oil companies agreed to and did purchase from independent refiners surplus gasoline that the market was forcing them to sell at distress prices. By buying up this gasoline, the large companies created a price floor for their own product. This conduct, said the Court, is a per se violation.

### **Regulating Competitive Methods**

Many companies may wish to eliminate certain business practices—for example, offering discounts or premiums such as trading stamps on purchase of goods—but are afraid or powerless to do so unless their competitors also stop. The temptation is strong to agree with one's competitors to jointly end these practices; in most instances, doing so is unlawful when the result would be to affect the price at which the product is sold. But not every agreed-on restraint or standard is necessarily unlawful. Companies might decide that it would serve their customers'

interests as well as their own if the product could be standardized, so that certain names or marks signify a grade or quality of product. When no restriction is placed on what grades are to be sold or at what prices, no restraint of trade has occurred.

In *National Society of Professional Engineers v. United States*, [Section 23.8.1 "Horizontal Restraints of Trade"](#), a canon of ethics of the National Society of Professional Engineers prohibited members from making competitive bids. This type of prohibition has been common in the codes of ethics of all kinds of occupational groups that claim professional status. These groups justify the ban by citing public benefits, though not necessarily price benefits, that flow from observance of the "ethical" rule.

## **Nonprice Restraints of Trade**

### **Allocating Territories**

Suppose four ice-cream manufacturers decided one day that their efforts to compete in all four corners of the city were costly and destructive. Why not simply strike a bargain: each will sell ice cream to retail shops in only one quadrant of the city. This is not a pricing arrangement; each is free to sell at whatever price it desires. But it is a restraint of trade, for in carving up the territory in which each may sell, they make it impossible for grocery stores to obtain a choice among all four manufacturers. The point becomes obvious when the same kind of agreement is put on a national scale: suppose Ford and Toyota agreed that Ford would not sell its cars in New York and Toyota would not sell Toyotas in California.

Most cases of territorial allocation are examples of vertical restraints in which manufacturers and distributors strike a bargain. But some cases deal with horizontal allocation of territories. In *United States v. Sealy*, the defendant company licensed manufacturers to use the Sealy trademark on beds and mattresses and restricted the territories in which the manufacturers could sell. <sup>[6]</sup> The evidence showed that the licensees, some thirty small bedding manufacturers, actually owned the licensor and were using the arrangement to allocate the territory. It was held to be unlawful per se.

### **Exclusionary Agreements**

We said earlier that it might be permissible for manufacturers, through a trade association, to establish certain quality standards for the convenience of the public. As long as these standards

are not exclusionary and do not reflect any control over price, they might not inhibit competition. The UL mark on electrical and other equipment—a mark to show that the product conforms to specifications of the private Underwriters Laboratory—is an example. But suppose that certain widget producers establish the Scientific Safety Council, a membership association whose staff ostensibly assigns quality labels, marked SSC, to those manufacturers who meet certain engineering and safety standards. In fact, however, the manufacturers are using the widespread public acceptance of the SSC mark to keep the market to themselves by refusing to let nonmembers join and by refusing to let nonmembers use the SSC mark, even if their widgets conform to the announced standards. This subterfuge would be a violation of Section 1 of the Sherman Act.

### **Boycotts**

Agreements by competitors to boycott (refuse to deal with) those who engage in undesirable practices are unlawful. In an early case, a retailers' trade association circulated a list of wholesale distributors who sold directly to the public. The intent was to warn member retailers not to buy from those wholesalers. Although each member was free to act however it wanted, the Court saw in this blacklist a plan to promote a boycott. <sup>[7]</sup>

This policy remains true even if the objective of the boycott is to prevent unethical or even illegal activities. Members of a garment manufacturers association agreed with a textile manufacturers association not to use any textiles that had been “pirated” from designs made by members of the textile association. The garment manufacturers also pledged, among other things, not to sell their goods to any retailer who did not refrain from using pirated designs. The argument that this was the only way to prevent unscrupulous design pirates from operating fell on deaf judicial ears; the Supreme Court held the policy unlawful under Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Act, the case having been brought by the FTC. <sup>[8]</sup>

### **Proof of Agreement**

It is vital for business managers to realize that once an agreement or a conspiracy is shown to have existed, they or their companies can be convicted of violating the law even if neither agreement nor conspiracy led to concrete results. Suppose the sales manager of Extremis Widget Company sits down over lunch with the sales manager of De Minimis Widget Company and

says, “Why are we working so hard? I have a plan that will let us both relax.” He explains that their companies can put into operation a data exchange program that will stabilize prices. The other sales manager does not immediately commit himself, but after lunch, he goes to the stationery store and purchases a notebook in which to record the information he will get from a telephone test of the plan. That action is probably enough to establish a conspiracy to fix prices, and the government could file criminal charges at that point. Discussion with your competitors of prices, discounts, production quotas, rebates, bid rigging, trade-in allowances, commission rates, salaries, advertising, and the like is exceedingly dangerous. It can lead to criminal conduct and potential jail terms.

### **Proof of Harm**

It is unnecessary to show that the public is substantially harmed by a restraint of trade as long as the plaintiff can show that the restraint injured him. In *Klor’s, Inc. v. Broadway-Hale Stores*, the plaintiff was a small retail appliance shop in San Francisco.<sup>[9]</sup> Next door to the shop was a competing appliance store, one of a chain of stores run by Broadway-Hale. Klor’s alleged that Broadway-Hale, using its “monopolistic buying power,” persuaded ten national manufacturers and their distributors, including GE, RCA, Admiral, Zenith, and Emerson, to cease selling to Klor’s or to sell at discriminatory prices. The defendants did not dispute the allegations. Instead, they moved for summary judgment on the ground that even if true, the allegations did not give rise to a legal claim because the public could not conceivably have been injured as a result of their concerted refusal to deal. As evidence, they cited the uncontradicted fact that within blocks of Klor’s, hundreds of household appliance retailers stood ready to sell the public the very brands Klor’s was unable to stock as a result of the boycott. The district court granted the motion and dismissed Klor’s complaint. The court of appeals affirmed. But the Supreme Court reversed, saying as follows:

*This combination takes from Klor’s its freedom to buy appliances in an open competitive market and drives it out of business as a dealer in the defendants’ products. It deprives the manufacturers and distributors of their freedom to sell to Klor’s....It interferes with the natural flow of interstate commerce. It clearly has, by its “nature” and “character,” a “monopolistic tendency.” As such it is not to be*

*tolerated merely because the victim is just one merchant whose business is so small that his destruction makes little difference to the economy. Monopoly can surely thrive by the elimination of such small businessmen, one at a time, as it can by driving them out in large groups.*

We have been exploring the Sherman Act as it applies to horizontal restraints of trade—that is, restraints of trade between competitors. We now turn our attention to vertical restraints—those that are the result of agreements or conspiracies between different levels of the chain of distribution, such as manufacturer and wholesaler or wholesaler and retailer.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Competitors can engage in horizontal restraints of trade by various means of price-fixing. They can also engage in horizontal price restraints of trade by allocating territories or by joint boycotts (refusals to deal). These restraints need not be substantial in order to be actionable as a violation of US antitrust laws.

#### EXERCISES

1. Suppose that BMW of North America tells its dealers that the prestigious M100 cannot be sold for more than \$230,000. Explain why this could be a violation of antitrust law.
2. Suppose that JPMorgan Chase, the Bank of England, and the Bank of China agree that they will not compete for investment services, and that JPMorgan Chase is given an exclusive right to North and South America, Bank of England is given access rights to Europe, and Bank of China is given exclusive rights to Asia, India, and Australia. Is there a violation of US antitrust law here? If not, why not? If so, what act does it violate, and how?
3. “It’s a free country.” Why are agreements by competitors to boycott (to refuse to deal with) certain others considered a problem that needs to be dealt with by law?

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[1] *United States v. Trenton Potteries*, 273 U.S. 392 (1927).

[2] *Kiefer-Stewart Co. v. Joseph E. Seagram & Sons*, 340 U.S. 211 (1951).

[3] *American Column and Lumber Company v. United States*, 257 U.S. 377 (1921).

[4] *Maple Flooring Manufacturers’ Association v. United States*, 268 U.S. 563 (1925).

[5] *United States v. Socony-Vacuum Oil Co.*, 310 U.S. 150 (1940).

[6] *United States v. Sealy*, 388 U.S. 350 (1967).

[7] *Eastern State Lumber Dealers' Association v. United States*, 234 U.S. 600 (1914).

[8] *Fashion Originators' Guild of America v. Federal Trade Commission*, 312 U.S. 457 (1941).

[9] *Klor's, Inc. v. Broadway-Hale Stores*, 359 U.S. 207 (1959).

## 23.3 Vertical Restraints of Trade

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Distinguish vertical restraints of trade from horizontal restraints of trade.
2. Describe exclusive dealing, and explain why exclusive dealing is anticompetitive in any way.
3. Explain how tying one product's sale to that of another could be anticompetitive.

We have been exploring the Sherman Act as it applies to horizontal restraints of trade, restraints that are created between competitors. We now turn to vertical restraints—those that result from agreements between different levels of the chain of distribution, such as manufacturer and wholesaler or wholesaler and retailer.

### Resale Price Maintenance

Is it permissible for manufacturers to require distributors or retailers to sell products at a set price? Generally, the answer is no, but the strict per se rule against any kind of resale price maintenance has been somewhat relaxed.

But why would a manufacturer want to fix the price at which the retailer sells its goods? There are several possibilities. For instance, sustained, long-term sales of many branded appliances and other goods depend on reliable servicing by the retailer. Unless the retailer can get a fair price, it will not provide good service. Anything less than good service will ultimately hurt the brand name and lead to fewer sales. Another possible argument for resale price maintenance is that unless all retailers must abide by a certain price, some goods will not be stocked at all. For instance, the argument runs, bookstores will not stock slow-selling books if they cannot be guaranteed a good price on best sellers. Stores free to discount best sellers will not have the profit margin to stock other types of books. To guarantee sales of best sellers to bookstores carrying many lines of books, it is necessary to put a floor under the price of books. Still another



argument is that brand-name goods are inviting targets for loss-leader sales; if one merchant drastically discounts Extremis Widgets, other merchants may not want to carry the line, and the manufacturer may experience unwanted fluctuations in sales.

None of these reasons has completely appeased the critics of price-fixing, including the most important critics—the US federal judges. As long ago as 1910, in *Dr. Miles Medical Co. v. John D. Park & Sons Co.*, the Supreme Court declared vertical price-fixing (what has come to be called resale price maintenance) unlawful under the Sherman Act. Dr. Miles Medical Company required wholesalers that bought its proprietary medicines to sign an agreement in which they agreed not to sell below a certain price and not to sell to retailers who did not have a “retail agency contract” with Dr. Miles. The retail agency contract similarly contained a price floor. Dr. Miles argued that since it was free to make or not make the medicines, it should be free to dictate the prices at which purchasers could sell them. The Court said that Dr. Miles’s arrangement with more than four hundred jobbers (wholesale distributors) and twenty-five thousand retailers was no different than if the wholesalers or retailers agreed among themselves to fix the price. Dr. Miles “having sold its product at prices satisfactory to itself, the public is entitled to whatever advantage may be derived from a competition in the subsequent traffic.” <sup>[1]</sup> In *Dr. Miles*, the company’s restrictions impermissibly limited the freedom of choice of other drug distributors and retailers. Society was therefore deprived of various benefits it would have received from unrestricted distribution of the drugs. But academics and some judges argue that most vertical price restraints do not limit competition among competitors, and manufacturers retain the power to restrict output, and the power to raise prices. Arguably, vertical price restraints help to ensure economic efficiencies and maximize consumer welfare. Some of the same arguments noted in this section—such as the need to ensure good service for retail items—continue to be made in support of a rule of reason.

The Supreme Court has not accepted these arguments with regard to minimum prices but has increased the plaintiff’s burden of proof by requiring evidence of an agreement on specific price levels. Where a discounter is terminated by a manufacturer, it will probably not be told exactly why, and very few manufacturers would be leaving evidence in writing that insists on dealers agreeing to minimum prices.

Moreover, in *State Oil Company v. Khan*, the Supreme Court held that “vertical maximum price fixing, like the majority of commercial arrangements subject to the antitrust laws, should be evaluated under the rule of reason.” [2] Vertical maximum price-fixing is not legal per se but should be analyzed under a rule of reason “to identify the situations in which it amounts to anti-competitive conduct.” The *Khan* case is at the end of this chapter, in [Section 23.8.2 "Vertical Maximum Price Fixing and the Rule of Reason"](#).

### Exclusive Dealing and Tying

We move now to a nonprice vertical form of restraint. Suppose you went to the grocery store intent on purchasing a bag of potato chips to satisfy a late-night craving. Imagine your surprise—and indignation—if the store manager waved a paper in your face and said, “I’ll sell you this bag only on the condition that you sign this agreement to buy all of your potato chips in the next five years from me.” Or if he said, “I’ll sell only if you promise never to buy potato chips from my rival across the street.” This is an exclusive dealing agreement, and if the effect may be to lessen competition substantially, it is unlawful under Section 3 of the Clayton Act. It also may be unlawful under Section 1 of the Sherman Act and Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Act. Another form of exclusive dealing, known as a tying contract, is also prohibited under Section 3 of the Clayton Act and under the other statutes. A tying contract results when you are forced to take a certain product in order to get the product you are really after: “I’ll sell you the potato chips you crave, but only if you purchase five pounds of my Grade B liver.”

Section 3 of the Clayton Act declares it unlawful for any person engaged in commerce

*to lease or make a sale or contract for sale of goods, wares, merchandise, machinery, supplies or other commodities, whether patented or unpatented, for use, consumption or resale...or fix a price charged therefore, or discount from or rebate upon, such price, **on the condition...that the lessee or purchaser...shall not use or deal in the goods, wares, merchandise, machinery, supplies, or other commodities of a competitor or competitors of the lessor or seller**, where the effect of such lease, sale, or contract for sale or such condition...may be to substantially lessen competition or tend to erect a monopoly in any line of commerce.*  
(emphasis added)

Under Section 3, the potato chip example is not unlawful, for you would not have much of an effect on competition nor tend to create a monopoly if you signed with your corner grocery. But the Clayton Act has serious ramifications for a producer who might wish to require a dealer to sell only its products—such as a fast-food franchisee that can carry cooking ingredients bought only from the franchisor ([Chapter 24 "Unfair Trade Practices and the Federal Trade Commission"](#)), an appliance store that can carry only one national brand of refrigerators, or an ice-cream parlor that must buy ice-cream supplies from the supplier of its machinery.

A situation like the one in the ice-cream example came under review in *International Salt Co. v. United States*.<sup>[3]</sup> International Salt was the largest US producer of salt for industrial uses. It held patents on two machines necessary for using salt products; one injected salt into foodstuffs during canning. It leased most of these machines to canners, and the lease required the lessees to purchase from International Salt all salt to be used in the machines. The case was decided on summary judgment; the company did not have the chance to prove the reasonableness of its conduct. The Court held that it was not entitled to. International Salt's valid patent on the machines did not confer on it the right to restrain trade in unpatented salt. Justice Tom Clark said that doing so was a violation of both Section 1 of the Sherman Act and Section 3 of the Clayton Act:

*Not only is price-fixing unreasonable, per se, but also it is unreasonable, per se, to foreclose competitors from any substantial market. The volume of business affected by these contracts cannot be said to be insignificant or insubstantial, and the tendency of the arrangement to accomplishment of monopoly seems obvious. Under the law, agreements are forbidden which "tend to create a monopoly," and it is immaterial that the tendency is a creeping one rather than one that proceeds at full gallop; nor does the law await arrival at the goal before condemning the direction of the movement.*

In a case involving the sale of newspaper advertising space (to purchase space in the morning paper, an advertiser would have to take space in the company's afternoon paper), the government lost because it could not use the narrower standards of Section 3 and could not prove that the defendant had monopoly power over the sale of advertising space. (Another

afternoon newspaper carried advertisements, and its sales did not suffer.) In the course of his opinion, Justice Clark set forth the rule for determining legality of tying arrangements under both the Clayton and Sherman Acts:

*When the seller enjoys a monopolistic position in the market for the “tying” product [i.e., the product that the buyer wants] or if a substantial volume of commerce in the “tied” product [i.e., the product that the buyer does not want] is restrained, a tying arrangement violates the narrower standards expressed in section 3 of the Clayton Act because from either factor the requisite potential lessening of competition is inferred. And because for even a lawful monopolist it is “unreasonable per se to foreclose competitors from any substantial market” a tying arrangement is banned by section 1 of the Sherman Act wherever both conditions are met.*<sup>[4]</sup>

This rule was broadened in 1958 in a Sherman Act case involving the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, which had received forty million acres of land from Congress in the late nineteenth century in return for building a rail line from the Great Lakes to the Pacific. For decades, Northern Pacific leased or sold the land on condition that the buyer or lessee use Northern Pacific to ship any crops grown on the land or goods manufactured there. To no avail, the railroad argued that unlike International Salt’s machines, the railroad’s “tying product” (its land) was not patented, and that the land users were free to ship on other lines if they could find cheaper rates. Wrote Justice Hugo Black,

*[A] tying arrangement may be defined as an agreement by a party to sell one product but only on the condition that the buyer also purchases a different (or tied) product, or at least agrees that he will not purchase that product from any other supplier. Where such conditions are successfully exacted competition on the merits with respect to the tied product is inevitably curbed.... They deny competitors free access to the market for the tied product, not because the party imposing the tying requirements has a better product or a lower price but because of his power or leverage in another market. At the same time buyers are forced to forego their free choice between competing products.... **They are unreasonable in and of themselves whenever a party has sufficient economic power with respect to the tying product***

***to appreciably restrain free competition in the market for the tied product and a “not insubstantial” amount of interstate commerce is affected.*** *In this case...the undisputed facts established beyond any genuine question that the defendant possessed substantial economic power by virtue of its extensive landholdings which it used as leverage to induce large numbers of purchasers and lessees to give it preference.* <sup>[5]</sup> *(emphasis in original)*

Taken together, the tying cases suggest that anyone with certain market power over a commodity or other valuable item (such as a trademark) runs a serious risk of violating the Clayton Act or Sherman Act or both if he insists that the buyer must also take some other product as part of the bargain. Microsoft learned about the perils of “tying” in a case brought by the United States, nineteen individual states, and the District of Columbia. The allegation was that Microsoft had tied together various software programs on its operating system, Microsoft Windows. Windows came prepackaged with Microsoft’s Internet Explorer (IE), its Windows Media Player, Outlook Express, and Microsoft Office. The United States claimed that Microsoft had bundled (or “tied”) IE to sales of Windows 98, making IE difficult to remove from Windows 98 by not putting it on the Remove Programs list.

The government alleged that Microsoft had designed Windows 98 to work “unpleasantly” with Netscape Navigator and that this constituted an illegal tying of Windows 98 and IE. Microsoft argued that its web browser and mail reader were just parts of the operating system, included with other personal computer operating systems, and that the integration of the products was technologically justified. The United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit rejected Microsoft’s claim that IE was simply one facet of its operating system, but the court held that the tie between Windows and IE should be analyzed deferentially under the rule of reason. The case settled before reaching final judicial resolution. (See *United States v. Microsoft*.<sup>[6]</sup>)

### **Nonprice Vertical Restraints: Allocating Territory and Customers**

With horizontal restraints of trade, we have already seen that it is a per se violation of Section 1 of the Sherman Act for competitors to allocate customers and territory. But a vertical allocation of customers or territory is only illegal if competition to the markets as a whole is adversely

affected. The key here is distinguishing intrabrand competition from interbrand competition. Suppose that Samsung electronics has relationships with ten different retailers in Gotham City. If Samsung decides to limit its contractual relationships to only six retailers, the market for consumer electronics in Gotham City is still competitive in terms of interbrand competition. Intrabrand competition, however, is now limited. It could be that consumers will pay slightly higher prices for Samsung electronics with only six different retailers selling those products in Gotham City. That is, intrabrand competition is lowered, but interbrand competition remains strong.

Notice that it is unlikely that the six remaining retailers will raise their prices substantially, since there is still strong interbrand competition. If the retailer only deals in Samsung electronics, it is unlikely to raise prices that much, given the strength of interbrand competition.

If the retailer carries Samsung and other brands, it will also not want to raise prices too much, for then its inventory of Samsung electronics will pile up, while its inventory of other electronics products will move off the shelves.

Why would Samsung want to limit its retail outlets in Gotham City at all? It may be that Samsung has decided that by firming up its dealer network, it can enhance service, offer a wider range of products at each of the remaining retailers, ensure improved technical and service support, increase a sense of commitment among the remaining retail outlets, or other good business reasons. Where the retailer deals in other electronic consumer brands as well, making sure that well-trained sales and service support is available for Samsung products can promote interbrand competition in Gotham City. Thus vertical allocation of retailers within the territory is not a per se violation of the Sherman Act. It is instead a rule of reason violation, or the law will intervene only if Samsung's activities have an anticompetitive effect on the market as a whole. Notice here that the only likely objections to the new allocation would come from those dealers who were contractually terminated and who are then effectively restricted from selling Samsung electronics.

There are other potentially legitimate territorial restrictions, and limits on what kind of customer the retailer can sell to will prevent a dealer or distributor from selling outside a certain territory or to a certain class of customers. Samsung may reduce its outlets in Iowa from four to

two, and it may also impose limits on those retail outlets from marketing beyond certain areas in and near Iowa.

Suppose that a Monsanto representative selling various kinds of fertilizers and pesticides was permitted to sell only to individual farmers and not to co-ops or retail distributors, or was limited to the state of Iowa. The Supreme Court has held that such vertical territorial or customer searches are not per se violations of Section 1 of the Sherman Act, as the situations often increase “interbrand competition.” Thus the rule of reason will apply to vertical allocation of customers and territory.

### **Nonprice Vertical Restraints: Exclusive Dealing Agreements**

Often, a distributor or retailer agrees with the manufacturer or supplier not to carry the products of any other supplier. This is not in itself (per se) illegal under Section 1 of the Sherman Act or Section 3 of the Clayton Act. Only if these **exclusive dealing contracts** have an anticompetitive effect will there be an antitrust violation. Ideally, in a competitive market, there are no significant barriers to entry. In the real world, however, various deals are made that can and do restrict entry. Suppose that on his farm in Greeley, Colorado, Richard Tucker keeps goats, and he creates a fine, handcrafted goat cheese for the markets in Denver, Fort Collins, and Boulder, Colorado, and Cheyenne, Wyoming. In these markets, if Safeway, Whole Foods, Albertsons, and King Soopers already have suppliers, and the suppliers have gained exclusive dealing agreements, Tucker will be effectively barred from the market.

Suppose that Billy Goat Cheese is a nationally distributed brand of goat cheese and has created exclusive dealing arrangements with the four food chains in the four cities. Tucker could sue Billy Goat for violating antitrust laws if he finds out about the arrangements. But the courts will not assume a per se violation has taken place. Instead, the courts will look at the number of other distributors available, the portion of the market foreclosed by the exclusive dealing arrangements, the ease with which new distributors could enter the market, the possibility that Tucker could distribute the product himself, and legitimate business reasons that led the distributors to accept exclusive dealing contracts from Billy Goat Cheese.

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Vertical restraints of trade can be related to price, can be in the form of tying arrangements, and can be in the form of allocating customers and territories. Vertical restraints can also come in the form of exclusive dealing agreements.

### EXERCISES

1. Explain how a seller with a monopoly in one product and tying the sale of that product to a new product that has no such monopoly is in any way hurting competition. How “free” is the buyer to choose a product different from the seller’s?
2. If your company wants to maintain its image as a high-end product provider, is it legal to create a floor for your product’s prices? If so, under what circumstances?

[1] *Dr. Miles Medical Co. v. John D. Park & Sons Co.*, 220 U.S. 373 (1910).

[2] *State Oil Company v. Khan*, 522 U.S. 3 (1997).

[3] *International Salt Co. v. United States*, 332 U.S. 392 (1947).

[4] *Times-Picayune Publishing Co. v. United States*, 345 U.S. 594 (1953).

[5] *Northern Pacific Railway Co. v. United States*, 356 U.S. 1 (1958).

[6] *United States v. Microsoft*, 253 F.3d 34 (D.C. Cir. 2001).

## 23.4 Price Discrimination: The Robinson-Patman Act

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why Congress legislated against price-cutting by large companies.
2. Recognize why price discrimination is not per se illegal.
3. Identify and explain the defenses to a Robinson-Patman price discrimination charge.

If the relatively simple and straightforward language of the Sherman Act can provide litigants and courts with interpretive headaches, the law against price discrimination—the Robinson-Patman Act—can strike the student with a crippling migraine. Technically, Section 2 of the Clayton Act, the Robinson-Patman Act, has been verbally abused almost since its enactment in 1936. It has been called the “Typhoid Mary of Antitrust,” a “grotesque manifestation of the scissors and paste-pot method” of draftsmanship. Critics carp at more than its language; many



have asserted over the years that the act is anticompetitive because it prevents many firms from lowering their prices to attract more customers.

Despite this rhetoric, the Robinson-Patman Act has withstood numerous attempts to modify or repeal it, and it can come into play in many everyday situations. Although in recent years the Justice Department has declined to enforce it, leaving government enforcement efforts to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), *private* plaintiffs are actively seeking treble damages in numerous cases. So whether it makes economic sense or not, the act is a living reality for marketers. This section introduces certain problems that lurk in deciding how to price goods and how to respond to competitors' prices.

The Clayton Act's original Section 2, enacted in 1914, was aimed at the price-cutting practice of the large trusts, which would reduce the price of products below cost where necessary in a particular location to wipe out smaller competitors who could not long sustain such losses. But the original Clayton Act exempted from its terms any "discrimination in price...on account of differences in the quantity of the commodity sold." This was a gaping loophole that made it exceedingly difficult to prove a case of price discrimination.

Not until the Depression in the 1930s did sufficient cries of alarm over price discrimination force Congress to act. The alarm was centered on the practices of large grocery chains. Their immense buying power was used as a lever to pry out price discounts from food processors and wholesalers. Unable to extract similar price concessions, the small mom-and-pop grocery stores found that they could not offer the retail customer the lower food prices set by the chains. The small shops began to fail. In 1936, Congress strengthened Section 2 by enacting the Robinson-Patman Act. Although prompted by concern about how large buyers could use their purchasing power, the act in fact places most of its restrictions on the pricing decisions of sellers.

### **The Statutory Framework**

The heart of the act is Section 2(a), which reads in pertinent part as follows: "[I]t shall be unlawful for any person engaged in commerce...to discriminate in price between different purchasers of commodities of like grade and quality...where the effect of such discrimination may be substantially to lessen competition or tend to create a monopoly in any line of

commerce, or to injure, destroy or prevent competition with any person who either grants or knowingly receives the benefit of such discrimination, or with customers of either of them.”

This section provides certain defenses to a charge of price discrimination. For example, differentials in price are permissible whenever they “make only due allowances for differences in the cost of manufacture, sale, or delivery resulting from the differing methods or quantities in which such commodities are to such purchasers sold or delivered.” This section also permits sellers to change prices in response to changing marketing conditions or the marketability of the goods—for example, if perishable goods begin to deteriorate, the seller may drop the price in order to move the goods quickly.

Section 2(b) provides the major defense to price discrimination: any price is lawful if made in good faith to meet competition.

## **Discrimination by the Seller**

### **Preliminary Matters**

#### **Simultaneous Sales**

To be discriminatory, the different prices must have been charged in sales made at the same time or reasonably close in time. What constitutes a reasonably close time depends on the industry and the circumstances of the marketplace. The time span for dairy sales would be considerably shorter than that for sales of mainframe computers, given the nature of the product, the frequency of sales, the unit cost, and the volatility of the markets.

#### **Identity of Purchaser**

Another preliminary issue is the identity of the actual purchaser. A supplier who deals through a dummy wholesaler might be charged with price discrimination even though on paper only one sale appears to have been made. Under the “indirect purchaser” doctrine, a seller who deals with two or more retail customers but passes their orders on to a single wholesaler and sells the total quantity to the wholesaler in one transaction, can be held to have violated the act. The retailers are treated as indirect purchasers of the supplier.

#### **Sales of Commodities**

The act applies only to *sales of commodities*. A lease, a rental, or a license to use a product does not constitute a sale; hence price differentials under one of those arrangements cannot be

unlawful under Robinson-Patman. Likewise, since the act applies only to commodities—tangible things—the courts have held that it does not apply to the sale of intangibles, such as rights to license or use patents, shares in a mutual fund, newspaper or television advertising, or title insurance.

### **Goods of Like Grade and Quality**

Only those sales involving goods of “like grade and quality” can be tested under the act for discriminatory pricing. What do these terms mean? The leading case is *FTC v. Borden Co.*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that trademarks and labels do not, for Robinson-Patman purposes, distinguish products that are otherwise the same. <sup>[1]</sup>Grade and quality must be determined “by the characteristics of the product itself.” When the products are physically or chemically identical, they are of like grade and quality, regardless of how imaginative marketing executives attempt to distinguish them. But physical differences that affect marketability can serve to denote products as being of different grade and quality, even if the differences are slight and do not affect the seller’s cost in manufacturing or marketing.

### **Competitive Injury**

To violate the Robinson-Patman Act, the seller’s price discrimination must have an anticompetitive effect. The usual Clayton Act standard for measuring injury applies to Robinson-Patman violations—that is, a violation occurs when the effect may be substantially to lessen competition or tend to create a monopoly in any line of commerce. But because the Robinson-Patman Act has a more specific test of competitive injury, the general standard is rarely cited.

The more specific test measures the impact on particular persons affected. Section 2(a) says that it is unlawful to discriminate in price where the effect is “to injure, destroy, or prevent competition with any person who grants or knowingly receives the benefit of such discrimination or to customers of either of them.” The effect—injury, destruction, or prevention of competition—is measured against three types of those suffering it: (1) competitors of the seller or supplier (i.e., competitors of the person who “grants” the price discrimination), (2) competitors of the buyer (i.e., competitors of the buyer who “knowingly receives the benefit” of

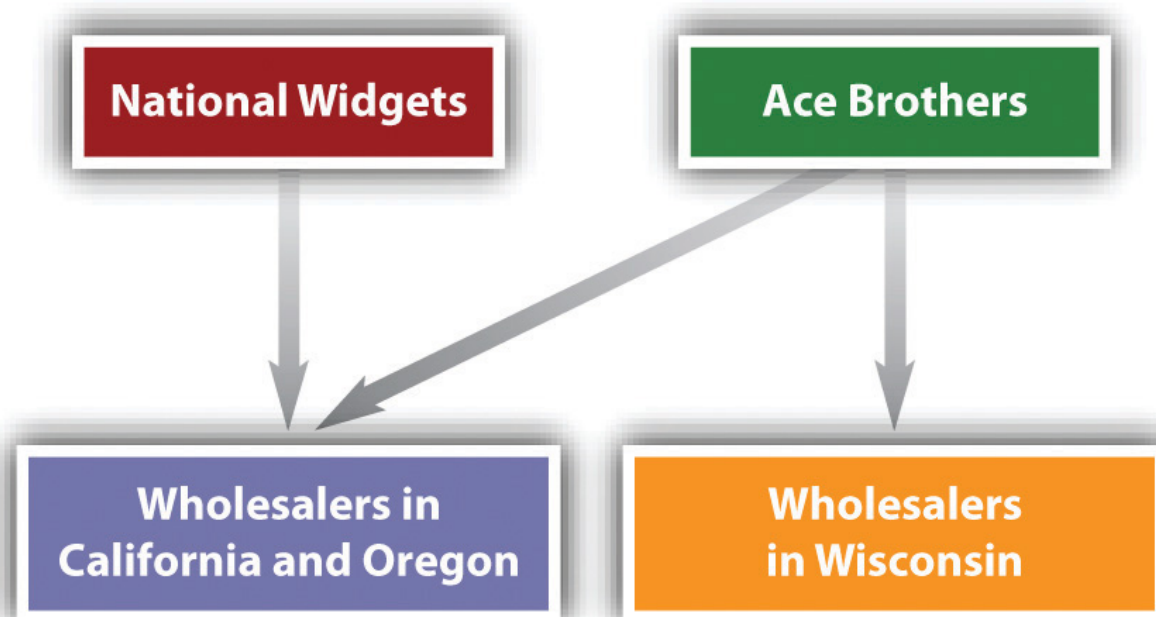
the price differential), and (3) customers of either of the two types of competitors. As we will see, the third category presents many difficulties.

For purposes of our discussion, assume the following scenario: Ace Brothers Widget Company manufactures the usual sizes and styles of American domestic widgets. It competes primarily with National Widget Corporation, although several smaller companies make widgets in various parts of the country. Ace Brothers is the largest manufacturer and sells throughout the United States. National sells primarily in the western states. The industry has several forms of distribution. Many retailers buy directly from Ace and National, but several regional and national wholesalers also operate, including Widget Jobbers, Ltd. and Widget Pushers, LLC. The retailers in any particular city compete directly against each other to sell to the general public. Jobbers and Pushers are in direct competition. Jobbers also sells directly to the public, so that it is in direct competition with retailers as well as Widget Pushers. As everyone knows, widgets are extremely price sensitive, being virtually identical in physical appearance and form.

### **Primary-Line Injury**

Now consider the situation in California, Oregon, and Wisconsin. The competing manufacturers, Ace Brothers and National Widgets, both sell to wholesalers in California and Oregon, but only Ace has a sales arm in Wisconsin. Seeing an opportunity, Ace drops its prices to wholesalers in California and Oregon and raises them in Wisconsin, putting National at a competitive disadvantage. This situation, illustrated in [Figure 23.2 "Primary-Line Injury"](#), is an example of primary-line injury—the injury is done directly to a competitor of the company that differentiates its prices. This is price discrimination, and it is prohibited under Section 2(a).

*Figure 23.2 Primary-Line Injury*

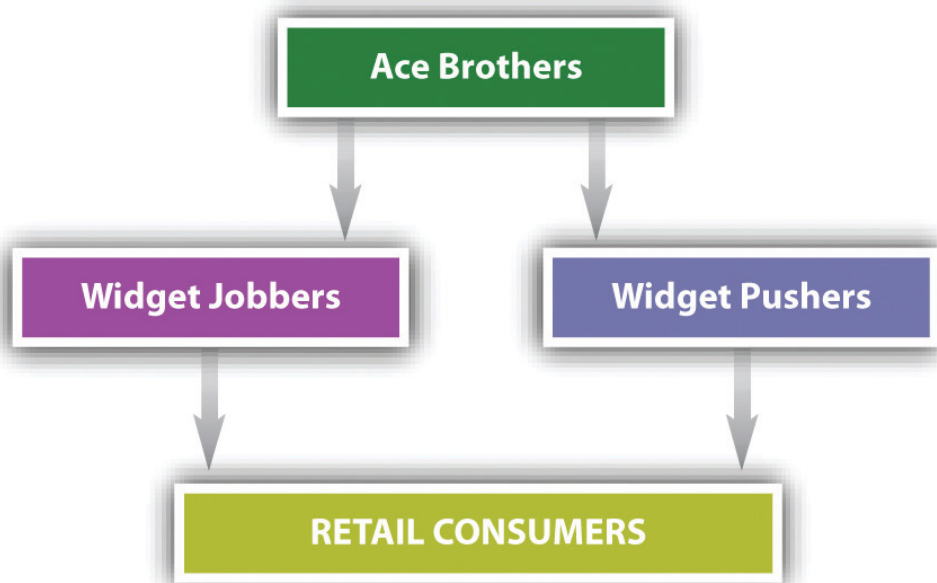


Most forms of primary-line injury have a geographical basis, but they need not. Suppose National sells exclusively to Jobbers in northern California, and Ace Brothers sells both to Jobbers and several other wholesalers. If Ace cuts its prices to Jobbers while charging higher prices to the other wholesalers, the effect is also primary-line injury to National. Jobbers will obviously want to buy more from Ace at lower prices, and National's reduced business is therefore a direct injury. If Ace intends to drive National out of business, this violation of Section 2(a) could also be an attempt to monopolize in violation of Section 2 of the Sherman Act.

### **Secondary-Line Injury**

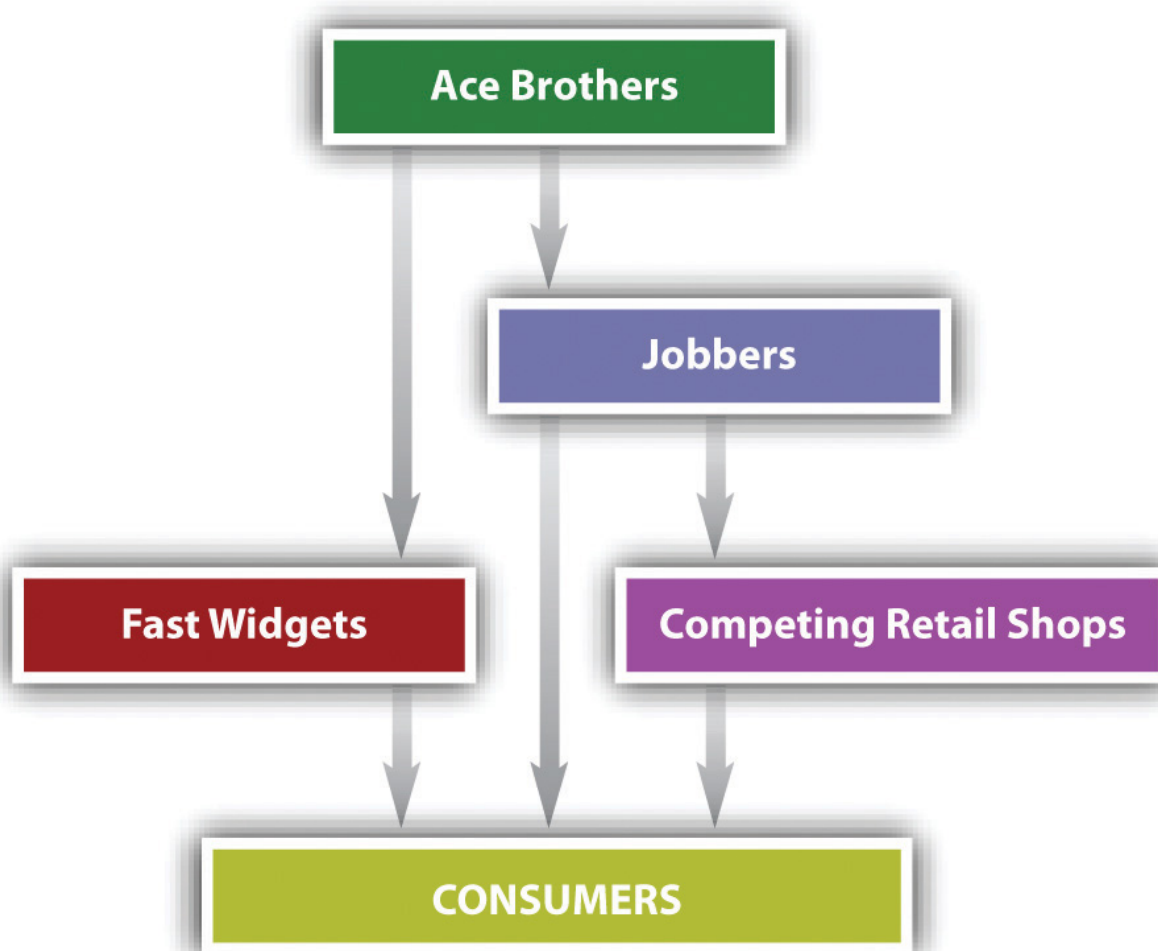
Next, we consider injury done to competing buyers. Suppose that Ace Brothers favors Jobbers—or that Jobbers, a powerful and giant wholesaler, induces Ace to act favorably by threatening not to carry Ace's line of widgets otherwise. Although Ace continues to supply both Jobbers and Widget Pushers, it cuts its prices to Jobbers. As a result, Jobbers can charge its retail customers lower prices than can Pushers, so that Pushers's business begins to slack off. This is secondary-line injury at the buyer's level. Jobbers and Pushers are in direct competition, and by impairing Pushers's ability to compete, the requisite injury has been committed. This situation is illustrated in [Figure 23.3 "Secondary-Line Injury"](#).

Figure 23.3 *Secondary-Line Injury*



Variations on this secondary-line injury are possible. Assume Ace Brothers sells directly to Fast Widgets, a retail shop, and also to Jobbers. Jobbers sells to retail shops that compete with Fast Widgets and also directly to consumers. The situation is illustrated in [Figure 23.4 "Variation on Secondary-Line Injury"](#)).

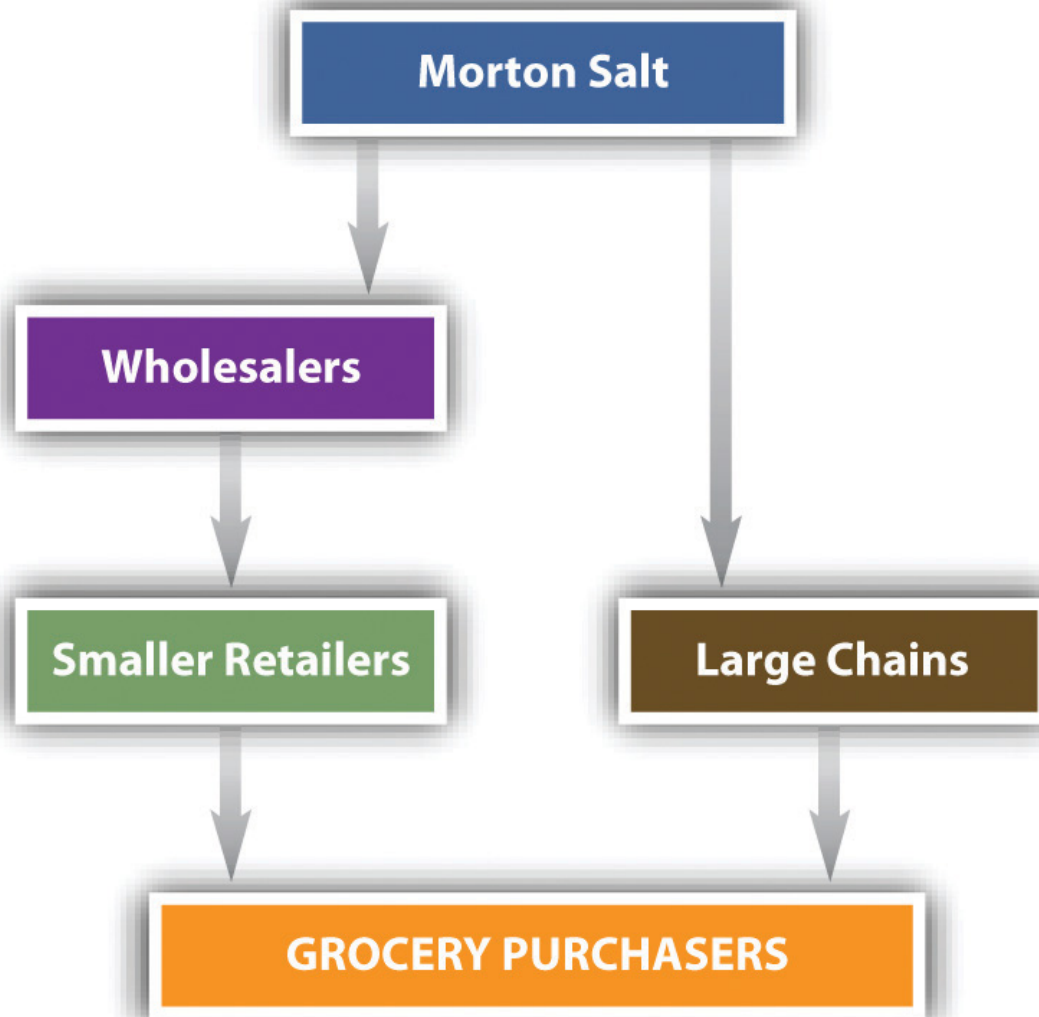
Figure 23.4 *Variation on Secondary-Line Injury*



If Ace favors Jobbers by cutting its prices, discriminating against Fast Widgets, the transaction is unlawful, even though Jobbers and Fast Widgets do not compete for sales to other retailers. Their competition for the business of ultimate consumers is sufficient to establish the illegality of the discrimination. A variation on this situation was at issue in the first important case to test Section 2(a) as it affects buyers. Morton Salt sold to both wholesalers and retailers, offering quantity discounts. Its pricing policy was structured to give large buyers great savings, computed on a yearly total, not on shipments made at any one time. Only five retail chains could take advantage of the higher discounts, and as a result, these chains could sell salt to grocery shoppers at a price below that at which the chains' retail competitors could buy it from their wholesalers. See [Figure 23.5 "Variation: Morton Salt Co."](#) for a schematic illustration. In this

case, *FTC v. Morton Salt Co.*, the Supreme Court for the first time declared that the impact of the discrimination does not have to be actual; it is enough if there is a “reasonable possibility” of competitive injury. <sup>[2]</sup>

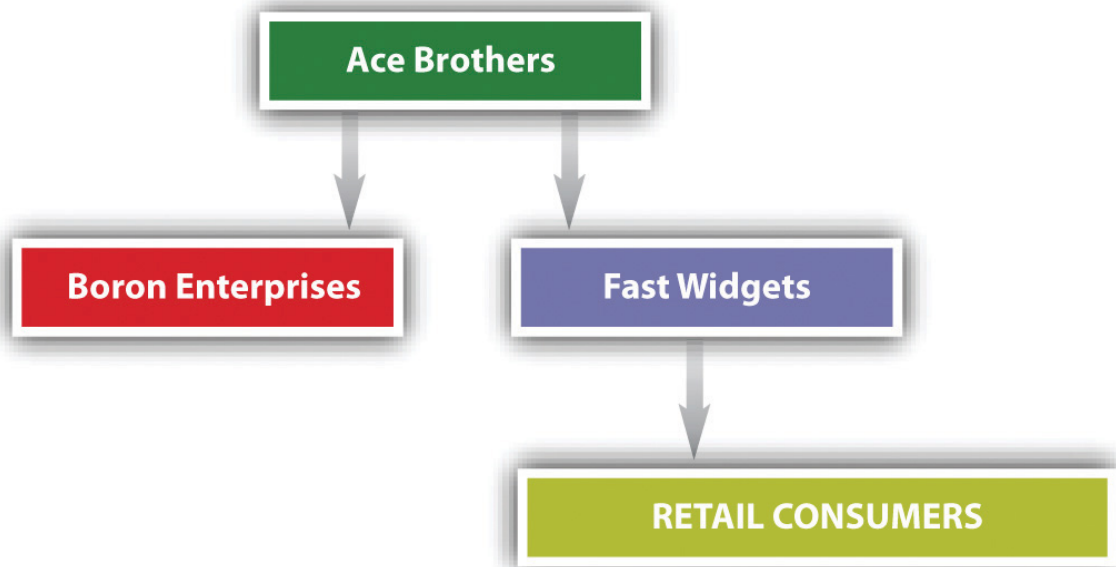
*Figure 23.5 Variation: Morton Salt Co.*



In order to make out a case of secondary-line injury, it is necessary to show that the buyers purchasing at different prices are in fact competitors. Suppose that Ace Brothers sells to Fast Widgets, the retailer, and also to Boron Enterprises, a manufacturer that incorporates widgets in most of its products. Boron does not compete against Fast Widgets, and therefore Ace Brothers may charge different prices to Boron and Fast without fearing Robinson-Patman repercussions. [Figure 23.6 "Variation: Boron-Fast Schematic"](#) shows the Boron-Fast schematic.



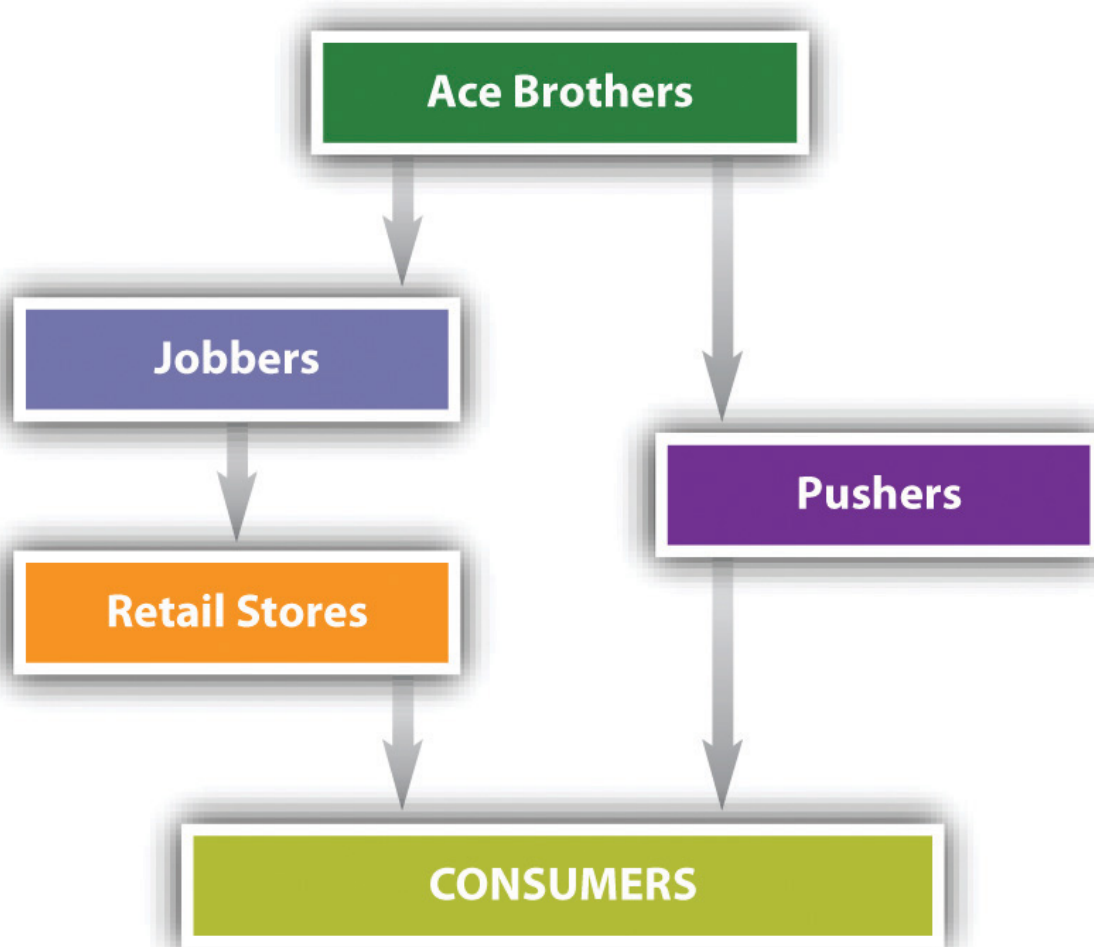
Figure 23.6 *Variation: Boron-Fast Schematic*



### Third-Line Injury

Second-line injury to buyers does not exhaust the possibilities. Robinson-Patman also works against so-called third-line or tertiary-line injury. At stake here is injury another rung down the chain of distribution. Ace Brothers sells to Pushers, which processes unfinished widgets in its own factory and sells them in turn directly to retail customers. Ace also sells to Jobbers, a wholesaler without processing facilities. Jobbers sells to retail shops that can process the goods and sell directly to consumers, thus competing with Pushers for the retail business. This distribution chain is shown schematically in [Figure 23.7 "Third-Line Injury"](#).

Figure 23.7 *Third-Line Injury*



If Ace's price differs between Pushers and Jobbers so that Jobbers is able to sell at a lower price to the ultimate consumers than Pushers, a Robinson-Patman violation has occurred.

#### **Fourth-Line Injury**

In a complex economy, the distribution chain can go on and on. So far, we have examined discrimination on the level of competing supplier-sellers, on the level of competing customers of the supplier-seller, and on the level of competing customers of customers of the supplier-seller. Does the vigilant spotlight of Robinson-Patman penetrate below this level? The Supreme Court has said yes. In *Perkins v. Standard Oil Co.*, the Court said that "customer" in Section 2(a) means any person who distributes the supplier-seller's product, regardless of how many intermediaries are involved in getting the product to him. <sup>[3]</sup>

#### **Seller's Defenses**

Price discrimination is not per se unlawful. The Robinson-Patman Act allows the seller two general defenses: (1) cost justification and (2) meeting competition. If the seller can demonstrate that sales to one particular buyer are cheaper than sales to others, a price differential is permitted if it is based entirely on the cost differences. For example, if one buyer is willing to have the goods packed in cheaper containers or larger crates that save money, that savings can be passed along to the buyer. Similarly, a buyer who takes over a warehousing function formerly undertaken by the seller is entitled to have the cost saving reflected in the selling price. Suppose the buyer orders its entire requirements for the year from the manufacturer, a quantity many times greater than that taken by any other customer. This large order permits the manufacturer to make the goods at a considerably reduced unit cost. May the manufacturer pass those savings along to the quantity buyer? It may, as long as it does not pass along the entire savings but only that attributable to the particular buyer, for other buyers add to its total production run and thus contribute to the final unit production cost. The marketing manager should be aware that the courts strictly construe cost-justification claims, and few companies have succeeded with this defense.

### **Meeting Competition**

Lowering a price to meet competition is a complete defense to a charge of price discrimination. Assume Ace Brothers is selling widgets to retailers in Indiana and Kentucky at \$100 per dozen. National Widgets suddenly enters the Kentucky market and, because it has lower manufacturing costs than Ace, sells widgets to the four Kentucky widget retailers at \$85 per dozen. Ace may lower its price to that amount in Kentucky without lowering its Indiana price. However, if National's price violated the Robinson-Patman Act and Ace knew or should have known that it did, Ace may not reduce its price.

The defense of meeting competition has certain limitations. For example, the seller may not use this defense as an excuse to charge different customers a price differential over the long run. Moreover, if National's lower prices result from quantity orders, Ace may reduce its prices only for like quantities. Ace may not reduce its price for lesser quantities if National charges more for smaller orders. And although Ace may meet National's price to a given customer, Ace may not legally charge less.

Section 2(c) prohibits payment of commissions by one party in a transaction to the opposite party (or to the opposite party's agent) in a sale of goods unless services are actually rendered for them. Suppose the buyer's broker warehouses the goods. May the seller pass along this cost to the broker in the form of a rebate? Isn't that "services rendered"? Although it might seem so, the courts have said no, because they refuse to concede that a buyer's broker or agent can perform services for the seller. Because Section 2(c) of the Robinson-Patman Act stands on its own, the plaintiff need prove only that a single payment was made. Further proof of competitive impact is unnecessary. Hence Section 2(c) cases are relatively easy to win once the fact of a brokerage commission is uncovered.

### **Allowances for Merchandising and Other Services**

Sections 2(d) and 2(e) of the Robinson-Patman Act prohibit sellers from granting discriminatory allowances for merchandising and from performing other services for buyers on a discriminatory basis. These sections are necessary because price alone is far from the only way to offer discounts to favored buyers. Allowances and services covered by these sections include advertising allowances, floor and window displays, warehousing, return privileges, and special packaging.

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Under the Robinson-Patman Act, it is illegal to charge different prices to different purchasers if the items are the same and the price discrimination lessens competition. It is legal, however, to charge a lower price to a specific buyer if the cost of serving that buyer is lower or if the seller is simply "meeting competition."

#### **EXERCISES**

1. Nikon sells its cameras to retailers at 5 percent less in the state of California than in Nevada or Arizona. Without knowing more, can you say that this is illegal?
2. Tysons Foods sells its chicken wings to GFS and other very large distributors at a price per wing that is 10 percent less than it sells to most grocery store chains. The difference is attributable to transportation costs, since GFS and others accept shipments in very large containers, which cost less to deliver than smaller containers. Is the price differential legal?

3. Your best customer, who has high volume with your company, asks you for a volume discount. Actually, he demands this, rather than just asking. Under what circumstances, if any, can you grant this request without violating antitrust laws?

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[1] *FTC v. Borden Co.*, 383 U.S. 637 (1966).

[2] *FTC v. Morton Salt Co.*, 334 U.S. 37 (1948).

[3] *Perkins v. Standard Oil Co.*, 395 U.S. 642 (1969).

## 23.5 Exemptions

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Know and describe the various exemptions from US antitrust law.

### Regulated Industries

Congress has subjected several industries to oversight by specific regulatory agencies. These include banking, securities and commodities exchanges, communications, transportation, and fuel and energy. The question often arises whether companies within those industries are immune to antitrust attack. No simple answer can be given. As a general rule, activities that fall directly within the authority of the regulatory agency are immune. The agency is said to have exclusive jurisdiction over the conduct—for example, the rate structure of the national stock exchanges, which are supervised by the Securities and Exchange Commission. But determining whether a particular case falls within a specific power of an agency is still up to the courts, and judges tend to read the antitrust laws broadly and the regulatory laws narrowly when they seem to clash. A doctrine known as primary jurisdiction often dictates that the question of regulatory propriety must first be submitted to the agency before the courts will rule on an antitrust question. If the agency decides the activity complained of is otherwise impermissible, the antitrust question becomes moot.

### Organized Labor

In the Clayton Act, Congress explicitly exempted labor unions from the antitrust laws in order to permit workers to band together. Section 6 says that “the labor of a human being is not a

commodity or article of commerce. Nothing contained in the antitrust laws shall be construed to forbid the existence and operation of labor...organizations,...nor shall such organizations, or the members thereof, be held or construed to be illegal combinations or conspiracies in restraint of trade, under the antitrust laws.” This provision was included to reverse earlier decisions of the courts that had applied the Sherman Act more against labor than business. Nevertheless, the immunity is not total, and unions have run afoul of the laws when they have combined with nonlabor groups to achieve a purpose unlawful under the antitrust laws. Thus a union could not bargain with an employer to sell its products above a certain price floor.

### **Insurance Companies**

Under the McCarran-Ferguson Act of 1945, insurance companies are not covered by the antitrust laws to the extent that the states regulate the business of insurance. Whether or not the states adequately regulate insurance and the degree to which the exemption applies are complex questions, and there has been some political pressure to repeal the insurance exemption.

### **State Action**

In 1943, the Supreme Court ruled in *Parker v. Brown* that when a valid state law regulates a particular industry practice and the industry members are bound to follow that law, then they are exempt from the federal antitrust laws. <sup>[1]</sup> Such laws include regulation of public power and licensing and regulation of the professions. This exemption for “state action” has proved troublesome and, like the other exemptions, a complex matter to apply. But it is clear that the state law must require or compel the action and not merely permit it. No state law would be valid if it simply said, “Bakers in the state may jointly establish tariffs for the sale of cookies.” The recent trend of Supreme Court decisions is to construe the exemption as narrowly as possible. A city, county, or other subordinate unit of a state is not immune under the *Parker* doctrine. A municipality can escape the consequences of antitrust violations—for example, in its operation of utilities—only if it is carrying out express policy of the state. Even then, a state-mandated price-fixing scheme may not survive a federal antitrust attack. New York law required liquor retailers to charge a certain minimum price, but because the state itself did not actively supervise the policy it had established, it fell to the Supreme Court’s antitrust axe.

### **Group Solicitation of Government**

Suppose representatives of the railroad industry lobby extensively and eventually successfully for state legislation that hampers truckers, the railroads' deadly enemies. Is this a combination or conspiracy to restrain trade? In *Eastern Railroad President's Conference v. Noerr Motor Freight, Inc.*, the Supreme Court said no. <sup>[2]</sup> What has come to be known as the *Noerr* doctrine holds that applying the antitrust laws to such activities would violate First Amendment rights to petition the government. One exception to this rule of immunity for soliciting action by the government comes when certain groups seek to harass competitors by instituting state or federal proceedings against them if the claims are baseless or known to be false. Nor does the *Noerr* doctrine apply to horizontal boycotts even if the object is to force the government to take action. In *FTC v. Superior Court Trial Lawyers Assn.*, the Supreme Court held that a group of criminal defense lawyers had clearly violated the Sherman Act when they agreed among themselves to stop handling cases on behalf of indigent defendants to force the local government to raise the lawyers' fees. <sup>[3]</sup> The Court rejected their claim that they had a First Amendment right to influence the government through a boycott to pay a living wage so that indigent defendants could be adequately represented.

## Baseball

Baseball, the Supreme Court said back in 1923, is not "in commerce." Congress has never seen fit to overturn this doctrine. Although some inroads have been made in the way that the leagues and clubs may exercise their power, the basic decision stands. Some things are sacred.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

For various reasons over time, certain industries and organized groups have been exempted from the operation of US antitrust laws. These include organized labor, insurance companies, and baseball. In addition, First Amendment concerns allow trade groups to solicit both state and federal governments, and state law may sometimes provide a "state action" exemption.

### EXERCISE

1. Do a little Internet research. Find out why Curt Flood brought an antitrust lawsuit against Major League Baseball and what the Supreme Court did with his case.

[1] *Parker v. Brown*, 317 U.S. 341 (1943).

[2] *Eastern Railroad President's Conference v. Noerr Motor Freight, Inc.*, 365 U.S. 127 (1961).

[3] *FTC v. Superior Court Trial Lawyers Assn.*, 493 U.S. 411 (1990).

## 23.6 Sherman Act, Section 2: Concentrations of Market Power

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the ways in which monopoly power can be injurious to competition.
- Explain why not all monopolies are illegal under the Sherman Act.
- Recognize the importance of defining the relevant market in terms of both geography and product.
- Describe the remedies for Sherman Act Section 2 violations.

### Introduction

Large companies, or any company that occupies a large portion of any market segment, can thwart competition through the exercise of monopoly power. Indeed, monopoly means the lack of competition, or at least of effective competition. As the Supreme Court has long defined it, monopoly is “the power to control market prices or exclude competition.”<sup>[1]</sup> Public concern about the economic and political power of the large trusts, which tended to become monopolies in the late nineteenth century, led to Section 2 of the Sherman Act in 1890 and to Section 7 of the Clayton Act in 1914. These statutes are not limited to the giants of American industry, such as ExxonMobil, Microsoft, Google, or AT&T. A far smaller company that dominates a relatively small geographic area or that merges with another company in an area where few others compete can be in for trouble under Sections 2 or 7. These laws should therefore be of concern to all businesses, not just those on the Fortune 500 list. In this section, we will consider how the courts have interpreted both the Section 2 prohibition against monopolizing and the Section 7 prohibition against mergers and acquisitions that tend to lessen competition or to create monopolies.



Section 2 of the Sherman Act reads as follows: “Every person who shall monopolize, or attempt to monopolize, or combine or conspire with any other person or persons, to monopolize any part of the trade or commerce among the several states, or with foreign nations, shall be deemed guilty of a [felony].”

We begin the analysis of Section 2 with the basic proposition that a monopoly is not per se unlawful. Section 2 itself makes this proposition inescapable: it forbids the act of monopolizing, not the condition or attribute of monopoly. Why should that be so? If monopoly power is detrimental to a functioning competitive market system, why shouldn't the law ban the very existence of a monopoly?

The answer is that we cannot hope to have “perfect competition” but only “workable competition.” Any number of circumstances might lead to monopolies that we would not want to eliminate. Demand for a product might be limited to what one company could produce, there thus being no incentive for any competitor to come into the market. A small town may be able to support only one supermarket, newspaper, or computer outlet. If a company is operating efficiently through economies of scale, we would not want to split it apart and watch the resulting companies fail. An innovator may have a field all to himself, yet we would not want to penalize the inventor for his very act of invention. Or a company might simply be smarter and more efficient, finally coming to stand alone through the very operation of competitive pressures. It would be an irony indeed if the law were to condemn a company that was forged in the fires of competition itself. As the Supreme Court has said, the Sherman Act was designed to protect competition, not competitors.

A company that has had a monopoly position “thrust upon it” is perfectly lawful. The law penalizes not the monopolist as such but the competitor who gains his monopoly power through illegitimate means with an intent to become a monopolist, or who after having become a monopolist acts illegitimately to maintain his power.

A Section 2 case involves three essential factors:

- What is the relevant market for determining dominance? The question of relevant market has two aspects: a geographic market dimension and a relevant product market dimension. It makes a considerable difference whether the company is thought to be a competitor in ten states or only one. A large company in one state may appear tiny matched against competitors operating in many states. Likewise, if the product itself has real substitutes, it makes little sense to brand its maker a monopolist. For instance, Coca-Cola is made by only one company, but that does not make the Coca-Cola Company a monopoly, for its soft drink competes with many in the marketplace.
- How much monopoly power is too much? What share of the market must a company have to be labeled a monopoly? Is a company with 50 percent of the market a monopoly? 75 percent? 90 percent?
- What constitutes an illegitimate means of gaining or maintaining monopoly power?

These factors are often closely intertwined, especially the first two. This makes it difficult to examine each separately, but to the extent possible, we will address each factor in the order given.

## **Relevant Markets: Product Market and Geographic Market**

### **Product Market**

The monopolist never exercises power in the abstract. When exercised, monopoly power is used to set prices or exclude competition in the market for a particular product or products.

Therefore it is essential in any Section 2 case to determine what products to include in the relevant market.

The Supreme Court looks at “cross-elasticity of demand” to determine the relevant market. That is, to what degree can a substitute be found for the product in question if the producer sets the price too high? If consumers stay with the product as its price rises, moving to a substitute only at a very high price, then the product is probably in a market by itself. If consumers shift to another product with slight rises in price, then the product market is “elastic” and must include all such substitutes.

## Geographic Market

A company doesn't have to dominate the world market for a particular product or service in order to be held to be a monopolist. The Sherman Act speaks of "any part" of the trade or commerce. The Supreme Court defines this as the "area of effective competition." Ordinarily, the smaller the part the government can point to, the greater its chances of prevailing, since a company usually will have greater control over a single marketplace than a regional or national market. Because of this, alleged monopolists will usually argue for a broad geographic market, while the government tries to narrow it by pointing to such factors as transportation costs and the degree to which consumers will shop outside the defined area.

## Monopoly Power

After the relevant product and geographic markets are defined, the next question is whether the defendant has sufficient power within them to constitute a monopoly. The usual test is the market share the alleged monopolist enjoys, although no rigid rule or mathematical formula is possible. In *United States v. Aluminum Company of America*, presented in **Section 23.8.3 "Acquiring and Maintaining a Monopoly"** of this chapter, Judge Learned Hand said that Alcoa's 90 percent share of the ingot market was enough to constitute a monopoly but that 64 percent would have been doubtful. <sup>[2]</sup> In a case against DuPont many years ago, the court looked at a 75 percent market share in cellophane but found that the relevant market (considering the cross-elasticity of demand) was not restricted to cellophane.

## Monopolization: Acquiring and Maintaining a Monopoly

Possessing a monopoly is not per se unlawful. Once a company has been found to have monopoly power in a relevant market, the final question is whether it either acquired its monopoly power in an unlawful way or has acted unlawfully to maintain it. This additional element of "deliberateness" does not mean that the government must prove that the defendant intended monopolization, in the sense that what it desired was the complete exclusion of all competitors. It is enough to show that the monopoly would probably result from its actions, for as Judge Hand put it, "No monopolist monopolizes unconscious of what he is doing."

What constitutes proof of unlawful acquisition or maintenance of a monopoly? In general, proof is made by showing that the defendant's acts were aimed at or had the probable effect of excluding competitors from the market. Violations of Section 1 or other provisions of the antitrust laws are examples. "Predatory pricing"—charging less than cost—can be evidence that the defendant's purpose was monopolistic, for small companies cannot compete with large manufacturers capable of sustaining continued losses until the competition folds up and ceases operations.

In *United States v. Lorain Journal Company*, the town of Lorain, Ohio, could support only one newspaper. <sup>[3]</sup> With a circulation of twenty thousand, the *Lorain Journal* reached more than 99 percent of the town's families. The *Journal* had thus lawfully become a monopoly. But when a radio station was set up, the paper found itself competing directly for local and national advertising. To retaliate, the *Journal* refused to accept advertisements unless the advertiser agreed not to advertise on the local station. The Court agreed that this was an unlawful attempt to boycott and hence was a violation of Section 2 because the paper was using its monopoly power to exclude a competitor. (Where was the interstate commerce that would bring the activity under federal law? The Court said that the radio station was in interstate commerce because it broadcast national news supported by national advertising.)

Practices that help a company acquire or maintain its monopoly position need not be unlawful in themselves. In the *Aluminum Company* case, Alcoa claimed its monopoly power was the result of superior business skills and techniques. These superior skills led it to constantly build plant capacity and expand output at every opportunity. But Judge Hand thought otherwise, given that for a quarter of a century other producers could not break into the market because Alcoa acted at every turn to make it impossible for them to compete, even as Alcoa increased its output by some 800 percent. Judge Hand's explanation remains the classic exposition.

### **Innovation as Evidence of Intent to Monopolize**

During the 1970s, several monopolization cases seeking huge damages were filed against a number of well-known companies, including Xerox, International Business Machines (IBM), and Eastman Kodak. In particular, IBM was hit with several suits as an outgrowth of the Justice

Department's lawsuit against the computer maker. (United States v. IBM was filed in 1969 and did not terminate until 1982, when the government agreed to drop all charges, a complete victory for the company.) The plaintiffs in many of these suits—SCM Corporation against Xerox, California Computer Products Incorporated against IBM (the Calcomp case), Berkey Photo Incorporated against Kodak—charged that the defendants had maintained their alleged monopolies by strategically introducing key product innovations that rendered competitive products obsolete. For example, hundreds of computer companies manufacture peripheral equipment “plug-compatible” with IBM computers. Likewise, Berkey manufactured film usable in Kodak cameras. When the underlying products are changed—mainframe computers, new types of cameras—the existing manufacturers are left with unusable inventory and face a considerable time lag in designing new peripheral equipment. In some of these cases, the plaintiffs managed to obtain sizable treble damage awards—SCM won more than \$110 million, IBM initially lost one case in the amount of \$260 million, and Berkey bested Kodak to the tune of \$87 million. Had these cases been sustained on appeal, a radical new doctrine would have been imported into the antitrust laws—that innovation for the sake of competing is unlawful.

None of these cases withstood appellate scrutiny. The Supreme Court has not heard cases in this area, so the law that has emerged is from decisions of the federal courts of appeals. A typical case is ILC Peripherals Leasing Corp. v. International Business Machines (the Memorex case).<sup>[4]</sup> Memorex argued that among other things, IBM's tactic of introducing a new generation of computer technology at lower prices constituted monopolization. The court disagreed, noting that other companies could “reverse engineer” IBM equipment much more cheaply than IBM could originally design it and that IBM computers and related products were subject to intense competition to the benefit of plug-compatible equipment users. The actions of IBM undoubtedly hurt Memorex, but they were part and parcel of the competitive system, the very essence of competition. “This kind of conduct by IBM,” the court said, “is precisely what the antitrust laws were meant to encourage....Memorex sought to use the antitrust laws to make time stand still and preserve its very profitable position. This court will not assist it and the others who would follow after in this endeavor.”

The various strands of the innovation debate are perhaps best summed up in *Berkey Photo, Inc. v. Eastman Kodak Company*, **Section 23.8.4 "Innovation and Intent to Monopolize"**.

### Attempts to Monopolize

Section 2 prohibits not only actual monopolization but also attempts to monopolize. An attempt need not succeed to be unlawful; a defendant who tries to exercise sway over a relevant market can take no legal comfort from failure. In any event, the plaintiff must show a specific intent to monopolize, not merely an intent to commit the act or acts that constitute the attempt.

### Remedies

Since many of the defendant's acts that constitute Sherman Act Section 2 monopolizing are also violations of Section 1 of the Clayton Act, why should plaintiffs resort to Section 2 at all? What practical difference does Section 2 make? One answer is that not every act of monopolizing is a violation of another law. Leasing and pricing practices that are perfectly lawful for an ordinary competitor may be unlawful only because of Section 2. But the more important reason is the remedy provided by the Sherman Act: divestiture. In the right case, the courts may order the company broken up.

In the *Standard Oil* decision of 1911, the Supreme Court held that the Standard Oil Company constituted a monopoly and ordered it split apart into separate companies. Several other trusts were similarly dealt with. In many of the early cases, doing so posed no insuperable difficulties, because the companies themselves essentially consisted of separate manufacturing plants knit together by financial controls. But not every company is a loose confederation of potentially separate operating companies.

The *Alcoa* case (**Section 23.8.3 "Acquiring and Maintaining a Monopoly"**) was fraught with difficult remedial issues. Judge Hand's opinion came down in 1945, but the remedial side of the case did not come up until 1950. By then the industry had changed radically, with the entrance of Reynolds and Kaiser as effective competitors, reducing Alcoa's share of the market to 50 percent. Because any aluminum producer needs considerable resources to succeed and because aluminum production is crucial to national security, the later court refused to order the

company broken apart. The court ordered Alcoa to take a series of measures that would boost competition in the industry. For example, Alcoa stockholders had to divest themselves of the stock of a closely related Canadian producer in order to remove Alcoa's control of that company; and the court rendered unenforceable a patent-licensing agreement with Reynolds and Kaiser that required them to share their inventions with Alcoa, even though neither the Canadian tie nor the patent agreements were in themselves unlawful.

Although the trend has been away from breaking up the monopolist, it is still employed as a potent remedy. In perhaps the largest monopolization case ever brought—United States v. American Telephone & Telegraph Company—the government sought divestiture of several of AT&T's constituent companies, including Western Electric and the various local operating companies. To avoid prolonged litigation, AT&T agreed in 1982 to a consent decree that required it to spin off all its operating companies, companies that had been central to AT&T's decades-long monopoly.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Aggressive competition is good for consumers and for the market, but if the company has enough power to control a market, the benefits to society decrease. Under Section 2 of the Sherman Act, it is illegal to monopolize or attempt to monopolize the market. If the company acquires a monopoly in the wrong way, using wrongful tactics, it is illegal under Section 2. Courts will look at three questions to see if a company has illegally monopolized a market: (1) What is the relevant market? (2) Does the company control the market? and (3) How did the company acquire or maintain its control?

#### EXERCISES

1. Mammoth Company, through three subsidiaries, controls 87 percent of the equipment to operate central station hazard-detecting devices; these devices are used to prevent burglary and detect fires and to provide electronic notification to police and fire departments at a central location. In an antitrust lawsuit, Mammoth Company claims that there are other means of protecting against burglary and it therefore does not have monopoly power. Explain how the Justice Department may be able to prove its claim that Mammoth Company is operating an illegal monopoly.

2. Name the sanctions used to enforce Section 2 of the Sherman Act.

3. Look at any news database or the Department of Justice antitrust website for the past three years and describe a case involving a challenge to the exercise of a US company's monopoly power.

[1] *United States v. Grinnell Corp.*, 384 U.S. 563, 571 (1966).

[2] *United States v. Aluminum Co. of America*, 148 F.2d 416 (2d Cir. 1945).

[3] *United States v. Lorain Journal Company*, 342 U.S. 143 (1951).

[4] *ILC Peripherals Leasing Corp. v. International Business Machines*, 458 F.Supp. 423 (N.D. Cal. 1978).

## 23.7 Acquisitions and Mergers under Section 7 of the Clayton Act

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Distinguish the three kinds of mergers.
2. Describe how the courts will define the relevant market in gauging the potential anticompetitive effects of mergers and acquisitions.

Neither Section 1 nor Section 2 of the Sherman Act proved particularly useful in barring mergers between companies or acquisition by one company of another. As originally written, neither did the Clayton Act, which prohibited only mergers accomplished through the sale of stock, not mergers or acquisitions carried out through acquisition of assets. In 1950, Congress amended the Clayton Act to cover the loophole concerning acquisition of assets. It also narrowed the search for relevant market; henceforth, if competition might be lessened *in any line of commerce in any section of the country*, the merger is unlawful.

As amended, the pertinent part of Section 7 of the Clayton Act reads as follows:

*[N]o corporation engaged in commerce shall acquire, directly or indirectly, the whole or any part of the stock or other share capital and no corporation subject to the jurisdiction of the Federal Trade Commission shall acquire the whole or any part of*



*the assets of another corporation engaged also in commerce, where in any line of commerce in any section of the country, the effect of such acquisition may be substantially to lessen competition, or to tend to create a monopoly.*

*No corporation shall acquire, directly or indirectly, the whole or any part of the stock or other share capital and no corporation subject to the jurisdiction of the Federal Trade Commission shall acquire the whole or any part of the assets of one or more corporations engaged in commerce, where in any line of commerce in any section of the country, the effect of such acquisition, of such stock or assets, or of the use of such stock by the voting or granting of proxies or otherwise, may be substantially to lessen competition, or to tend to create a monopoly.*

## **Definitions**

### **Mergers and Acquisitions**

For the sake of brevity, we will refer to both mergers and acquisitions as mergers. Mergers are usually classified into three types: horizontal, vertical, and conglomerate.

#### **Horizontal**

A horizontal merger is one between competitors—for example, between two bread manufacturers or two grocery chains competing in the same locale.

#### **Vertical**

A vertical merger is that of a supplier and a customer. If the customer acquires the supplier, it is known as backward vertical integration; if the supplier acquires the customer, it is forward vertical integration. For example, a book publisher that buys a paper manufacturer has engaged in backward vertical integration. Its purchase of a bookstore chain would be forward vertical integration.

#### **Conglomerate Mergers**

Conglomerate mergers do not have a standard definition but generally are taken to be mergers between companies whose businesses are not directly related. Many commentators have subdivided this category into three types. In a “pure” conglomerate merger, the businesses are not related, as when a steel manufacturer acquires a movie distributor. In a product-extension merger, the manufacturer of one product acquires the manufacturer of a related product—for

instance, a producer of household cleansers, but not of liquid bleach, acquires a producer of liquid bleach. In a market-extension merger, a company in one geographic market acquires a company in the same business in a different location. For example, suppose a bakery operating only in San Francisco buys a bakery operating only in Palo Alto. Since they had not competed before the merger, this would not be a horizontal merger.

## General Principles

As in monopolization cases, a relevant product market and geographic market must first be marked out to test the effect of the merger. But Section 7 of the Clayton Act has a market definition different from that of Section 2. Section 7 speaks of “*any line* of commerce in any *section* of the country” (emphasis added). And its test for the effect of the merger is the same as that which we have already seen for exclusive dealing cases governed by Section 3: “may be substantially to lessen competition or to tend to create a monopoly.” Taken together, this language makes it easier to condemn an unlawful merger than an unlawful monopoly. The relevant product market is any *line* of commerce, and the courts have taken this language to permit the plaintiff to prove the existence of “submarkets” in which the relative effect of the merger is greater. The relevant geographic market is any *section of the country*, which means that the plaintiff can show the appropriate effect in a city or a particular region and not worry about having to show the effect in a national market. Moreover, as we have seen, the effect is one of probability, not actuality. Thus the question is, *Might* competition be substantially lessened? rather than, *Was* competition in fact substantially lessened? Likewise, the question is, Did the merger *tend* to create a monopoly? rather than, Did the merger in fact create a monopoly? In *United States v. du Pont*, the government charged that du Pont’s “commanding position as General Motors’ supplier of automotive finishes and fabrics” was not achieved on competitive merit alone but because du Pont had acquired a sizable block of GM stock, and the “consequent close intercompany relationship led to the insulation of most of the General Motors’ market from free competition,” in violation of Section 7. <sup>[3]</sup> Between 1917 and 1919, du Pont took a 23 percent stock interest in GM. The district court dismissed the complaint, partly on the grounds that at least before the 1950 amendment to Section 7, the Clayton Act did not condemn vertical mergers and partly on the grounds that du Pont had not dominated GM’s decision to purchase

millions of dollars' worth of automotive finishes and fabrics. The Supreme Court disagreed with this analysis and sent the case back to trial. The Court specifically held that even though the stock acquisition had occurred some thirty-five years earlier, the government can resort to Section 7 whenever it appears that the result of the acquisition will violate the competitive tests set forth in the section.

### **Defining the Market**

In the seminal *Brown Shoe* case, the Supreme Court said that the outer boundaries of broad markets “are determined by the reasonable interchangeability of use or the cross elasticity of demand between the product itself and substitutes for it” but that narrower “well defined submarkets” might also be appropriate lines of commerce. <sup>[2]</sup> In drawing market boundaries, the Court said, courts should realistically reflect “[c]ompetition where, in fact, it exists.” Among the factors to consider are “industry or public recognition of the submarket as a separate economic entity, the product’s peculiar characteristics and uses, unique production facilities, distinct customers, distinct prices, sensitivity to price changes and specialized vendors.” To select the geographic market, courts must consider both “the commercial realities” of the industry and the economic significance of the market.

### **The Failing Company Doctrine**

One defense to a Section 7 case is that one of the merging companies is a failing company. In *Citizen Publishing Company v. United States*, the Supreme Court said that the defense is applicable if two conditions are satisfied. <sup>[3]</sup> First, a company must be staring bankruptcy in the face; it must have virtually no chance of being resuscitated without the merger. Second, the acquiring company must be the only available purchaser, and the failing company must have made bona fide efforts to search for another purchaser.

### **Beneficial Effects**

That a merger might produce beneficial effects is not a defense to a Section 7 case. As the Supreme Court said in *United States v. Philadelphia National Bank*, “[A] merger, the effect of which ‘may be substantially to lessen competition’ is not saved because, on some ultimate reckoning of social or economic debits or credits, it may be deemed beneficial.” <sup>[4]</sup> And in *FTC v. Procter & Gamble Co.*, the Court said, “Possible economies cannot be used as a defense to

illegality.”<sup>[5]</sup> Congress was also aware that some mergers which lessen competition may also result in economies but it struck the balance in favor of protecting competition.

## Tests of Competitive Effect

### Horizontal Mergers

Three factors are critical in assessing whether a horizontal merger may substantially lessen competition: (1) the market shares of the merging companies, (2) the concentration ratios, and (3) the trends in the industry toward concentration.

The first factor is self-evident. A company with 10 percent or even 5 percent of the market is in a different position from one with less than 1 percent. A concentration ratio indicates the number of firms that constitute an industry. An industry with only four firms is obviously much more concentrated than one with ten or seventy firms. Concentration trends indicate the frequency with which firms in the relevant market have been merging. The first merger in an industry with a low concentration ratio might be predicted to have no likely effect on competition, but a merger of two firms in a four-firm industry would obviously have a pronounced effect.

In the *Philadelphia National Bank* case, the court announced this test in assessing the legality of a horizontal merger: “[A] merger which produces a firm controlling an undue percentage share of the relevant market, and results in a significant increase in the concentration of firms in that market is so inherently likely to lessen competition substantially that it must be enjoined in the absence of evidence clearly showing that the merger is not likely to have such anticompetitive effects.” In this case, the merger led to a 30 percent share of the commercial banking market in a four-county region around Philadelphia and an increase in concentration by more than one-third, and the court held that those numbers amounted to a violation of Section 7. The court also said that “if concentration is already great, the importance of preventing even slight increases in concentration and so preserving the possibility of eventual de-concentration is correspondingly great.”

The Hart-Scott-Rodino Antitrust Improvements Act of 1976 requires certain companies to notify the Justice Department before actually completing mergers or acquisitions, whether by private negotiation or by public tender offer. When one of the companies has sales or assets of \$100 million or more and the other company \$10 million or more, premerger notification must be

provided at least thirty days prior to completion of the deal—or fifteen days in the case of a tender offer of cash for publicly traded shares if the resulting merger would give the acquiring company \$50 million worth or 15 percent of assets or voting securities in the acquired company. The rules are complex, but they are designed to give the department time to react to a merger before it has been secretly accomplished and then announced. The 1976 act gives the department the authority to seek an injunction against the completion of any such merger, which of course greatly simplifies the remedial phase of the case should the courts ultimately hold that the merger would be unlawful. (Note: Section 7 is one of the “tools” in the kit of the lawyer who defends companies against unwelcomed takeover attempts: if the target company can point to lines of its business in which it competes with the acquiring company, it can threaten antitrust action in order to block the merger.)

### **Vertical Mergers**

To prove a Section 7 case involving a vertical merger, the plaintiff must show that the merger forecloses competition “in a substantial share of” a substantial market. But statistical factors alone do not govern in a vertical merger. To illustrate, we see that in *Ford Motor Co. v. United States*, the merger between Ford and Autolite (a manufacturer of spark plugs) was held unlawful because it eliminated Ford’s potential entry into the market as an independent manufacturer of spark plugs and because it foreclosed Ford “as a purchaser of about ten percent of total industry output” of spark plugs. <sup>[6]</sup> This decision underscores the principle that a company may serve to enhance competition simply by waiting in the wings as a potential entrant to a market. If other companies feel threatened by a company the size of Ford undertaking to compete where it had not done so before, the existing manufacturers will likely keep their prices low so as not to tempt the giant in. Of course, had Ford entered the market on its own by independently manufacturing spark plugs, it might ultimately have caused weak competitors to fold. As the Court said, “Had Ford taken the internal-expansion route, there would have been no illegality; not, however, because the result necessarily would have been commendable, but simply because that course has not been proscribed.”

### **Conglomerate Mergers**

Recall the definition of a conglomerate merger given in [Section 23.7.1 "Definitions"](#). None of the three types listed has a direct impact on competition, so the test for illegality is more difficult to state and apply than for horizontal or vertical mergers. But they are nonetheless within the reach of Section 7. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the government filed a number of divestiture suits against conglomerate mergers. It did not win them all, and none reached the Supreme Court; most were settled by consent decree, leading in several instances to divestiture either of the acquired company or of another division of the acquiring company. Thus International Telephone & Telegraph Company agreed to divest itself of Canteen Corporation and either of the following two groups: (1) Avis, Levin & Sons, and Hamilton Life Insurance Company; or (2) Hartford Fire Insurance Company. Ling-Temco-Vought agreed to divest itself of either Jones & Laughlin Steel or Braniff Airways and Okonite Corporation. In these and other cases, the courts have looked to specific potential effects, such as raising the barriers to entry into a market and eliminating potential competition, but they have rejected the more general claim of “the rising tide of economic concentration in American industry.”

### **Entrenching Oligopoly**

One way to attack conglomerate mergers is to demonstrate that by taking over a dominant company in an oligopolistic industry, a large and strong acquiring company will further entrench the oligopoly. In an oligopolistic industry, just a few major competitors so dominate the industry that competition is quelled. In *FTC v. Procter & Gamble Co.*, the government challenged Procter & Gamble’s (P&G’s) acquisition of Clorox. P&G was the leading seller of household cleansers, with annual sales of more than \$1 billion.<sup>[7]</sup> In addition, it was the “nation’s largest advertiser,” promoting its products so heavily that it was able to take advantage of substantial advertising discounts from the media. Clorox had more than 48 percent of national sales for liquid bleach in a heavily concentrated industry. Since all liquid bleach is chemically identical, advertising and promotion plays the dominant role in selling the product. Prior to the merger, P&G did not make or sell liquid bleach; hence it was a product-extension merger rather than a horizontal one.

The Supreme Court concluded that smaller firms would fear retaliation from P&G if they tried to compete in the liquid bleach market and that “a new entrant would be much more reluctant to

face the giant Procter than it would have been to face the smaller Clorox.” Hence “the substitution of the powerful acquiring firm for the smaller, but already dominant firm may substantially reduce the competitive structure of the industry by raising entry barriers and by dissuading the smaller firms from aggressively competing.” The entrenchment theory probably applies only to highly concentrated industries and dominant firms, however. Many subsequent cases have come out in favor of the defendants on a variety of grounds—that the merger led simply to a more efficient acquired firm, that the existing competitors were strong and able to compete, or even that the acquiring firm merely gives the acquired company a deep pocket to better finance its operations.

### **Eliminating Potential Competition**

This theory holds that but for the merger, the acquiring company might have competed in the acquired company’s market. In *Procter & Gamble*, for example, P&G might have entered the liquid bleach market itself and thus given Clorox a run for its money. An additional strong company would then have been in the market. When P&G bought Clorox, however, it foreclosed that possibility. This theory depends on proof of some probability that the acquiring company would have entered the market. When the acquired company is small, however, a Section 7 violation is unlikely; these so-called toehold mergers permit the acquiring company to become a competitive force in an industry without necessarily sacrificing any preexisting competition.

### **Reciprocity**

Many companies are both heavy buyers and heavy sellers of products. A company may buy from its customers as well as sell to them. This practice is known in antitrust jargon as reciprocity. Reciprocity is the practice of a seller who uses his volume of purchases from the buyer to induce the buyer to purchase from him. The clearest example arose in *FTC v. Consolidated Foods Corp.*<sup>[8]</sup> Consolidated owned wholesale grocery outlets and retail food stores. It wanted to merge with Gentry, which made dehydrated onions and garlic. The Supreme Court agreed that the merger violated Section 7 because of the possibility of reciprocity: Consolidated made bulk purchases from several food processors, which were purchasers of dehydrated onions and garlic from Gentry and others. Processors who did not buy from Gentry might feel pressured to do so in order to keep Consolidated as a customer for their food supplies. If so, other onion and garlic

processors would be foreclosed from competing for sales. A merger that raises the mere possibility of reciprocity is not per se unlawful, however. The plaintiff must demonstrate that it was probable the acquiring company would adopt the practice—for example, by conditioning future orders for supplies on the receipt of orders for onions and garlic—and that doing so would have an anticompetitive effect given the size of the reciprocating companies and their positions in the market.

### **Joint Ventures**

Section 7 can also apply to joint ventures, a rule first announced in 1964. Two companies, Hooker and American Potash, dominated sales of sodium chlorate in the Southeast, with 90 percent of the market. Pennsalt Chemicals Corporation produced the rest in the West and sold it in the Southeast through Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation. The latter two decided to team up, the better to compete with the giants, and so they formed Penn-Olin, which they jointly owned. The district court dismissed the government's suit, but the Supreme Court reinstated it, saying that a joint venture can serve to blunt competition, or at least potential competition, between the parent companies. The Court said that the lower court must look to a number of factors to determine whether the joint venture was likely to lessen competition substantially:

*The number and power of the competitors in the relevant market; the background of their growth; the power of the joint venturers; the relationship of their lines of commerce; competition existing between them and the power of each in dealing with the competitors of the other; the setting in which the joint venture was created; the reasons and necessities for its existence; the joint venture's line of commerce and the relationship thereof to that of its parents; the adaptability of its line of commerce to non-competitive practices; the potential power of the joint venture in the relevant market; and appraisal of what the competition in the relevant market would have been if one of the joint venturers had entered it alone instead of through Penn-Olin; the effect, in the event of this occurrence, of the other joint venturer's potential competition; and such other factors as might indicate potential risk to competition in the relevant market.* <sup>[9]</sup>



These numerous factors illustrate how the entire economic environment surrounding the joint venture and mergers in general must be assessed to determine the legalities.

## Remedies

The Clayton Act provides that the government may seek divestiture when an acquisition or a merger violates the act. Until relatively recently, however, it was unresolved whether a private plaintiff could seek divestiture after proving a Clayton Act violation. In 1990, the Supreme Court unanimously agreed that divestiture is an available remedy in private suits, even in suits filed by a state's attorney general on behalf of consumers.<sup>[10]</sup> This ruling makes it more likely that antimerger litigation will increase in the future.

During the years of the Reagan administration in the 1980s, the federal government became far less active in prosecuting antitrust cases, especially merger cases, than it had been in previous decades. Many giant mergers went unchallenged, like the merger between two oil behemoths, Texaco and Getty, resulting in a company with nearly \$50 billion in assets in 1984. With the arrival of the first Bush administration in 1989, the talk in Washington antitrust circles was of a renewed interest in antitrust enforcement. The arrival of the second Bush administration in 2000 brought about an era of less antitrust enforcement than had been undertaken during the Clinton administration. Whether the Obama administration reinvigorates antitrust enforcement remains to be seen.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Section 7 prohibits mergers or acquisitions that might tend to lessen competition in any line of commerce in any section of the country. Mergers and acquisitions are usually classified in one of three ways: horizontal (between competitors), vertical (between different levels of the distribution chain), or conglomerate (between businesses that are not directly related).

The latter may be divided into product-extension and market-expansion mergers. The relevant market test is different than in monopolization cases; in a Section 7 action, relevance of market may be proved.

In assessing horizontal mergers, the courts will look to the market shares of emerging companies, industry concentration ratios, and trends toward concentration in the industry.

To prove a Section 7 case, the plaintiff must show that the merger forecloses competition "in

a substantial share of” a substantial market. Conglomerate merger cases are harder to prove and require a showing of specific potential effects, such as raising barriers to entry into an industry and thus entrenching monopoly, or eliminating potential competition. Joint ventures may also be condemned by Section 7. The Hart-Scott-Rodino Antitrust Improvements Act of 1976 requires certain companies to get premerger notice to the Justice Department.

## EXERCISES

1. Sirius Satellite radio and XM satellite radio proposed to merge. Was this a horizontal merger, a vertical merger, or a conglomerate merger? How is the market defined, in terms of both product or service and geographic area?
2. In 2010, Live Nation and Ticketmaster proposed to merge. Was this a horizontal merger, a vertical merger, or a conglomerate merger? How should the market be defined, in terms of both product or service and geographic area? Should the US government approve the merger?

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[1] *United States v. du Pont*, 353 U.S. 586 (1957).

[2] *Brown Shoe Co., Inc. v. United States*, 370 U.S. 294 (1962).

[3] *Citizen Publishing Company v. United States*, 394 U.S. 131 (1969).

[4] *United States v. Philadelphia National Bank*, 374 U.S. 321, 371 (1963).

[5] *FTC v. Procter & Gamble Co.*, 386 U.S. 568, 580 (1967).

[6] *Ford Motor Co. v. United States*, 405 U.S. 562 (1972).

[7] *FTC v. Procter & Gamble Co.*, 386 U.S. 568 (1967).

[8] *FTC v. Consolidated Foods Corp.*, 380 U.S. 592 (1965).

[9] *United States v. Penn-Olin Chemical Co.*, 378 U.S. 158 (1964).

[10] *California v. American Stores*, 58 U.S.L.W. 4529 (1990).

## 23.8 Cases

### Horizontal Restraints of Trade

*National Society of Professional Engineers v. United States*

Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/books>



Saylor.org

922

*435 U.S. 679 (1978)*

MR. JUSTICE STEVENS delivered the opinion of the Court.

This is a civil antitrust case brought by the United States to nullify an association's canon of ethics prohibiting competitive bidding by its members. The question is whether the canon may be justified under the Sherman Act, 15 U.S. c. § 1 et seq. (1976 ed.), because it was adopted by members of a learned profession for the purpose of minimizing the risk that competition would produce inferior engineering work endangering the public safety. The District Court rejected this justification without making any findings on the likelihood that competition would produce the dire consequences foreseen by the association. The Court of Appeals affirmed. We granted certiorari to decide whether the District Court should have considered the factual basis for the proffered justification before rejecting it. Because we are satisfied that the asserted defense rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the Rule of Reason frequently applied in antitrust litigation, we affirm.

Engineering is an important and learned profession. There are over 750,000 graduate engineers in the United States, of whom about 325,000 are registered as professional engineers.

Registration requirements vary from State to State, but usually require the applicant to be a graduate engineer with at least four years of practical experience and to pass a written examination. About half of those who are registered engage in consulting engineering on a fee basis. They perform services in connection with the study, design, and construction of all types of improvements to real property—bridges, office buildings, airports, and factories are examples. Engineering fees, amounting to well over \$2 billion each year, constitute about 5% of total construction costs. In any given facility, approximately 50% to 80% of the cost of construction is the direct result of work performed by an engineer concerning the systems and equipment to be incorporated in the structure.

The National Society of Professional Engineers (Society) was organized in 1935 to deal with the nontechnical aspects of engineering practice, including the promotion of the professional, social, and economic interests of its members. Its present membership of 69,000 resides throughout the United States and in some foreign countries. Approximately 12,000 members are consulting engineers who offer their services to governmental, industrial, and private clients. Some Society

members are principals or chief executive officers of some of the largest engineering firms in the country.

The charges of a consulting engineer may be computed in different ways. He may charge the client a percentage of the cost of the project, may charge fixed rates per hour for different types of work, may perform an assignment for a specific sum, or he may combine one or more of these approaches....This case...involves a charge that the members of the Society have unlawfully agreed to refuse to negotiate or even to discuss the question of fees until after a prospective client has selected the engineer for a particular project. Evidence of this agreement is found in § II(c) of the Society's Code of Ethics, adopted in July 1964.

The District Court found that the Society's Board of Ethical Review has uniformly interpreted the "ethical rules against competitive bidding for engineering services as prohibiting the submission of any form of price information to a prospective customer which would enable that customer to make a price comparison on engineering services." If the client requires that such information be provided, then § II(c) imposes an obligation upon the engineering firm to withdraw from consideration for that job.

[P]etitioner argues that its attempt to preserve the profession's traditional method of setting fees for engineering services is a reasonable method of forestalling the public harm which might be produced by unrestrained competitive bidding. To evaluate this argument it is necessary to identify the contours of the Rule of Reason and to discuss its application to the kind of justification asserted by petitioner.

\* \* \*

The test prescribed in *Standard Oil* is whether the challenged contracts or acts "were unreasonably restrictive of competitive conditions." Unreasonableness under that test could be based either (1) on the nature or character of the contracts, or (2) on surrounding circumstances giving rise to the inference or presumption that they were intended to restrain trade and enhance prices. Under either branch of the test, the inquiry is confined to a consideration of impact on competitive conditions.

\* \* \*

Price is the “central nervous system of the economy,” *United States v. Socony-Vacuum Oil Co.*, 310 U.S. 150, 226 n. 59, and an agreement that “interfere[s] with the setting of price by free market forces” is illegal on its face, *United States v. Container Corp.*, 393 U.S. 333,337. In this case we are presented with an agreement among competitors to refuse to discuss prices with potential customers until after negotiations have resulted in the initial selection of an engineer. While this is not price fixing as such, no elaborate industry analysis is required to demonstrate the anticompetitive character of such an agreement. It operates as an absolute ban on competitive bidding, applying with equal force to both complicated and simple projects and to both inexperienced and sophisticated customers. As the District Court found, the ban “impedes the ordinary give and take of the market place,” and substantially deprives the customer of “the ability to utilize and compare prices in selecting engineering services.” On its face, this agreement restrains trade within the meaning of § 1 of the Sherman Act.

The Society’s affirmative defense confirms rather than refutes the anticompetitive purpose and effect of its agreement. The Society argues that the restraint is justified because bidding on engineering services is inherently imprecise, would lead to deceptively low bids, and would thereby tempt individual engineers to do inferior work with consequent risk to public safety and health. The logic of this argument rests on the assumption that the agreement will tend to maintain the price level; if it had no such effect, it would not serve its intended purpose. The Society nonetheless invokes the Rule of Reason, arguing that its restraint on price competition ultimately inures to the public benefit by preventing the production of inferior work and by insuring ethical behavior. As the preceding discussion of the Rule of Reason reveals, this Court has never accepted such an argument.

It may be, as petitioner argues, that competition tends to force prices down and that an inexpensive item may be inferior to one that is more costly. There is some risk, therefore, that competition will cause some suppliers to market a defective product. Similarly, competitive bidding for engineering projects may be inherently imprecise and incapable of taking into account all the variables which will be involved in the actual performance of the project. Based on these considerations, a purchaser might conclude that his interest in quality—which may embrace the safety of the end product—outweighs the advantages of achieving cost savings by

putting one competitor against another. Or an individual vendor might independently refrain from price negotiation until he has satisfied himself that he fully understands the scope of his customers' needs. These decisions might be reasonable; indeed, petitioner has provided ample documentation for that thesis. But these are not reasons that satisfy the Rule; nor are such individual decisions subject to antitrust attack.

The Sherman Act does not require competitive bidding; it prohibits unreasonable restraints on competition. Petitioner's ban on competitive bidding prevents all customers from making price comparisons in the initial selection of an engineer, and imposes the Society's views of the costs and benefits of competition on the entire marketplace. It is this restraint that must be justified under the Rule of Reason, and petitioner's attempt to do so on the basis of the potential threat that competition poses to the public safety and the ethics of its profession is nothing less than a frontal assault on the basic policy of the Sherman Act.

The Sherman Act reflects a legislative judgment that ultimately competition will produce not only lower prices, but also better goods and services. "The heart of our national economic policy long has been faith in the value of competition." *Standard Oil Co. v. FTC*, 340 U.S. 231, 248. The assumption that competition is the best method of allocating resources in a free market recognizes that all elements of a bargain—quality, service, safety, and durability—and not just the immediate cost, are favorably affected by the free opportunity to select among alternative offers. Even assuming occasional exceptions to the presumed consequences of competition, the statutory policy precludes inquiry into the question whether competition is good or bad.

\* \* \*

In sum, the Rule of Reason does not support a defense based on the assumption that competition itself is unreasonable. Such a view of the Rule would create the "sea of doubt" on which Judge Taft refused to embark in *Addyston*, 85 F. 271 (1898), at 284, and which this Court has firmly avoided ever since.

\* \* \*

The judgment of the Court of Appeals is affirmed.

## CASE QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of harms are likely if there is unrestrained competitive bidding among engineering firms?
2. By what other means (i.e., *not* including deliberate nondisclosure of price information up to the time of contracting) could the National Society of Professional Engineers protect the public from harm?

## Vertical Maximum Price Fixing and the Rule of Reason

*State Oil Company v. Barkat U Khan and Khan & Associates*

522 U.S. 3 (1997)

*Barkat U. Khan and his corporation entered into an agreement with State Oil Company to lease and operate a gas station and convenience store owned by State Oil. The agreement provided that Khan would obtain the station's gasoline supply from State Oil at a price equal to a suggested retail price set by State Oil, less a margin of 3.25 cents per gallon. Under the agreement, respondents could charge any amount for gasoline sold to the station's customers, but if the price charged was higher than State Oil's suggested retail price, the excess was to be rebated to State Oil. Respondents could sell gasoline for less than State Oil's suggested retail price, but any such decrease would reduce their 3.25 cents-per-gallon margin.*

*About a year after respondents began operating the gas station, they fell behind in lease payments. State Oil then gave notice of its intent to terminate the agreement and commenced a state court proceeding to evict respondents. At State Oil's request, the state court appointed a receiver to operate the gas station. The receiver operated the station for several months without being subject to the price restraints in respondents' agreement with State Oil. According to respondents, the receiver obtained an overall profit margin in excess of 3.25 cents per gallon by lowering the price of regular-grade gasoline and raising the price of premium grades.*

*Respondents sued State Oil in the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, alleging in part that State Oil had engaged in price fixing in violation of § 1 of the Sherman Act by preventing respondents from raising or lowering retail gas prices. According to the complaint, but for the agreement with*

*State Oil, respondents could have charged different prices based on the grades of gasoline, in the same way that the receiver had, thereby achieving increased sales and profits. State Oil responded that the agreement did not actually prevent respondents from setting gasoline prices, and that, in substance, respondents did not allege a violation of antitrust laws by their claim that State Oil's suggested retail price was not optimal.*

*The District Court entered summary judgment for State Oil on this claim, [finding] that [Khan's allegations, if true]...did not establish the sort of "manifestly anticompetitive implications or pernicious effect on competition" that would justify per se prohibition of State Oil's conduct. The Seventh Circuit reversed. The Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit reversed the District Court's grant of summary judgment for State Oil on the basis of *Albrecht v. Herald Co.*, 390 U.S. 14 (1968). 93 F.3d 1358 (1996). The court first noted that the agreement between respondents and State Oil did indeed fix maximum gasoline prices by making it "worthless" for respondents to exceed the suggested retail prices. After reviewing legal and economic aspects of price fixing, the court concluded that State Oil's pricing scheme was a per se antitrust violation under *Albrecht v. Herald Co.*, supra. Although the Court of Appeals characterized *Albrecht* as "unsound when decided" and "inconsistent with later decisions" of this Court, it felt constrained to follow that decision. The Supreme Court granted certiorari.*

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

We granted certiorari to consider two questions, whether State Oil's conduct constitutes a per se violation of the Sherman Act and whether respondents are entitled to recover damages based on that conduct.

\* \* \* \*

Although the Sherman Act, by its terms, prohibits every agreement "in restraint of trade," this Court has long recognized that Congress intended to outlaw only unreasonable restraints. See, e.g., *Arizona v. Maricopa County Medical Soc.*, U.S. Supreme Court (1982). As a consequence, most antitrust claims are analyzed under a "rule of reason," according to which the finder of fact



must decide whether the questioned practice imposes an unreasonable restraint on competition, taking into account a variety of factors, including specific information about the relevant business, its condition before and after the restraint was imposed, and the restraint's history, nature, and effect.

Some types of restraints, however, have such predictable and pernicious anticompetitive effect, and such limited potential for pro-competitive benefit, that they are deemed unlawful *per se*. *Northern Pacific R. Co. v. United States*, U.S. Supreme Court (1958). *Per se* treatment is appropriate "once experience with a particular kind of restraint enables the Court to predict with confidence that the rule of reason will condemn it." *Maricopa County* (1982). Thus, we have expressed reluctance to adopt *per se* rules with regard to "restraints imposed in the context of business relationships where the economic impact of certain practices is not immediately obvious." *FTC v. Indiana Federation of Dentists*, U.S. Supreme Court (1986).

A review of this Court's decisions leading up to and beyond *Albrecht* is relevant to our assessment of the continuing validity of the *per se* rule established in *Albrecht*. Beginning with *Dr. Miles Medical Co. v. John D. Park & Sons Co.*, U.S. Supreme Court (1911), the Court recognized the illegality of agreements under which manufacturers or suppliers set the minimum resale prices to be charged by their distributors. By 1940, the Court broadly declared all business combinations "formed for the purpose and with the effect of raising, depressing, fixing, pegging, or stabilizing the price of a commodity in interstate or foreign commerce" illegal *per se*. *United States v. Socony-Vacuum Oil Co.*, U.S. Supreme Court (1940). Accordingly, the Court condemned an agreement between two affiliated liquor distillers to limit the maximum price charged by retailers in *Kiefer-Stewart Co. v. Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc.*, U.S. Supreme Court (1951), noting that agreements to fix maximum prices, "no less than those to fix minimum prices, cripple the freedom of traders and thereby restrain their ability to sell in accordance with their own judgment."

In subsequent cases, the Court's attention turned to arrangements through which suppliers imposed restrictions on dealers with respect to matters other than resale price. In *White Motor Co. v. United States*, U.S. Supreme Court (1963), the Court considered the validity of a manufacturer's assignment of exclusive territories to its distributors and dealers. The Court

determined that too little was known about the competitive impact of such vertical limitations to warrant treating them as *per se* unlawful. Four years later, in *United States v. Arnold, Schwinn & Co.*, U.S. Supreme Court (1967), the Court reconsidered the status of exclusive dealer territories and held that, upon the transfer of title to goods to a distributor, a supplier's imposition of territorial restrictions on the distributor was "so obviously destructive of competition" as to constitute a *per se* violation of the Sherman Act. In *Schwinn*, the Court acknowledged that some vertical restrictions, such as the conferral of territorial rights or franchises, could have pro-competitive benefits by allowing smaller enterprises to compete, and that such restrictions might avert vertical integration in the distribution process. The Court drew the line, however, at permitting manufacturers to control product marketing once dominion over the goods had passed to dealers.

*Albrecht*, decided [a year after *Schwinn*], involved a newspaper publisher who had granted exclusive territories to independent carriers subject to their adherence to a maximum price on resale of the newspapers to the public. Influenced by its decisions in *Socony-Vacuum*, *Kiefer-Stewart*, and *Schwinn*, the Court concluded that it was *per se* unlawful for the publisher to fix the maximum resale price of its newspapers. The Court acknowledged that "maximum and minimum price fixing may have different consequences in many situations," but nonetheless condemned maximum price fixing for "substituting the perhaps erroneous judgment of a seller for the forces of the competitive market."

Nine years later, in *Continental T. V., Inc. v. GTE Sylvania, Inc.*, 433 U.S. 36, 53 L. Ed. 2d 568, 97 S. Ct. 2549 (1977), the Court overruled *Schwinn*, thereby rejecting application of a *per se* rule in the context of vertical nonprice restrictions. The Court acknowledged the principle of *stare decisis*, but explained that the need for clarification in the law justified reconsideration of *Schwinn*:

*"Since its announcement, Schwinn has been the subject of continuing controversy and confusion, both in the scholarly journals and in the federal courts. The great weight of scholarly opinion has been critical of the decision, and a number of the federal courts confronted with analogous vertical restrictions have sought to limit its reach. In our*

*view, the experience of the past 10 years should be brought to bear on this subject of considerable commercial importance.”*

The Court then reviewed scholarly works supporting the economic utility of vertical nonprice restraints....The Court concluded that, because “departure from the rule-of-reason standard must be based upon demonstrable economic effect rather than—as in *Schwinn*—upon formalistic line drawing,” the appropriate course would be “to return to the rule of reason that governed vertical restrictions prior to *Schwinn*.” *Sylvania* (1977)

\* \* \*

Subsequent decisions of the Court...have hinted that the analytical underpinnings of *Albrecht* were substantially weakened by *Sylvania*. We noted in *Maricopa County* that vertical restraints are generally more defensible than horizontal restraints...and that decisions such as *Sylvania* “recognize the possibility that a vertical restraint imposed by a *single* manufacturer or wholesaler may stimulate interbrand competition even as it reduces intrabrand competition.”

[I]n *Atlantic Richfield Co. v. USA Petroleum Co. (ARCO)*, U.S. Supreme Court (1990), although *Albrecht*'s continuing validity was not squarely before the Court, some disfavor with that decision was signaled by our statement that we would “assume, *arguendo*, that *Albrecht* correctly held that vertical, maximum price fixing is subject to the *per se* rule.” More significantly, we specifically acknowledged that vertical maximum price fixing “may have procompetitive interbrand effects,” and pointed out that, in the wake of *GTE Sylvania*, “the procompetitive potential of a vertical maximum price restraint is more evident...than it was when *Albrecht* was decided, because exclusive territorial arrangements and other nonprice restrictions were unlawful *per se* in 1968.”

Thus, our reconsideration of *Albrecht*'s continuing validity is informed by several of our decisions, as well as a considerable body of scholarship discussing the effects of vertical restraints. Our analysis is also guided by our general view that the primary purpose of the antitrust laws is to protect interbrand competition. See, *e.g.*, *Business Electronics Corp. v. Sharp Electronics Corp.*, 485 U.S. 717, 726, 99 L. Ed. 2d 808, 108 S. Ct. 1515 (1988). “Low prices,” we have explained, “benefit consumers regardless of how those prices are set, and

so long as they are above predatory levels, they do not threaten competition.” *ARCO, supra*, at 340. Our interpretation of the Sherman Act also incorporates the notion that condemnation of practices resulting in lower prices to consumers is “especially costly” because “cutting prices in order to increase business often is the very essence of competition.”

So informed, we find it difficult to maintain that vertically-imposed maximum prices could harm consumers or competition to the extent necessary to justify their *per se* invalidation. As Chief Judge Posner wrote for the Court of Appeals in this case:

*As for maximum resale price fixing, unless the supplier is a monopsonist he cannot squeeze his dealers' margins below a competitive level; the attempt to do so would just drive the dealers into the arms of a competing supplier. A supplier might, however, fix a maximum resale price in order to prevent his dealers from exploiting a monopoly position....Suppose that State Oil, perhaps to encourage...dealer services...has spaced its dealers sufficiently far apart to limit competition among them (or even given each of them an exclusive territory); and suppose further that Union 76 is a sufficiently distinctive and popular brand to give the dealers in it at least a modicum of monopoly power. Then State Oil might want to place a ceiling on the dealers' resale prices in order to prevent them from exploiting that monopoly power fully. It would do this not out of disinterested malice, but in its commercial self-interest. The higher the price at which gasoline is resold, the smaller the volume sold, and so the lower the profit to the supplier if the higher profit per gallon at the higher price is being snared by the dealer.” 93 F.3d at 1362.*

We recognize that the *Albrecht* decision presented a number of theoretical justifications for a *per se* rule against vertical maximum price fixing. But criticism of those premises abounds. The *Albrecht* decision was grounded in the fear that maximum price fixing by suppliers could interfere with dealer freedom. 390 U.S. at 152. In response, as one commentator has pointed out, “the ban on maximum resale price limitations declared in *Albrecht* in the name of ‘dealer freedom’ has actually prompted many suppliers to integrate forward into distribution, thus eliminating the very independent trader for whom *Albrecht* professed solicitude.” 7 P. Areeda,

Antitrust Law, P1635, p. 395 (1989). For example, integration in the newspaper industry since *Albrecht* has given rise to litigation between independent distributors and publishers. The *Albrecht* Court also expressed the concern that maximum prices may be set too low for dealers to offer consumers essential or desired services. 390 U.S. at 152-153. But such conduct, by driving away customers, would seem likely to harm manufacturers as well as dealers and consumers, making it unlikely that a supplier would set such a price as a matter of business judgment....In addition, *Albrecht* noted that vertical maximum price fixing could effectively channel distribution through large or specially-advantaged dealers. 390 U.S. at 153. It is unclear, however, that a supplier would profit from limiting its market by excluding potential dealers. See, e.g., Easterbrook, *supra*, at 905-908. Further, although vertical maximum price fixing might limit the viability of inefficient dealers, that consequence is not necessarily harmful to competition and consumers.

Finally, *Albrecht* reflected the Court's fear that maximum price fixing could be used to disguise arrangements to fix minimum prices, 390 U.S. at 153, which remain illegal *per se*. Although we have acknowledged the possibility that maximum pricing might mask minimum pricing, see *Maricopa County*, 457 U.S. at 348, we believe that such conduct—as with the other concerns articulated in *Albrecht*—can be appropriately recognized and punished under the rule of reason....After reconsidering *Albrecht's* rationale and the substantial criticism the decision has received, however, we conclude that there is insufficient economic justification for *per se* invalidation of vertical maximum price fixing.

\* \* \*

Despite what Chief Judge Posner aptly described as *Albrecht's* “infirmities, [and] its increasingly wobbly, moth-eaten foundations,” there remains the question whether *Albrecht* deserves continuing respect under the doctrine of *stare decisis*. The Court of Appeals was correct in applying that principle despite disagreement with *Albrecht*, for it is this Court's prerogative alone to overrule one of its precedents....We approach the reconsideration of decisions of this Court with the utmost caution. *Stare decisis* reflects “a policy judgment that ‘in most matters it is more important that the applicable rule of law be settled than that it be settled right.’” *Agostini v. Felton*, U.S. Supreme Court (1997).

But “*stare decisis* is not an inexorable command.” *Payne v. Tennessee*, U.S. Supreme Court (1991). In the area of antitrust law, there is a competing interest, well-represented in this Court’s decisions, in recognizing and adapting to changed circumstances and the lessons of accumulated experience.

...With the views underlying *Albrecht* eroded by this Court’s precedent, there is not much of that decision to salvage....[W]e find its conceptual foundations gravely weakened. In overruling *Albrecht*, we of course do not hold that all vertical maximum price fixing is *per se* lawful. Instead, vertical maximum price fixing, like the majority of commercial arrangements subject to the antitrust laws, should be evaluated under the rule of reason.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. What does Judge Posner of the Seventh Circuit mean when he uses the term *monopsonist*? Is he referring to the respondent (Khan and Associates) or to the State Oil Company?
2. Explain why State Oil Company would want to set a maximum price. What business benefit is it for State Oil Company?
3. The court clearly states that setting maximum price is no longer a *per se* violation of the Sherman Act and is thus a rule of reason analysis in each case. What about setting minimum prices? Is setting minimum prices *per se* illegal, illegal if it does not pass the rule of reason standard, or entirely legal?

## Acquiring and Maintaining a Monopoly

*United States v. Aluminum Company of America*

*148 F.2d 416 (2d Cir. 1945)*

### JUDGE LEARNED HAND

It does not follow because “Alcoa” had such a monopoly that it “monopolized” the ingot market: it may not have achieved monopoly; monopoly may have been thrust upon it. If it had been a combination of existing smelters which united the whole industry and controlled the production of all aluminum ingot, it would certainly have “monopolized” the market....We may start therefore with the premise that to have combined ninety percent of the producers of ingot would have been to “monopolize” the ingot market; and, so far as concerns the public interest, it can

make no difference whether an existing competition is put an end to, or whether prospective competition is prevented....

Nevertheless, it is unquestionably true that from the very outset the courts have at least kept in reserve the possibility that the origin of a monopoly may be critical in determining its legality; and for this they had warrant in some of the congressional debates which accompanied the passage of the Act.... This notion has usually been expressed by saying that size does not determine guilt; that there must be some "exclusion" of competitors; that the growth must be something else than "natural" or "normal"; that there must be a "wrongful intent," or some other specific intent; or that some "unduly" coercive means must be used. At times there has been emphasis upon the use of the active verb, "monopolize," as the judge noted in the case at bar. A market may, for example, be so limited that it is impossible to produce at all and meet the cost of production except by a plant large enough to supply the whole demand. Or there may be changes in taste or in cost which drive out all but one purveyor. A single producer may be the survivor out of a group of active competitors, merely by virtue of his superior skill, foresight, and industry. In such cases a strong argument can be made that, although the result may expose the public to the evils of monopoly, the Act does not mean to condemn the resultant of those very forces which it is its prime object to foster: *finis opus coronal*. The successful competitor, having been urged to compete, must not be turned upon when he wins.

\* \* \*

[As] Cardozo, J., in *United States v. Swift & Co.*, 286 U.S. 106, p. 116, 52 S. Ct. 460, 463, 76 L.Ed. 999,...said, "Mere size...is not an offense against the Sherman Act unless magnified to the point at *which* it amounts to a monopoly...but size carries with it an opportunity for abuse that is not to be ignored when the opportunity is proved to have been utilized in the past." "Alcoa's" size was "magnified" to make it a "monopoly"; indeed, it has never been anything else; and its size not only offered it an "opportunity for abuse," but it "utilized" its size for "abuse," as can easily be shown.

It would completely misconstrue "Alcoa's" position in 1940 to hold that it was the passive beneficiary of a monopoly, following upon an involuntary elimination of competitors by automatically operative *economic* forces. Already in 1909, when its last lawful monopoly ended,

it sought to strengthen its position by unlawful practices, and these concededly continued until 1912. In that year it had two plants in New York, at which it produced less than 42 million pounds of ingot; in 1934 it had five plants (the original two, enlarged; one in Tennessee; one in North Carolina; one in Washington), and its production had risen to about 327 million pounds, an increase of almost eight-fold. Meanwhile not a pound of ingot had been produced by anyone else in the United States. This increase and this continued and undisturbed control did not fall undesigned into “Alcoa’s” lap; obviously it could not have done so. It could only have resulted, as it did result, from a persistent determination to maintain the control, with which it found itself vested in 1912. There were at least one or two abortive attempts to enter the industry, but “Alcoa” effectively anticipated and forestalled all competition, and succeeded in holding the field alone. True, it stimulated demand and opened new uses for the metal, but not without making sure that it could supply what it had evoked. There is no dispute as to this; “Alcoa” avows it as evidence of the skill, energy and initiative with which it has always conducted its business: as a reason why, having won its way by fair means, it should be commended, and not dismembered. We need charge it with no moral derelictions after 1912; we may assume that all its claims for itself are true. The only question is whether it falls within the exception established in favor of those who do not seek, but cannot avoid, the control of a market. It seems to us that that question scarcely survives its statement. It was not inevitable that it should always anticipate increases in the demand for ingot and be prepared to supply them. Nothing compelled it to keep doubling and redoubling its capacity before others entered the field. It insists that it never excluded competitors; but we can think of no more effective exclusion than progressively to embrace each new opportunity as it opened, and to face every newcomer with new capacity already geared into a great organization, having the advantage of experience, trade connections and the elite of personnel. Only in case we interpret “exclusion” as limited to maneuvers not honestly industrial, but actuated solely by a desire to prevent competition, can such a course, indefatigably pursued, be deemed not “exclusionary.” So to limit it would in our judgment emasculate the Act; would permit just such consolidations as it was designed to prevent. We disregard any question of “intent.” Relatively early in the history of the Act—1905—Holmes, J., in *Swift & Co. v. United States*, explained this aspect of the Act in a passage often quoted.



Although the primary evil was monopoly, the Act also covered preliminary steps, which, if continued, would lead to it. These may do no harm of themselves; but if they are initial moves in a plan or scheme which, carried out, will result in monopoly, they are dangerous and the law will nip them in the bud....In order to fall within § 2, the monopolist must have both the power to monopolize, and the intent to monopolize. To read the passage as demanding any “specific,” intent, makes nonsense of it, for no monopolist monopolizes unconscious of what he is doing. So here, “Alcoa” meant to keep, and did keep, that complete and exclusive hold upon the ingot market with which it started. That was to “monopolize” that market, however innocently it otherwise proceeded. So far as the judgment held that it was not within § 2, it must be reversed.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Judge Learned Hand claims there would be no violation of the Sherman Act in any case where a company achieves monopoly through “natural” or “normal” operation of the market.
  - a. What language in the Sherman Act requires the plaintiff to show something more than a company’s monopoly status?
  - b. What specifics, if any, does Judge Hand provide that indicate that Alcoa not only had market dominance but sought to increase its dominance and to exclude competition?

Can you think of a single producer in a given product or geographic market that has achieved that status because of “peer skill, foresight, and industry”? Is there anything wrong with Alcoa’s selling the concept of aluminum products to an ever-increasing set of customers and then also ensuring that it had the capacity to meet the increasing demand?

To stimulate interbrand competition, would you recommend that Congress change Section 2 so that any company that had over 80 percent of market share would be “broken up” to ensure competition? Why is this a bad idea? Or why do you think it is a good idea?

## Innovation and Intent to Monopolize

*Berkey Photo, Inc. v. Eastman Kodak Company*

*603 F.2d 263 (2d Cir. 1979)*

IRVING R. KAUFMAN, CHIEF JUDGE

To millions of Americans, the name Kodak is virtually synonymous with photography....It is one of the giants of American enterprise, with international sales of nearly \$6 billion in 1977 and pre-tax profits in excess of \$1.2 billion.

This action, one of the largest and most significant private antitrust suits in history, was brought by Berkey Photo, Inc., a far smaller but still prominent participant in the industry. Berkey competes with Kodak in providing photofinishing services—the conversion of exposed film into finished prints, slides, or movies. Until 1978, Berkey sold cameras as well. It does not manufacture film, but it does purchase Kodak film for resale to its customers, and it also buys photofinishing equipment and supplies, including color print paper, from Kodak.

The two firms thus stand in a complex, multifaceted relationship, for Kodak has been Berkey's competitor in some markets and its supplier in others. In this action, Berkey claims that every aspect of the association has been infected by Kodak's monopoly power in the film, color print paper, and camera markets, willfully acquired, maintained, and exercised in violation of § 2 of the Sherman Act, 15 U.S.C. § 2....Berkey alleges that these violations caused it to lose sales in the camera and photofinishing markets and to pay excessive prices to Kodak for film, color print paper, and photofinishing equipment.

\* \* \*

[T]he jury found for Berkey on virtually every point, awarding damages totalling \$37,620,130. Judge Frankel upheld verdicts aggregating \$27,154,700 for lost camera and photofinishing sales and for excessive prices on film and photofinishing equipment....Trebled and supplemented by attorneys' fees and costs pursuant to § 4 of the Clayton Act, 15 U.S.C. § 15, Berkey's judgment reached a grand total of \$87,091,309.47, with interest, of course, continuing to accrue.

Kodak now appeals this judgment.

The principal markets relevant here, each nationwide in scope, are amateur conventional still cameras, conventional photographic film, photofinishing services, photofinishing equipment, and color print paper.

The "amateur conventional still camera" market now consists almost entirely of the so-called 110 and 126 instant-loading cameras. These are the direct descendants of the popular "box" cameras, the best-known of which was Kodak's so-called "Brownie." Small, simple, and

relatively inexpensive, cameras of this type are designed for the mass market rather than for the serious photographer.

Kodak has long been the dominant firm in the market thus defined. Between 1954 and 1973 it never enjoyed less than 61% of the annual unit sales, nor less than 64% of the dollar volume, and in the peak year of 1964, Kodak cameras accounted for 90% of market revenues. Much of this success is no doubt due to the firm's history of innovation.

Berkey has been a camera manufacturer since its 1966 acquisition of the Keystone Camera Company, a producer of movie cameras and equipment. In 1968 Berkey began to sell amateur still cameras made by other firms, and the following year the Keystone Division commenced manufacturing such cameras itself. From 1970 to 1977, Berkey accounted for 8.2% of the sales in the camera market in the United States, reaching a peak of 10.2% in 1976. In 1978, Berkey sold its camera division and thus abandoned this market.

\* \* \*

One must comprehend the fundamental tension—one might almost say the paradox—that is near the heart of § 2....

The conundrum was indicated in characteristically striking prose by Judge Hand, who was not able to resolve it. Having stated that Congress “did not condone ‘good trusts’ and condemn ‘bad’ ones; it forbade all,” he declared with equal force, “The successful competitor, having been urged to compete, must not be turned upon when he wins.”...We must always be mindful lest the Sherman Act be invoked perversely in favor of those who seek protection against the rigors of competition.

\* \* \*

In sum, although the principles announced by the § 2 cases often appear to conflict, this much is clear. The mere possession of monopoly power does not *ipso facto* condemn a market participant. But, to avoid the proscriptions of § 2, the firm must refrain at all times from conduct directed at smothering competition. This doctrine has two branches. Unlawfully acquired power remains anathema even when kept dormant. And it is no less true that a firm with a legitimately achieved monopoly may not wield the resulting power to tighten its hold on the market.

\* \* \*

As Kodak had hoped, the 110 system proved to be a dramatic success. In 1972—the system’s first year—the company sold 2,984,000 Pocket Instamatics, more than 50% of its sales in the amateur conventional still camera market. The new camera thus accounted in large part for a sharp increase in total market sales, from 6.2 million units in 1971 to 8.2 million in 1972....

Berkey’s Keystone division was a late entrant in the 110 sweepstakes, joining the competition only in late 1973. Moreover, because of hasty design, the original models suffered from latent defects, and sales that year were a paltry 42,000. With interest in the 126 dwindling, Keystone thus suffered a net decline of 118,000 unit sales in 1973. The following year, however, it recovered strongly, in large part because improvements in its pocket cameras helped it sell 406,000 units, 7% of all 110s sold that year.

Berkey contends that the introduction of the 110 system was both an attempt to monopolize and actual monopolization of the camera market.

\* \* \*

It will be useful at the outset to present the arguments on which Berkey asks us to uphold its verdict: Kodak, a film and camera monopolist, was in a position to set industry standards. Rivals could not compete effectively without offering products similar to Kodak’s. Moreover, Kodak persistently refused to make film available for most formats other than those in which it made cameras. Since cameras are worthless without film, this policy effectively prevented other manufacturers from introducing cameras in new formats. Because of its dominant position astride two markets, and by use of its film monopoly to distort the camera market, Kodak forfeited its own right to reap profits from such innovations without providing its rivals with sufficient advance information to enable them to enter the market with copies of the new product on the day of Kodak’s introduction. This is one of several “predisclosure” arguments Berkey has advanced in the course of this litigation.

\* \* \*

Through the 1960s, Kodak followed a checkered pattern of predisclosing innovations to various segments of the industry. Its purpose on these occasions evidently was to ensure that the industry would be able to meet consumers’ demand for the complementary goods and services they would need to enjoy the new Kodak products. But predisclosure would quite obviously also

diminish Kodak's share of the auxiliary markets. It was therefore, in the words of Walter Fallon, Kodak's chief executive officer, "a matter of judgment on each and every occasion" whether predisclosure would be for or against Kodak's self-interest. Kodak decided not to release advance information about the new film and format. The decision was evidently based on the perception of Dr. Louis K. Eilers, Kodak's chief executive officer at that time, that Kodak would gain more from being first on the market for the sale of all goods and services related to the 110 system than it would lose from the inability of other photofinishers to process Kodacolor II. Judge Frankel did not decide that Kodak should have disclosed the details of the 110 to other camera manufacturers prior to introduction. Instead, he left the matter to the jury....We hold that this instruction was in error and that, as a matter of law, Kodak did not have a duty to predisclose information about the 110 system to competing camera manufacturers.

As Judge Frankel indicated, and as Berkey concedes, a firm may normally keep its innovations secret from its rivals as long as it wishes, forcing them to catch up on the strength of their own efforts after the new product is introduced. It is the possibility of success in the marketplace, attributable to superior performance, that provides the incentives on which the proper functioning of our competitive economy rests....

Withholding from others advance knowledge of one's new products, therefore, ordinarily constitutes valid competitive conduct. Because, as we have already indicated, a monopolist is permitted, and indeed encouraged, by § 2 to compete aggressively on the merits, any success that it may achieve through "the process of invention and innovation" is clearly tolerated by the antitrust laws.

\* \* \*

Moreover, enforced predisclosure would cause undesirable consequences beyond merely encouraging the sluggishness the Sherman Act was designed to prevent. A significant vice of the theory propounded by Berkey lies in the uncertainty of its application. Berkey does not contend, in the colorful phrase of Judge Frankel, that "Kodak has to live in a goldfish bowl," disclosing every innovation to the world at large. However predictable in its application, such an extreme rule would be insupportable. Rather, Berkey postulates that Kodak had a duty to disclose limited types of information to certain competitors under specific circumstances. But it is difficult to

comprehend how a major corporation, accustomed though it is to making business decisions with antitrust considerations in mind, could possess the omniscience to anticipate all the instances in which a jury might one day in the future retrospectively conclude that predisclosure was warranted. And it is equally difficult to discern workable guidelines that a court might set forth to aid the firm's decision. For example, how detailed must the information conveyed be? And how far must research have progressed before it is "ripe" for disclosure? These inherent uncertainties would have an inevitable chilling effect on innovation. They go far, we believe, towards explaining why no court has ever imposed the duty Berkey seeks to create here.

\* \* \*

We do not perceive, however, how Kodak's introduction of a new format was rendered an unlawful act of monopolization in the camera market because the firm also manufactured film to fit the cameras. "The 110 system was in substantial part a camera development...."

Clearly, then, the policy considerations militating against predisclosure requirements for monolithic monopolists are equally applicable here. The first firm, even a monopolist, to design a new camera format has a right to the lead time that follows from its success. The mere fact that Kodak manufactured film in the new format as well, so that its customers would not be offered worthless cameras, could not deprive it of that reward.

\* \* \*

*Conclusion* We have held that Kodak did not have an obligation, merely because it introduced film and camera in a new format, to make any predisclosure to its camera-making competitors. Nor did the earlier use of its film monopoly to foreclose format innovation by those competitors create of its own force such a duty where none had existed before. In awarding Berkey \$15,250,000, just \$828,000 short of the maximum amount demanded, the jury clearly based its calculation of lost camera profits on Berkey's central argument that it had a right to be "at the starting line when the whistle blew" for the new system. The verdict, therefore, cannot stand.

#### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Consider patent law. Did Kodak have a legal monopoly on the 110 system (having invented it) for seventeen years? Did it have any legal obligation to share the technology with others?

2. Might it have been better business strategy to give predisclosure to Berkey and others about the necessary changes in film that would come about with the introduction of the 110 camera? How so, or why not? Is there any way that some sort of predisclosure to Berkey and others would maintain or sustain good relations with competitors?

## 23.9 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Four basic antitrust laws regulate the competitive activities of US business: the Sherman Act, the Clayton Act, the Federal Trade Commission Act, and the Robinson-Patman Act. The Sherman Act prohibits restraints of trade and monopolizing. The Clayton Act prohibits a variety of anticompetitive acts, including mergers and acquisitions that might tend to lessen competition. The Federal Trade Commission Act prohibits unfair methods of competition and unfair and deceptive acts or practices in commerce. The Robinson-Patman Act prohibits a variety of price discriminations. (This act is actually an amendment to the Clayton Act.) These laws are enforced in four ways: (1) by the US Department of Justice, Antitrust Division; (2) by the Federal Trade Commission; (3) by state attorneys general; and (4) by private litigants.

The courts have interpreted Section 1 of the Sherman Act, prohibiting every contract, combination, or conspiracy in restraint of trade, by using a rule of reason. Thus reasonable restraints that are ancillary to legitimate business practices are lawful. But some acts are per se unreasonable, such as price-fixing, and will violate Section 1. Section 1 restraints of trade include both horizontal and vertical restraints of trade. Vertical restraints of trade include resale price maintenance, refusals to deal, and unreasonable territorial restrictions on distributors.

Horizontal restraints of trade include price-fixing, exchanging price information when doing so permits industry members to control prices, controlling output, regulating competitive methods, allocating territories, exclusionary agreements, and boycotts.

**Exclusive dealing contracts** and tying contracts whose effects may be to substantially lessen competition violate Section 3 of the Clayton Act and may also violate both Section 1 of the Sherman Act and Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act. Requirements and supply contracts are unlawful if they tie up so much of a commodity that they tend substantially to lessen competition or might tend to do so.

The Robinson-Patman Act (Section 2 of the Clayton Act) prohibits price discrimination for different purchasers of commodities of like grade and quality if the effect may be substantially to (1) lessen competition or tend to create a monopoly in any line of commerce or (2) impair competition with (a) any person who grants or (b) knowingly receives the benefit of the discrimination, or (c) with customers of either of them.

Some industries and groups are insulated from the direct reach of the antitrust laws. These include industries separately regulated under federal law, organized labor, insurance companies, activities mandated under state law, group solicitation government action, and baseball.

Section 2 of the Sherman Act prohibits monopolizing or attempting to monopolize any part of interstate or foreign trade or commerce. The law does not forbid monopoly as such but only acts or attempts or conspiracies to monopolize. The prohibition includes the monopolist who has acquired his monopoly through illegitimate means.

Three factors are essential in a Section 2 case: (1) relevant market for determining dominance, (2) the degree of monopoly power, and (3) the particular acts claimed to be illegitimate.

Relevant market has two dimensions: product market and geographic market. Since many goods have close substitutes, the courts look to the degree to which consumers will shift to other goods or suppliers if the price of the commodity or service in question is priced in a monopolistic way.

This test is known as cross-elasticity of demand. If the cross-elasticity is high—meaning that consumers will readily shift—then the other goods or services must be included in the product market definition, thus reducing the share of the market that the defendant will be found to have. The geographic market is not the country as a whole, because Section 2 speaks in terms of “any part” of trade or commerce. Usually the government or private plaintiff will try to show that the geographic market is small, since that will tend to give the alleged monopolist a larger share of it.

Market power in general means the share of the relevant market that the alleged monopolist enjoys. The law does not lay down fixed percentages, though various decisions seem to suggest that two-thirds of the market might be too low but three-quarters high enough to constitute monopoly power.



Acts that were aimed at or had the probable effect of excluding competitors from the market are acts of monopolizing. Examples are predatory pricing and boycotts. Despite repeated claims during the 1970s and 1980s by smaller competitors, large companies have prevailed in court against the argument that innovation suddenly sprung on the market without notice is per se evidence of intent to monopolize.

Remedies for Sherman Act Section 2 violations include damages, injunction, and **divestiture**. These remedies are also available in Clayton Act Section 7 cases.

Section 7 prohibits mergers or acquisitions that might tend to lessen competition in any line of commerce in any section of the country. Mergers and acquisitions are usually classified in one of three ways: horizontal (between competitors), vertical (between different levels of the distribution chain), or conglomerate (between businesses that are not directly related). The latter may be divided into product-extension and market-expansion mergers. The relevant market test is different than in monopolization cases; in a Section 7 action, relevance of market may be proved.

In assessing horizontal mergers, the courts will look to the market shares of emerging companies, industry concentration ratios, and trends toward concentration in the industry. To prove a Section 7 case, the plaintiff must show that the merger forecloses competition “in a substantial share of” a substantial market. Conglomerate merger cases are harder to prove and require a showing of specific potential effects, such as raising barriers to entry into an industry and thus entrenching monopoly, or eliminating potential competition. Joint ventures may also be condemned by Section 7. The Hart-Scott-Rodino Antitrust Improvements Act of 1976 requires certain companies to get premerger notice to the Justice Department.

## EXERCISES

1. To protect its state’s businesses against ruinous price wars, a state legislature has passed a law permitting manufacturers to set a “suggested resale price” on all goods that they make and sell direct to retailers. Retailers are forbidden to undercut the resale price by more than 10 percent. A retailer who violates the law may be sued by the manufacturer for treble damages: three times the difference between the suggested resale price and the actual selling price. But out-of-state retailers are bound by no such law and are regularly

discounting the goods between 35 and 40 percent. As the general manager of a large discount store located within a few miles of a city across the state line, you wish to offer the public a price of only 60 percent of the suggested retail price on items covered by the law in order to compete with the out-of-state retailers to which your customers have easy access. May you lower your price in order to compete? How would you defend yourself if sued by a manufacturer whose goods you discounted in violation of the law?

2. The DiForio Motor Car Company is a small manufacturer of automobiles and sells to three distributors in the city of Peoria. The largest distributor, Hugh's Auras, tells DiForio that it is losing money on its dealership and will quit selling the cars unless DiForio agrees to give it an exclusive contract. DiForio tells the other distributors, whose contracts were renewed from year to year, that it will no longer sell them cars at the end of the contract year. Smith Autos, one of the other dealers, protests, but DiForio refuses to resupply it. Smith Autos sues DiForio and Hugh's. What is the result? Why?
3. Twenty-five local supermarket chains banded together as Topco Associates Incorporated to sell groceries under a private label. Topco was formed in 1940 to compete with the giant chains, which had the economic clout to sell private-label merchandise unavailable to the smaller chains. Topco acted as a purchasing agent for the members. By the late 1960s, Topco's members were doing a booming business: \$1.3 billion in retail sales, with market share ranging from 1.5 percent to 16 percent in the markets that members served. Topco-brand groceries accounted for no more than 10 percent of any store's total merchandise. Under Topco's rules, members were assigned exclusive territories in which to sell Topco-brand goods. A member chain with stores located in another member's exclusive territory could not sell Topco-brand goods in those stores. Topco argued that the market division was necessary to give each chain the economic incentive to advertise and develop brand consciousness and thus to be able to compete more effectively against the large nonmember supermarkets' private labels. If other stores in the locality could also carry the Topco brand, then it would not be a truly "private" label and there would be no reason to tout it; it would be like any national brand foodstuff, and Topco members did not have the funds to advertise the brand nationally. Which, if any, antitrust laws has Topco violated? Why?

4. In 1983, Panda Bears Incorporated, a small manufacturer, began to sell its patented panda bear robot dolls (they walk, smile, and eat bamboo shoots) to retail toy shops. The public took an immediate fancy to panda bears, and the company found it difficult to meet the demand. Retail shops sold out even before their orders arrived. In order to allocate the limited supply fairly while it tooled up to increase production runs, the company announced to its distributors that it would not sell to any retailers that did not also purchase its trademarked Panda Bear's Bambino Bamboo Shoots. It also announced that it would refuse to supply any retailer that sold the robots for less than \$59.95. Finally, it said that it would refuse to sell to retailers unless they agreed to use the company's repair services exclusively when customers brought bears back to repair malfunctions in their delicate, patented computerized nervous system. By the following year, with demand still rising, inferior competitive panda robots and bamboo shoots began to appear. Some retailers began to lower the Panda Bear price to meet the competition. The company refused to resupply them. Panda Bears Incorporated also decreed that it would refuse to sell to retailers who carried any other type of bamboo shoot. What antitrust violations, if any, has Panda Bear Incorporated committed? What additional information might be useful in helping you to decide?
5. Elmer has invented a new battery-operated car. The battery, which Elmer has patented, functions for five hundred miles before needing to be recharged. The car, which he has named The Elmer, is a sensation when announced, and his factory can barely keep up with the orders. Worried about the impact, all the other car manufacturers ask Elmer for a license to use the battery in their cars. Elmer refuses because he wants the car market all to himself. Banks are eager to lend him the money to expand his production, and within three years he has gained a 5 percent share of the national market for automobiles. During these years, Elmer has kept the price of The Elmer high, to pay for his large costs in tooling up a factory. But then it dawns on him that he can expand his market much more rapidly if he drops his price, so he prices the car to yield the smallest profit margin of any car being sold in the country. Its retail price is far lower than that of any other domestic car on the market. Business begins to boom. Within three more years, he has garnered an additional 30 percent

of the market, and he announces at a press conference that he confidently expects to have the market “all to myself” within the next five years. Fighting for their lives now, the Big Three auto manufacturers consult their lawyers about suing Elmer for monopolizing. Do they have a case? What is Elmer’s defense?

6. National Widget Company is the dominant manufacturer of widgets in the United States, with 72 percent of the market for low-priced widgets and 89 percent of the market for high-priced widgets. Dozens of companies compete with National in the manufacture and sale of compatible peripheral equipment for use with National’s widgets, including countertops, holders, sprockets and gear assemblies, instruction booklets, computer software, and several hundred replacements parts. Revenues of these peripherals run upwards of \$100 million annually. Beginning with the 1981 model year, National Widget sprang a surprise: a completely redesigned widget that made most of the peripheral equipment obsolete. Moreover, National set the price for its peripherals below that which would make economic sense for competitors to invest in new plants to tool up for producing redesigned peripherals. Five of the largest peripheral-equipment competitors sued National under Section 2 of the Sherman Act. One of these, American Widget Peripherals, Inc., had an additional complaint: on making inquiries in early 1980, American was assured by National’s general manager that it would not be redesigning any widgets until late 1985 at the earliest. On the basis of that statement, American invested \$50 million in a new plant to manufacture the now obsolescent peripheral equipment, and as a result, it will probably be forced into bankruptcy. What is the result? Why? How does this differ, if at all, from the *Berkey Camera* case?

7. In 1959, The Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) acquired the stock and assets of the Rome Cable Corporation. Alcoa and Rome both manufactured bare and insulated aluminum wire and cable, used for overhead electric power transmission lines. Rome, but not Alcoa, manufactured copper conductor, used for underground transmissions. Insulated aluminum wire and cable is quite inferior to copper, but it can be used effectively for overhead transmission, and Alcoa increased its share of annual installations from 6.5 percent in 1950 to 77.2

percent in 1959. During that time, copper lost out to aluminum for overhead transmission. Aluminum and copper conductor prices do not respond to one another; lower copper conductor prices do not put great pressure on aluminum wire and cable prices. As the Supreme Court summarized the facts in *United States v. Aluminum Co. of America*,<sup>[1]</sup>

*In 1958—the year prior to the merger—Alcoa was the leading producer of aluminum conductor, with 27.8% of the market; in bare aluminum conductor, it also led the industry with 32.5%. Alcoa plus Kaiser controlled 50% of the aluminum conductor market and, with its three leading competitors, more than 76%. Only nine concerns (including Rome with 1.3%) accounted for 95.7% of the output of aluminum conductor, Alcoa was third with 11.6%, and Rome was eighth with 4.7%. Five companies controlled 65.4% and four smaller ones, including Rome, added another 22.8%.*

The Justice Department sued Alcoa-Rome for violation of Section 7 of the Clayton Act. What is the government's argument? What is the result?

8. Quality Graphics has been buying up the stock of companies that manufacture billboards. Quality now owns or controls 23 of the 129 companies that make billboards, and its sales account for 3.2 percent of the total national market of \$72 million. In Texas, Quality has acquired 27 percent of the billboard market, and in the Dallas–Ft. Worth area alone, about 25 percent. Billboard advertising accounts for only 0.001 percent of total national advertising sales; the majority goes to newspaper, magazine, television, and radio advertising. What claims could the Justice Department assert in a suit against Quality? What is Quality's defense? What is the result?
9. The widget industry consists of six large manufacturers who together account for 62 percent of output, which in 1985 amounted to \$2.1 billion in domestic US sales. The remaining 38 percent is supplied by more than forty manufacturers. All six of the large manufacturers and thirty-one of the forty small manufacturers belong to the Widget Manufacturers Trade Association (WMTA). An officer from at least two of the six manufacturers always serves on

the WMTA executive committee, which consists of seven members. The full WMTA board of directors consists of one member from each manufacturer. The executive committee meets once a month for dinner at the Widgeters Club; the full board meets semiannually at the Widget Show. The executive committee, which always meets with the association's lawyer in attendance, discusses a wide range of matters, including industry conditions, economic trends, customer relations, technological developments, and the like, but scrupulously refrains from discussing price, territories, or output. However, after dinner at the bar, five of the seven members meet for drinks and discuss prices in an informal manner. The chairman of the executive committee concludes the discussion with the following statement: "If I had to guess, I'd guess that the unit price will increase by 5 percent the first of next month." On the first of the month, his prediction is proven to be correct among the five companies whose officers had a drink, and within a week, most of the other manufacturers likewise increase their prices. At the semiannual meeting of the full board, the WMTA chairman notes that prices have been climbing steadily, and he ventures the hope that they will not continue to do so because otherwise they will face stiff competition from the widget industry. However, following the next several meetings of the executive committee, the price continues to rise as before. The Justice Department gets wind of these discussions and sues the companies whose officers are members of the board of directors and also sues individually the members of the executive committee and the chairman of the full board. What laws have they violated, if any, and who has violated them? What remedies or sanctions may the department seek?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. A company with 95 percent of the market for its product is

- a. a monopolist
- b. monopolizing
- c. violating Section 2 of the Sherman Act
- d. violating Section 1 of the Sherman Act

Which of the following may be evidence of an intent to monopolize?

- a. innovative practices

- b. large market share
- c. pricing below cost of production
- d. low profit margins

A merger that lessens competition in any line of commerce is prohibited by

- a. Section 1 of the Sherman Act
- b. Section 2 of the Sherman Act
- c. Section 7 of the Clayton Act
- d. none of the above

Which of the following statements is true?

- a. A horizontal merger is always unlawful.
- b. A conglomerate merger between companies with unrelated products is always lawful.
- c. A vertical merger violates Section 2 of the Sherman Act.
- d. A horizontal merger that unduly increases the concentration of firms in a particular market is always unlawful.

A line of commerce is a concept spelled out in

- a. Section 7 of the Clayton Act
- b. Section 2 of the Sherman Act
- c. Section 1 of the Sherman Act
- d. none of the above

## SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. a
- 2. c
- 3. c
- 4. d
- 5. d

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[1] *United States v. Aluminum Co. of America*, 377 U.S. 271 (1964).

# Chapter 24

## Unfair Trade Practices and the Federal Trade Commission

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following:

1. The general powers of the Federal Trade Commission
2. The general principles of law that govern deceptive acts and practices
3. Several categories of deceptive acts and practices, with examples
4. The remedies that the Federal Trade Commission has at its disposal to police unfair trade practices

## 24.1 The Federal Trade Commission: Powers and Law Governing Deceptive Acts

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the general powers of the Federal Trade Commission.
2. Describe the general principles that guide laws and regulations against unfair and deceptive trade practices.

### General Powers of the Federal Trade Commission

Common law prohibited a variety of trade practices unfair either to competitors or to consumers. These included passing off one's products as though they were made by someone else, using a trade name confusingly similar to that of another, stealing trade secrets, and various forms of misrepresentation. In the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1912, Congress for the first time empowered a federal agency to investigate and deter acts of unfair competition. Section 5 of the act gave the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) power to enforce a law that said "unfair methods of competition in commerce are hereby declared unlawful." By "unfair methods of competition," Congress originally intended acts that constituted violations of the Sherman and Clayton Antitrust Acts. But from the beginning, the commissioners of the FTC took a broader view of their mandate. Specifically, they were concerned about the problem of false and deceptive advertising and promotional schemes. But the original Section 5 was confining; it



seemed to authorize FTC action only when the deceptive advertising injured a competitor of the company. In 1931, the Supreme Court ruled that this was indeed the case: an advertisement that deceived the public was not within the FTC's jurisdiction unless a competitor was injured by the misrepresentation also. Congress responded in 1938 with the Wheeler-Lea Amendments to the FTC Act. To the words "unfair methods of competition" were added these words: "unfair or deceptive acts or practices in commerce." Now it became clear that the FTC had a broader role to play than as a second agency enforcing the antitrust laws. Henceforth, the FTC would be the guardian also of consumers.

Deceptive practices that the FTC has prosecuted are also amenable to suit at common law. A tire manufacturer who advertises that his "special tire" is "new" when it is actually a retread has committed a common-law misrepresentation, and the buyer could sue for rescission of the contract or for damages. But having a few buyers sue for misrepresentation does not stop the determined fraudster. Moreover, such lawsuits are expensive to bring, and the amount of damages awarded is usually small; thus law actions alone cannot adequately address deliberately fraudulent practices.

Through Section 5, however, the FTC can seek far-reaching remedies against the sham and the phony; it is not limited to proving damages to individual customers case by case. The FTC can issue cease and desist orders and has other sanctions to wield as well. So do its counterpart agencies at the state level.

As an administrative agency, the FTC has broader powers than those vested in the ordinary prosecutorial authority, such as the Department of Justice. It can initiate administrative proceedings in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act to enforce the several statutes that it administers. In addition to issuing cease and desist orders and getting them enforced in court, the FTC can seek temporary and permanent injunctions, fines, and monetary damages and promulgate trade regulation rules (TRRs). Although the FTC's authority to issue TRRs had long been assumed (and was approved by the US court of appeals in Washington in 1973), Congress formalized it in 1975 in the FTC Improvement Act (part of the Magnuson-Moss Warranty Act), which gives the FTC explicit authority to prescribe rules defining unfair or deceptive acts or practices.

A TRR is like a statute. It is a detailed statement of procedures and substantive dos and don'ts. Before promulgating a TRR, the commission must publish its intention to do so in the *Federal Register* and must hold open hearings on its proposals. Draft versions of a TRR must be published to allow the public to comment. Once issued, the final version is published as part of the *Code of Federal Regulations* and becomes a permanent part of the law unless modified or repealed by the FTC itself or by Congress—or overturned by a court on grounds of arbitrariness, lack of procedural regularity, or the like. A violation of a TRR is treated exactly like a violation of a federal statute. Once the FTC proves that a defendant violated a TRR, no further proof is necessary that the defendant's act was unfair or deceptive. Examples of TRRs include the Retail Food Store Advertising and Marketing Practices Rule, Games of Chance in the Food Retailing and Gasoline Industries Rule, Care Labeling of Textile Wearing Apparel Rule, Mail Order Merchandise Rule, Cooling-Off Period for Door-to-Door Sales Rule, and Use of Negative Option Plans by Sellers in Commerce.

### **General Principles of Law Governing Deceptive Acts and Practices**

With a staff of some sixteen hundred and ten regional offices, the FTC is, at least from time to time, an active regulatory agency. The FTC's enforcement vigor waxes and wanes with the economic climate. Critics have often charged that what the FTC chooses to investigate defies common sense because so many of the cases seem to involve trivial, or at least relatively unimportant, offenses: Does the nation really need a federal agency to guard us against pronouncements by singer Pat Boone on the efficacy of acne medication or to ensure the authenticity of certain crafts sold to tourists in Alaska as "native"? One answer is that through such cases, important principles of law are declared and ratified.

To be sure, most readers of this book, unlikely to be gulled by false claims, may see a certain Alice-in-Wonderland quality to FTC enforcement. But the first principle of FTC action is that it gauges deceptive acts and practices as interpreted by the general public, not by the more sophisticated. As a US court of appeals once said, the FTC Act was not "made for the protection of experts, but for the public—that vast multitude which includes the ignorant, the unthinking, and the credulous." The deceptive statement or act need not actually deceive. Before 1983, it was sufficient that the statement had a "capacity to deceive." According to a standard adopted in

1983, however, the FTC will take action against deceptive advertising “if there is a representation, omission or practice that is likely to mislead the consumer acting reasonably in the circumstances, to the consumer’s detriment.” Critics of the new standard have charged that it will be harder to prove deception because an advertisement must be “likely to mislead” rather than merely have a “capacity to deceive.” The FTC might also be put to the burden of showing that consumers reasonably interpreted the ad and that they relied on the ad. Whether the standard will reduce the volume of FTC actions against deceptive advertising remains to be seen. The FTC also has the authority to proceed against “unfair...acts or practices.” These need not be deceptive but, instead, of such a character that they offend a common sense of propriety or justice or of an honest way of comporting oneself. See [Figure 24.1 "Unfair and Deceptive Practices Laws"](#) for a diagram of the unfair and deceptive practices discussed in this chapter.

*Figure 24.1 Unfair and Deceptive Practices Laws*

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

Although common law still serves to prohibit certain kinds of trade practices, the FTC has far more extensive powers to police unfair and deceptive trade practices. The FTC’s rules, once passed through the processes defined in the Administrative Procedure Act, have the same authority as a federal statute. Trade regulation rules issued by the FTC, if violated, can trigger injunctions, fines, and other remedial actions.

#### EXERCISE

1. Go to the FTC website and look at its most recent annual report. Find a description of a loan modification scam, and discuss with another student why a regulatory agency is needed. Ask yourselves whether leaving it up to individual consumers to sue the scammers, using common law, would create greater good for society.

## 24.2 Deceptive Acts and Practices

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Name the categories of deceptive acts and practices that the Federal Trade Commission has found, and give examples.

### Failure to Disclose Pertinent Facts

Businesses are under no general obligation to disclose everything. Advertisers may put a bright face on their products as long as they do not make a direct material misrepresentation or misstatement. But under certain circumstances, a business may be required to disclose more than it did in order not to be involved in unfair or deceptive acts and practices. For example, failure to state the cost of a service might constitute deception. Thus a federal court has ruled that it is deceptive for a telephone service to fail to disclose that it cost fifteen dollars per call for customers dialing a special 900 number listed in newspaper advertisements offering jobs. <sup>[1]</sup> Likewise, if a fact not disclosed might have a material bearing on a consumer's decision whether to purchase the product, its omission might be tantamount to deception, as *J. B. Williams Co. v. FTC* (see /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch49\_s05\_s01), suggests.

### **Descriptions of Products**

Although certain words are considered mere puffery (*greatest, best*), other words, which have more precise connotations, can cause trouble if they are misused. One example is the word *new*. In most cases, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has held that if a product is more than six months old, it is not new and may not lawfully be advertised as such.

The efficacy of products is perhaps their most often advertised aspect. An ad stating that a product will do more than it can is almost always deceptive if the claim is specific. Common examples that the FTC continues to do battle over are claims that a cream, pill, or other substance will “rejuvenate” the body, “cure” baldness, “permanently remove” wrinkles, or “restore” the vitality of hair.

The composition of goods is another common category of deceptive claims. For example, a product advertised as “wool” had better be 100 percent wool; a mixture of wool and synthetic fabrics cannot be advertised as wool. The FTC has lists of dozens of descriptive words with appropriate definitions.

Labeling of certain products is strictly regulated by specific statutes. Under the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, artificial colors and flavors must be disclosed. Other specific federal statutes include the Wool Products Labeling Act, the Textile Fiber Products Identification Act, the Fur Products Labeling Act, and the Flammable Fabrics Act; these acts are enforced by the FTC. In 1966, Congress enacted the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act. It governs most consumer

products and gives the FTC authority to issue regulations for proper labeling of most of them. In particular, the statute is designed to help standardize quantity descriptions (“small,” “medium,” and “large”) and enable shoppers to compare the value of competing goods in the stores.

### **Misleading Price and Savings Claims**

“Buy one, get another for half price.” “Suggested retail price: \$25. Our price: \$5.95.” “Yours for only \$95. You save \$50.” Claims such as these assault the eye and ear daily. Unless these ads are strictly true, they are violations of Section 5 of the FTC Act. To regulate deceptive price and savings claims, the FTC has issued a series of *Guides against Deceptive Pricing* that set forth certain principles by which the commission will judge the merits of price claims. These guides are not themselves law, but they are important clues to how the FTC will act when faced with a price claim case and they may even provide guidance to state courts hearing claims of deceptive pricing ads.

In general, the guides deal with five claims, as follows:

- **Comparisons of the sale price to a former price.** The former price must have been offered for a substantial period of time in the near past for a seller to be justified in referring to it. A product that once had a price tag of \$50, but that never actually sold for more than \$40, cannot be hawked at “the former price of \$50.” Under the FTC guides, a reduction of at least 10 percent is necessary to make the claim true.
- **Comparable products.** “This same mattress and box spring would cost you \$450 at retail.” The advertisement is true only if the seller is in fact offering the same merchandise and if the price quoted is genuine.
- **“Suggested” retail price.** The same rules apply as those just mentioned. But in the case of a “manufacturer’s suggested” price, an additional wrinkle can occur: the manufacturer might help the retailer deceive by listing a “suggested” price that is in fact considerably greater than the going price in the retailer’s trading area. Whether it is the manufacturer who is doing his own selling or the retailer who takes advantage of the “list price” ticket on the goods, the resulting claim of a bargain is deceptive if the product does not sell for the list price in any market or in the market of the retailer.

- **Bargain based on the purchase of something else.** The usual statement in these cases is “Buy one, get one free” (or at some percentage of the usual selling price). Again, the watchwords are *literal accuracy*. If the package of batteries normally sells in the advertiser’s store for ninety-nine cents, and two packages are now selling for that price, then the advertisement is unexceptionable. But advertisers are often tempted to raise the original selling price or reduce the size or quantity of the bargain product; doing so is deceptive.
- **False claims to explain a “sale” price.** “Giant clearance sale” or “going out of business” or “limited offer” are common advertising gimmicks. If true, they are legitimate, but it takes very little to make them deceptive. A “limited offer” that goes on forever (or a sale price charged beyond the date on which a sale is said to end) is deceptive. Likewise, false claims that imply the manufacturer is charging the customer a small price are illegitimate. These include claims like “wholesale price,” “manufacturer’s close-outs,” “irregulars,” or “seconds.”

### **Bait-and-Switch Advertisements**

A common sales pitch in retail is the bait and switch. The retailer “baits” the prospective customer by dangling an alluring offer, but the offer either disappears or is disparaged once the customer arrives. Suppose someone sees this advertisement: “Steinway Grand Piano—only \$1,000.” But when the customer arrives at the store, he finds that the advertised product has “sold out.” The retailer then tries to sell the disappointed customer a higher priced product. Or the salesperson may have the product, but she will disparage it—pointing out that it does not really live up to the advertised expectations—and will exhort the customer to buy the “better,” more expensive model. These and related tactics are all violations of Section 5 of the FTC Act. In its *Guides Against Bait Advertising*, the FTC lists several such unfair practices, including the following: (1) refusing to demonstrate the advertised product, (2) disparaging the product (e.g., by exhibiting a visibly inferior grade of product next to higher-priced merchandise), (3) failing to stock enough of the advertised product to meet anticipated demand (although the advertiser may say “supplies limited,” if that is the case), (4) stating that delivery of the advertised product will take an inordinate amount of time, (5) demonstrating a defective product, and (6) deliberately discouraging the would-be buyer from purchasing the advertised product.

### **Free Offers**

Careless advertisers will discover that *free*, perhaps the most powerful word in advertising, comes at a cost. As just noted, a product is not free if it is conditional on buying another product and the price of the “free” product is included in the purchased product (“Buy one tube and get another tube free”). Just how far the commission is prepared to take this rule is clear from *F.T.C. v. Mary Carter Paint Co.* <sup>[2]</sup> In that case, the company offered, from the time it began business, to sell on a two-for-one basis: “every second can FREE, gallon or quart.” The problem was that it had never priced and sold single cans of paint, so the FTC assumed that the price of the second can was included in the first, even though Mary Carter claimed it had established single-can prices that were comparable to those for paint of comparable quality sold by competing manufacturers. The Supreme Court sustained the commission’s finding of deception.

### **Product Comparisons and Disparagements**

Product disparagement—saying defamatory things about a competitor’s product—is a common-law tort, actionable under state law. It is also actionable under Section 5 of the FTC Act. The FTC brands as disparagement the making of specific untrue statements about a competitor’s product. The agency labels an indirect form of disparagement “comparative misrepresentation”—making false claims of superiority of one’s own product. Again, the common-law puffing rule would permit the manufacturer of an over-the-counter pain reliever to make the general statement “Our pill is the best.” But the claim that a pill “works three times as fast as the leading competitor’s” violates Section 5 if untrue.

Truth has always been a defense to claims of product disparagement, but even that common-law rule has been eroded in recent years with the application of the *significance* doctrine. A statement may be technically true but insignificant and made in such a way as to be misleading. For example, *P. Lorillard Co. v. Federal Trade Commission* (/6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch49\_s05\_s02) concerned a comparative study published in *Reader’s Digest* of tar and nicotine in cigarettes. The article suggested that the differences were inconsequential to health, but the company making the cigarette with the smallest amount of tar and nicotine touted the fact anyway. During the 1970s, to help enforce its rules against comparative misrepresentations, the FTC began to insist that advertisers fully document any quantitative claims that their products were

superior to others. This meant that the advertiser should have proof of accuracy not only if the commission comes calling; the advertiser should collect the information beforehand. If it does not, the claim will be held presumptively deceptive.

The FTC Act and state laws against misleading advertising are not the only statutes aimed at product comparisons. One important more recent federal law is the Trademark Law Revision Act of 1988, amending the original Lanham Act that protects trademarks as intellectual property (see /6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch32). For many years, the federal courts had ruled that a provision in the Lanham Act prohibiting false statements in advertisements was limited to an advertiser's false statements about its own goods or services only. The 1988 amendments overturned that line of court cases, broadening the rule to cover false statements about someone else's goods or services as well. The amendments also prohibit false or misleading claims about another company's commercial activities, such as the nature of its warranties. The revised Lanham Act now permits a company injured by a competitor's false advertising to sue directly in federal court.

## **Endorsements**

How wonderful to have a superstar (or maybe yesterday's superstar) appear on television drooling over your product. Presumably, millions of people would buy a throat spray if Lady Gaga swore by it, or a pair of jeans if Justin Bieber wore them, or a face cream if Paris Hilton blessed it. In more subtle ways, numerous products are touted every day with one form of testimonial or another: "Three out of four doctors recommend..." or "Drivers across the country use..." In this area, there are endless opportunities for deception.

It is not a deception for a well-known personality to endorse a product without disclosing that she is being paid to do so. But the person giving the testimonial must in fact use the product; if she does not, the endorsement is deceptive. Suppose an astronaut just returned to Earth is talked into endorsing suspenders ("They keep your pants from floating away") that he was seen to be wearing on televised shots of the orbital mission. If he has customarily worn them, he may properly endorse them. But if he stops wearing them for another brand or because he has decided to go back to wearing belts, reruns of the TV commercials must be pulled from the air.



**Figure 24.2**

COOGA MOOGA, INC. Trade Reg. REp. (CCH)

21,247 (FTC, 1978)

The FTC issued a complaint alleging that Karr Preventative Medica Products, Inc (KPMP), Beverly Hills, Calif., and its controlling officer, Atida H. Karr, M.D. have made false and unsubstantiated claims for Acne-Statin, a mail order preparation advertised for the treatment of acne ....

The FTC also accepted an agreement containing a consent order entered into by Charles E "Pat" Boone and Cooga Mooga, Inc., Los Angeles, Calif., of which Mr. Boone is president. Mr. Boone appeared in print and television advertisements for Acne-Statin in which he provided an endorsement for the product. Key provisions of the consent agreement require that Mr. Boone make a reasonable inquiry before endorsing products in the future and that he pay part of any restitution that may be ordered in this matter.

The Commission's administrative complaint against KPMP and Dr. Karr alleges in part that : (1) Acne-Statin neither will cure acne nor can eliminate its cause, as claimed; (2) they have falsely advertised that Acne-Statin is superior to all other acne preparations and to soap in the anti-bacterial treatment of acne; (3) contrary to other claims, there are time and quantity limitations on the money-back guarantee for Acne-Statin; and (4) there was no reasonable basis for claims that Acne-Statin will cure acne and result in skin free of acne blemishes or for various other performance claims.

Under the agreed-to order, ML Boone and Cooga Mooga, nc. must have a reasonable basis when making any claim relating to the efficacy, performance, and characteristic or property, or the result of use of any product. Also, they must make a reasonable inquiry into the truthfulness of any proposed endorsement of this nature.

Mr. Boone must also pay his pro rata share of any restitution which might be ordered by the Commission or by a court.

The consent agreement, among other things, prohibits misrepresentations of (a) the benefits Boone family members have derived from any product; (b) product tests or product test results; and (c) the efficacy, use or performance of any product where the use or misuse could affect the user's health and safety.

According to Albert H. Kramer, Director, Bureau of Consumer Protection, the negotiated order, while not a binding legal precedent, stands for the principle that an endorser must verify the claims made about the advertised product before the first commercial goes on the air or appears in print, or else risk FTC action. Unless the endorser is an expert on the subject, the endorser must look to independent reliable sources to validate claims, tests, or studies supplied by the advertiser. Failure to make a reasonable effort at independent evaluation could result in personal liability for the endorser.

*Consent Decree: Pat Boone and Cooga Mooga, Inc.*

That a particular consumer is in fact ecstatic about a product does not save a false statement: it is deceptive to present this glowing testimonial to the public if there are no facts to back up the customer's claim. The assertion "I was cured by apricot pits" to market a cancer remedy would not pass FTC muster. Nor may an endorser give a testimonial involving subjects known only to experts if the endorser is not himself that kind of expert, as shown in the consent decree negotiated by the FTC with singer Pat Boone (/6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch49\_s02\_s07\_f01).

## Pictorial and Television Advertising

Pictorial representations create special problems because the picture can belie the caption or the announcer's words. A picture showing an expensive car may be deceptive if the dealer does not stock those cars or if the only readily available cars are different models. The ways of deceiving by creating false inferences through pictures are limited only by imagination. White-coated "doctors," seals of the British monarchy, and plush offices can connote various things about a product, even if the advertisement never says that the man in the white coat is a doctor, that the product is related to the British crown, or that the company has its operations in the building depicted.

Television demonstrations may also suggest nonexistent properties or qualities in a product. In one case, the commission ordered the manufacturer of a liquid cleaner to cease showing it in use near hot stoves and candles, implying falsely that it was nonflammable. A commercial showing a knife cutting through nails is deceptive if the nails were pre-cut and different knives were used for the before and after shots.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

A variety of fairly common acts and practices have been held by the FTC to be deceptive (and illegal). These include the failure to disclose pertinent facts, misleading price and savings claims, bait and switch advertisements, careless use of the word "free," and comparative misrepresentation—making misleading comparisons between your product and the product of another company.

### EXERCISES

1. Look around this week for an example of a merchant offering something for "free." Do you think there is anything deceptive about the merchant's offer? If they offer "free shipping," how do you know that the shipping cost is not hidden in the price? In any case, why do

consumers need protection from an agency that polices merchant offerings that include the word *free*?

2. Find the FTC's guide against deceptive pricing (<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/guides/decptprc.htm>). Can you find any merchants locally that appear to be in violation of the FTC's rules and principles?

[1] *FTC v. Transworld Courier Services, Inc.*, 59 A&TR Rpt. 174 (N.D. Ga. 1990).

[2] *F.T.C. v. Mary Carter Paint Co.*, 382 U.S. 46 (1965).

## 24.3 Unfair Trade Practices

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how unfair trade practices are different from deceptive trade practices.
2. Name three categories of unfair trade practices, and give examples.

We turn now to certain practices that not only have deceptive elements but also operate unfairly in ways beyond mere deception. In general, three types of unfair practices will be challenged: (1) failing to substantiate material representations in advertisements before publishing them or putting them on the air, (2) failing to disclose certain material information necessary for consumers to make rational comparisons of price and quality of products, and (3) taking unconscionable advantage of certain consumers or exploiting their weakness. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has enjoined many ads of the first type. The second type of unfairness has led the commission to issue a number of trade regulation rules (TRRs) setting forth what must be disclosed—for example, octane ratings of gasoline. In this section, we focus briefly on the third type.

### Contests and Sweepstakes

In 1971, the FTC obtained a consent order from *Reader's Digest* barring it from promoting a mail-order sweepstakes—a sweepstakes in which those responding had a chance to win large monetary or other prizes by returning numbered tickets—unless the magazine expressly disclosed how many prizes would be awarded and unless all such prizes were in fact awarded. *Reader's Digest* had heavily promoted the size and number of prizes, but few of the

winning tickets were ever returned, and consequently few of the prizes were ever actually awarded. <sup>[1]</sup>

Beginning in the 1960s, the retail food and gasoline industries began to heavily promote games of chance. Investigations by the FTC and a US House of Representatives small business subcommittee showed that the games were rigged: winners were “picked” early by planting the winning cards early on in the distribution, winning cards were sent to geographic areas most in need of the promotional benefits of announcing winners, not all prizes were awarded before many games terminated, and local retailers could spot winning cards and cash them in or give them to favored customers. As a result of these investigations, the FTC in 1969 issued its Trade Regulation Rule for Games of Chance in the Food Retailing and Gasoline Industries, strictly regulating how the games may operate and be promoted.

Many marketers use contests, as opposed to sweepstakes, in merchandising their products. In a contest, the consumer must actually do something other than return a ticket, such as fill in a bingo card or come up with certain words. It is an unfair practice for the sponsoring company not to abide by its own rules in determining winners.

### **Door-to-Door, Direct Mail, and Unsolicited Merchandise**

In 1974, the FTC promulgated a TRR requiring a three-day cooling-off period within which any door-to-door sales contract can be cancelled. The contract must state the buyer’s right to the cooling-off period.

For many years, certain unscrupulous distributors would mail unsolicited merchandise to consumers and demand payment through a series of dunning letters and bills. In 1970, Congress enacted legislation that declares any unsolicited mailing and subsequent dunning to be an unfair trade practice under Section 5 of the FTC Act. Under this law, if you receive an unsolicited product in the mail, you may treat it as a gift and use it; you are under no obligation to return it or pay for it.

Another regulation of mail-order sales is the FTC’s TRR concerning mail-order merchandise. Any direct-mail merchandiser must deliver the promised goods within thirty days or give the consumer an option to accept delayed delivery or a prompt refund of his money or cancellation of the order if it has not been prepaid.

## Negative-Option Plans

The “negative option” was devised in the 1920s by the Book-of-the-Month Club. It is a marketing device through which the consumer responds to the seller only if she wishes *not* to receive the product. As used by book clubs and other distributors of goods that are sent out periodically, the customer agrees, when “joining,” to accept and pay for all items unless she specifically indicates, before they arrive, that she wishes to reject them. If she does nothing, she must pay. Difficulties arise when the negative-option notice arrives late in the mail or when a member quits and continues to receive the monthly notices. Internet users will recognize the negative option in current use as the “opt out” process, where you are “in” unless you notice what’s going on and specifically opt out.

In 1974, the FTC issued a TRR governing use of negative-option plans by sellers. The TRR laid down specific notice requirements. Among other things, a subscriber is entitled to ten days in which to notify sellers that she has rejected the particular item about to be sent. If a customer has cancelled her membership, the seller must take back and pay the former member’s mailing expenses for any merchandise mailed after cancellation. The former member may treat any shipments beyond one after cancellation as unsolicited merchandise and keep it without having to pay for it or return it.

## Breach of Contract

Under certain circumstances, a company’s willful breach of contract can constitute an unfair trade practice, thus violating section 5 of the FTC Act. In one recent case, a termite and pest exterminating company signed contracts with its customers guaranteeing “lifetime” protection against termite damage to structures that the company treated. The contract required a customer to renew the service each year by paying an unchanging annual fee. Five years after signing these contracts, the company notified 207,000 customers that it was increasing the annual fee because of inflation. The FTC challenged the fee hike on the ground that it was a breach of contract amounting to an unfair trade practice. The FTC’s charges were sustained on appeal. The eleventh circuit approved the FTC’s three-part test for determining unfairness: (1) the injury “must be substantial,” (2) “it must not be outweighed by countervailing benefits to consumers,” and (3) “it must be an injury that consumers themselves could not reasonably have

avoided.” In the termite case, all three parts were met: consumers were forced to pay substantially higher fees, they received no extra benefits, and they could not have anticipated or prevented the price hike, since the contract specifically precluded them. <sup>[2]</sup>

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Market efficiency is premised on buyers being able to make rational choices about their purchases. Where sellers fail to substantiate material representations or to disclose material information that is necessary for buyers to act rationally, the FTC may find an unfair trade practice. In addition, some sellers will take “unconscionable advantage” of certain buyers or exploit their weakness. This takes place in various contests and sweepstakes, door-to-door and mail-order selling, and negative-option plans. The FTC has issued a number of TRRs to combat some of these unfair practices.

### EXERCISES

1. The FTC receives over ten thousand complaints every year about sweepstakes and prizes. Using the Internet or conversations with people you know, name two ways that sweepstakes or contests can be unfair to consumers.
2. As economic hard times return, many scam artists have approached people in debt or people who are in danger of losing their homes. Describe some of the current practices of such people and companies, and explain why they are unfair.
3. With regard to Exercise 2, discuss and decide whether government serves a useful public function by protecting consumers against such scam artists or whether use of the common law—by the individuals who have been taken advantage of—would create greater good for society.

[1] *Reader’s Digest Assoc.*, 79 F.T.C. 599 (1971).

[2] *Orkin Exterminating Co. v. FTC*, 849 F.2d 1354 (11th Cir. 1988), *cert. denied*, 488 U.S. 1041 (1989).

## 24.4 Remedies

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the various remedies the Federal Trade Commission has used against unfair and deceptive acts and practices.

2. Understand that the states also have power to regulate unfair and deceptive trade practices and often do.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has a host of weapons in its remedial arsenal. It may issue cease and desist orders against unfair and deceptive acts and practices and let the punishment fit the crime. For instance, the FTC can order a company to remove or modify a deceptive trade name. It may order companies to substantiate their advertising. Or if a company fails to disclose facts about a product, the commission may order the company to affirmatively disclose the facts in future advertising. In the *J. B. Williams* case (/6059 - mayer\_1.0-ch49\_s05\_s02), the court upheld the commission's order that the company tell consumers in future advertising that the condition Geritol is supposed to treat—iron-poor blood—is only rarely the cause of symptoms of tiredness that Geritol would help cure.

The FTC has often exercised its power to order affirmative disclosures during the past decade, but its power to correct advertising deceptions is even broader. In *Warner Lambert Co. v. Federal Trade Commission*, the US court of appeals in Washington, using corrective advertising, approved the commission's power to order a company to *correct* in future advertisements its former misleading and deceptive statements regarding Listerine mouthwash should it choose to continue to advertise the product.<sup>[1]</sup> The court also approved the FTC's formula for determining how much the company must spend: an amount equal to the average annual expenditure on advertising the mouthwash during the ten years preceding the case.

In addition to its injunctive powers, the FTC may seek civil penalties of \$10,000 for violation of final cease and desist orders, and if the violation is a continuing one—an advertising campaign that lasts for weeks or months—each day is considered a separate violation. The commission may also sue for up to \$10,000 per violation, as just described, for violations of its trade regulation rules (TRRs). Under the FTC Improvement Act of 1975, the commission is authorized to seek injunctions and collect monetary damages on behalf of injured consumers in cases involving violations of TRRs. It may also seek restitution for consumers in cases involving cease and desist orders if the party continuing to commit the unfair or deceptive practice should have known that it would be dishonest or fraudulent to continue doing so. The exact reach of this

power to seek restitution, which generally had not been available before 1975, remains to be tested in the courts. As for *private* parties, though they have rights under the antitrust statutes, they have no right to sue under Section 5 of the FTC Act.

### Little FTC Acts

Even when consumers have no direct remedy under federal law for unfair or deceptive acts and practices, they may have recourse under state laws modeled on the FTC Act, known as little FTC acts. All states have some sort of consumer protection act, and these acts are often more liberal than the federal unfair trade rules; they permit consumers—and in several states, even aggrieved businesses—to sue when injured by a host of “immoral, unethical, oppressive, or unscrupulous” commercial acts. Often, a successful plaintiff can recover treble damages and attorneys’ fees. The acts are helpful to consumers because common-law fraud is difficult to prove. Its elements are rigorous and unyielding: an intentional misrepresentation of material facts, reliance by the recipient, causation, and damages. Many of these elements are omitted from consumer fraud statutes. While most statutes require some aspect of willfulness, some do not. In fact, many states relax or even eliminate the element of reliance, and some states do not even require a showing of causation or injury.

#### KEY TAKEAWAY

The FTC has many weapons to remedy unfair and deceptive trade practices. These include civil penalties, cease and desist orders, restitution for consumers, and corrective advertising. States have supplemented common law with their own consumer protection acts, known as little FTC acts. Remedies are similar for state statutes, and private parties may bring lawsuits directly.

#### EXERCISE

1. Doan’s Pills are an over-the-counter medicine for low back pain. Using the Internet, find out what claims Doan’s was making and why the FTC thought corrective advertising was necessary.

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[1] *Warner Lambert Co. v. Federal Trade Commission*, 562 F.2d 749 (D.C. Cir. 1977), *cert. denied*, 435 U.S. 950 (1978).



## 24.5 Cases

### False and Misleading Representations

*J. B. Williams Co. v. FTC*

*381 F.2d 884 (6th Cir. 1967)*

CELEBREEZE, CIRCUIT JUDGE

The question presented by this appeal is whether Petitioners' advertising of a product, Geritol, for the relief of iron deficiency anemia, is false and misleading so as to violate Sections 5 and 12 of the Federal Trade Commission Act.

The J. B. Williams Company, Inc. is a New York corporation engaged in the sale and distribution of two products known as Geritol liquid and Geritol tablets. Geritol liquid was first marketed in August, 1950; Geritol tablets in February, 1952. Geritol is sold throughout the United States and advertisements for Geritol have appeared in newspapers and on television in all the States of the United States.

Parkson Advertising Agency, Inc. has been the advertising agency for Williams since 1957. Most of the advertising money for Geritol is spent on television advertising....

The Commission's Order requires that not only must the Geritol advertisements be expressly limited to those persons whose symptoms are due to an existing deficiency of one or more of the vitamins contained in the preparation, or due to an existing deficiency of iron, but also the Geritol advertisements must affirmatively disclose the negative fact that a great majority of persons who experience these symptoms do not experience them because they have a vitamin or iron deficiency; that for the great majority of people experiencing these symptoms, Geritol will be of no benefit. Closely related to this requirement is the further requirement of the Order that the Geritol advertisements refrain from representing that the symptoms are generally reliable indications of iron deficiency.

\* \* \*

The main thrust of the Commission's Order is that the Geritol advertising must affirmatively disclose the negative fact that a great majority of persons who experience these symptoms do not experience them because there is a vitamin or iron deficiency.

The medical evidence on this issue is conflicting and the question is not one which is susceptible to precise statistical analysis.

\* \* \*

While the advertising does not make the affirmative representation that the majority of people who are tired and rundown are so because of iron deficiency anemia and the product Geritol will be an effective cure, there is substantial evidence to support the finding of the Commission that most tired people are not so because of iron deficiency anemia, and the failure to disclose this fact is false and misleading because the advertisement creates the impression that the tired feeling is caused by something which Geritol can cure.

\* \* \*

Here the advertisements emphasize the fact that if you are often tired and run-down you will feel stronger fast by taking Geritol. The Commission, in looking at the overall impression created by the advertisements on the general public, could reasonably find these advertisements were false and misleading. The finding that the advertisements link common, non-specific symptoms with iron deficiency anemia, and thereby create a false impression because most people with these symptoms are not suffering from iron deficiency anemia, is both reasonable and supported by substantial evidence. The Commission is not bound to the literal meaning of the words, nor must the Commission take a random sample to determine the meaning and impact of the advertisements.

Petitioners argue vigorously that the Commission does not have the legal power to require them to state the negative fact that “in the great majority of persons who experience such symptoms, these symptoms are not caused by a deficiency of one or more of the vitamins contained in the preparation or by iron deficiency or iron deficiency anemia”; and “for such persons the preparation will be of no benefit.”

We believe the evidence is clear that Geritol is of no benefit in the treatment of tiredness except in those cases where tiredness has been caused by a deficiency of the ingredients contained in Geritol. The fact that the great majority of people who experience tiredness symptoms do not suffer from any deficiency of the ingredients in Geritol is a “material fact” under the meaning of that term as used in Section 15 of the Federal Trade Commission Act and Petitioners’ failure to

reveal this fact in this day when the consumer is influenced by mass advertising utilizing highly developed arts of persuasion, renders it difficult for the typical consumer to know whether the product will in fact meet his needs unless he is told what the product will or will not do....

\* \* \*

The Commission forbids the Petitioners' representation that the presence of iron deficiency anemia can be self-diagnosed or can be determined without a medical test. The danger to be remedied here has been fully and adequately taken care of in the other requirements of the Order. We can find no Congressional policy against self-medication on a trial and error basis where the consumer is fully informed and the product is safe as Geritol is conceded to be. In fact, Congressional policy is to encourage such self-help. In effect the Commission's Order l(f) tends to place Geritol in the prescription drug field. We do not consider it within the power of the Federal Trade Commission to remove Geritol from the area of proprietary drugs and place it in the area of prescription drugs. This requirement of the Order will not be enforced. We also find this Order is not unduly vague and fairly apprises the Petitioners of what is required of them. Petition denied and, except for l(f) of the Commission's Order, enforcement of the Order will be granted

## Video 49.1

*Students may be interested in a Geritol ad from 1960.*

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. Did the defendant actually make statements that were false? If so, what were they? Or, rather than being clearly false, were the statements deceptive? If so, how so?
2. Whether or not you feel that you have "tired blood" or "iron-poor blood," you may be amused by a Geritol ad from 1960. See Video 49.1. Do the disclaimers at the start of the ad that "the majority of tired people don't feel that way because of iron-poor blood" sound like corrective advertising? Is the ad still deceptive in some way? If so, how? If not, why not?

## Product Comparisons

*P. Lorillard Co. v. Federal Trade Commission*

*186 F.2d 52 (4th Cir. 1950)*

Parker, Chief Judge

This is a petition to set aside an order of the Federal Trade Commission which directed that the P. Lorillard Company cease and desist from making certain representations found to be false in the advertising of its tobacco products. The Commission has filed an answer asking that its order be enforced. The company was ordered to cease and desist “from representing by any means directly or indirectly”:

That Old Gold cigarettes or the smoke therefrom contains less nicotine, or less tars and resins, or is less irritating to the throat than the cigarettes or the smoke therefrom of any of the six other leading brands of cigarettes.

\* \* \*

Laboratory tests introduced in evidence show that the difference in nicotine, tars and resins of the different leading brands of cigarettes is insignificant in amount; and there is abundant testimony of medical experts that such difference as there is could result in no difference in the physiological effect upon the smoker. There is expert evidence, also, that the slight difference in the nicotine, tar and resin content of cigarettes is not constant between different brands, but varies from place to place and from time to time, and that it is a practical impossibility for the manufacturer of cigarettes to determine or to remove or substantially reduce such content or to maintain constancy of such content in the finished cigarette. This testimony gives ample support to the Commission’s findings.

\* \* \*

The company relies upon the truth of the advertisements complained of, saying that they merely state what had been truthfully stated in an article in the Reader’s Digest. An examination of the advertisements, however, shows a perversion of the meaning of the Reader’s Digest article which does little credit to the company’s advertising department—a perversion which results in the use of the truth in such a way as to cause the reader to believe the exact opposite of what was intended by the writer of the article. A comparison of the advertisements with the article makes this very plain. The article, after referring to laboratory tests that had been made on cigarettes of the leading brands, says:

*“The laboratory’s general conclusion will be sad news for the advertising copy writers, but good news for the smoker, who need no longer worry as to which*

*cigarette can most effectively nail down his coffin. For one nail is just about as good as another. Says the laboratory report: 'The differences between brands are, practically speaking, small, and no single brand is so superior to its competitors as to justify its selection on the ground that it is less harmful.' How small the variations are may be seen from the data tabulated on page 7."*

The table referred to in the article was inserted for the express purpose of showing the insignificance of the difference in the nicotine and tar content of the smoke from the various brands of cigarettes. It appears therefrom that the Old Gold cigarettes examined in the test contained less nicotine, tars and resins than the others examined, although the difference, according to the uncontradicted expert evidence, was so small as to be entirely insignificant and utterly without meaning so far as effect upon the smoker is concerned. The company proceeded to advertise this difference as though it had received a citation for public service instead of a castigation from the Reader's Digest. In the leading newspapers of the country and over the radio it advertised that the Reader's Digest had had experiments conducted and had found that Old Gold cigarettes were lowest in nicotine and lowest in irritating tars and resins, just as though a substantial difference in such content had been found. The following advertisement may be taken as typical:

*OLD GOLDS FOUND LOWEST IN NICOTINE*

*OLD GOLDS FOUND LOWEST IN*

*THROAT-IRRITATING TARS AND RESINS*

*"See Impartial Test by Reader's Digest July Issue." See How Your Brand Compares with Old Gold.*

*"Reader's Digest assigned a scientific testing laboratory to find out about cigarettes. They tested seven leading cigarettes and Reader's Digest published the results.*

*"The cigarette whose smoke was lowest in nicotine was Old Gold. The cigarette with the least throat-irritating tars and resins was Old Gold.*

*"On both these major counts Old Gold was best among all seven cigarettes tested.*

*"Get July Reader's Digest. Turn to Page 5. See what this highly respected magazine reports.*

*“You’ll say, ‘From now on, my cigarette is Old Gold.’ Light one? Note the mild, interesting flavor. Easier on the throat? Sure: And more smoking pleasure: Yes, it’s the new Old Gold—finer yet, since ‘something new has been added’.”*

The fault with this advertising was not that it did not print all that the Reader’s Digest article said, but that it printed a small part thereof in such a way as to create an entirely false and misleading impression, not only as to what was said in the article, but also as to the quality of the company’s cigarettes. Almost anyone reading the advertisements or listening to the radio broadcasts would have gained the very definite impression that Old Gold cigarettes were less irritating to the throat and less harmful than other leading brands of cigarettes because they contained substantially less nicotine, tars and resins, and that the Reader’s Digest had established this fact in impartial laboratory tests; and few would have troubled to look up the Reader’s Digest to see what it really had said. The truth was exactly the opposite. There was no substantial difference in Old Gold cigarettes and the other leading brands with respect to their content of nicotine, tars and resins and this was what the Reader’s Digest article plainly said. The table whose meaning the advertisements distorted for the purpose of misleading and deceiving the public was intended to prove that there was no practical difference and did prove it when properly understood. To tell less than the whole truth is a well-known method of deception; and he who deceives by resorting to such method cannot excuse the deception by relying upon the truthfulness per se of the partial truth by which it has been accomplished. In determining whether or not advertising is false or misleading within the meaning of the statute regard must be had, not to fine spun distinctions and arguments that may be made in excuse, but to the effect which it might reasonably be expected to have upon the general public. “The important criterion is the net impression which the advertisement is likely to make upon the general populace.” As was well said by Judge Coxe in *Florence Manufacturing Co. v. J. C. Dowd & Co.*, with reference to the law relating to trademarks: “The law is not made for the protection of experts, but for the public—that vast multitude which includes the ignorant, the unthinking and the credulous, who, in making purchases, do not stop to analyze, but are governed by appearances and general impressions.”

\* \* \*

For the reasons stated, the petition to set aside the order will be denied and the order will be enforced.

### CASE QUESTIONS

1. From a practical perspective, what (if anything) is wrong with caveat emptor—"let the buyer beware"? The careful consumer could have looked at the *Reader's Digest* article; the magazine was widely available in libraries and newsstands.
2. Why isn't this just an example of "puffing" the company's wares? (Puffing presents opinions rather than facts; statements like "This car is a real winner" and "Your wife will love this watch" constitute puffing.)

## 24.6 Summary and Exercises

### Summary

Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Act gives the FTC the power to enforce a provision prohibiting "unfair methods of competition and unfair or deceptive acts or practices in commerce." Under this power, the FTC may bring enforcement proceedings against companies on a case-by-case basis or may promulgate trade regulation rules.

A deceptive act or practice need not actually deceive as long as it is "likely to mislead." An unfair act or practice need not deceive at all but must offend a common sense of propriety or justice or of an honest way of acting. Among the proscribed acts or practices are these: failure to disclose pertinent facts, false or misleading description of products, misleading price and savings claims, bait-and-switch advertisements, free-offer claims, false product comparisons and disparagements, and endorsements by those who do not use the product or who have no reasonable basis for making the claims. Among the unfair trade practices that the FTC has sought to deter are certain types of contests and sweepstakes, high-pressure door-to-door and mail-order selling, and certain types of negative-option plans.

The FTC has a number of remedial weapons: cease and desist orders tailored to the particular deception or unfair act (including affirmative disclosure in advertising and corrections in future advertising), civil monetary penalties, and injunctions, damages, and restitution on behalf of injured consumers. Only the FTC may sue to correct violations of Section 5; private parties have

no right to sue under Section 5, but they can sue for certain kinds of false advertising under the federal trademark laws.

## EXERCISES

1. Icebox Ike, a well-known tackle for a professional football team, was recently signed to a multimillion-dollar contract to appear in a series of nationally televised advertisements touting the pleasures of going to the ballet and showing him in the audience watching a ballet. In fact, Icebox has never been to a ballet, although he has told his friends that he “truly believes” ballet is a “wonderful thing.” The FTC opens an investigation to determine whether there are grounds to take legal action against Icebox and the ballet company ads. What advice can you give Icebox Ike? What remedies can the FTC seek?
2. Door-to-door salespersons of an encyclopedia company offer a complete set of encyclopedias to “selected” customers. They tell customers that their only obligation is to pay for a ten-year updating service. In fact, the price of the updating service includes the cost of the encyclopedias. The FTC sues, charging deception under Section 5 of the FTC Act. The encyclopedia company defends itself on the ground that no one could possibly have been misled because everyone must have understood that no company could afford to give away a twenty-volume set of books for free. What is the result?
3. Vanessa Cosmetics takes out full-page advertisements in the local newspaper stating that “this Sunday only” the Vanessa Makeup Kit will be “reduced to only \$25.” In fact, the regular price has been \$25.50. Does this constitute deceptive advertising? Why?
4. Lilliputian Department Stores advertises a “special” on an electric carrot slicer, priced “this week only at \$10.” When customers come to the store, they find the carrot slicer in frayed boxes, and the advertised special is clearly inferior to a higher-grade carrot slicer priced at \$25. When customers ask about the difference, the store clerk tells them, “You wouldn’t want to buy the cheaper one; it wears out much too fast.” What grounds, if any, exist to charge Lilliputian with violations of the FTC Act?
5. A toothpaste manufacturer advertises that special tests demonstrate that use of its toothpaste results in fewer cavities than a “regular toothpaste.” In fact, the “regular” toothpaste was not marketed but was merely the advertiser’s brand stripped of its fluoride.



Various studies over the years have demonstrated, however, that fluoride in toothpaste will reduce the number of cavities a user will get. Is this advertisement deceptive under Section 5 of the FTC Act?

6. McDonald's advertises a sweepstakes through a mailing that says prizes are to be reserved for 15,610 "lucky winners." The mailing further states, "You may be [a winner] but you will never know if you don't claim your prize. All prizes not claimed will never be given away, so hurry." The mailing does not give the odds of winning. The FTC sues to enjoin the mailing as deceptive. What is the result?

### SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

1. Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act is enforceable by

- a. a consumer in federal court
- b. a consumer in state court
- c. the FTC in an administrative proceeding
- d. the FTC suing in federal court

The FTC

- a. is an independent federal agency
- b. is an arm of the Justice Department
- c. supersedes Congress in defining deceptive trade practices
- d. speaks for the president on consumer matters

A company falsely stated that its competitor's product "won't work." Which of the following statements is false?

- a. The competitor may sue the company under state law.
- b. The competitor may sue the company for violating the FTC Act.
- c. The competitor may sue the company for violating the Lanham Act.
- d. The FTC may sue the company for violating the FTC Act.

The FTC may order a company that violated Section 5 of the FTC Act by false advertising

- a. to go out of business
- b. to close down the division of the company that paid for false advertising

- c. to issue corrective advertising
- d. to buy back from its customers all the products sold by the advertising

The ingredients in a nationally advertised cupcake must be disclosed on the package under

- a. state common law
- b. a trade regulation rule promulgated by the FTC
- c. the federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act
- d. an executive order of the president

### SELF-TEST ANSWERS

- 1. c
- 2. a
- 3. b
- 4. c
- 5. b