In a recent article in this journal¹, Daniel Kading claims that the obligation to keep one's promises is not to be construed as a moral obligation. He offers two reasons for thinking this:

(i) It is possible to make an 'explicitly immoral promise'; this would be the case if, for example, I undertook to commit a murder.

It would be fantastic to suggest in this case that (the promiser) obligates himself morally—he obligates himself, so to speak, in the face of morality (p. 58).

(ii) Mr Kading believes that:

To say that A is obligated to do X is to say, in part, that a certain kind of person, the kind being implied by the context, would, if he knew the facts, necessarily be displeased with A if A inexcusably failed to do X. Thus where the context is the context of a promise, the relevant kind of person will be the promisee (p. 59).

But in the case of a genuine moral obligation to do X, the kind of person whose displeasure at the non-performance of X is a necessary condition of the obligation is any 'thoroughly morally concerned person'; and since this sort of person is to be distinguished from a promisee qua promisee, the obligation to keep promises cannot be thought of as a matter of morality.

Traditionally, of course, the honouring of promises has been considered an example of moral obligation, indeed, a paradigm of such obligation. Reasons why this view should have been adopted do not concern me on this occasion; I wish merely to show that Mr Kading's reasons for denying this do not survive critical scrutiny. I would like to lay some stress on what I say in connection with the second reason, for it seems to me that what Mr Kading says there about the obligation to keep promises is not just mistaken, but mildly dangerous.

1. It seems reasonable to suppose that if the performance of action X in given circumstances would be immoral, then it would be immoral to un-
dertake to perform action X; if this is what Mr Kading has in mind when he says that the man who promises to commit murder obligates himself, not morally, but in the face of morality, we may readily agree. But having said that one may acquire immorally an obligation, we have not thereby ruled out the possibility that the obligation so acquired is a moral one. Consider this case: most of us would, I think, want to say that a parent is morally obliged to take good care of his children. Part of what is involved in the adoption of a child is the acquisition of this moral obligation towards the child. But, of course, as child welfare officers know full well, it is possible to adopt children for quite the wrong reasons. One may speak perfectly properly of an immoral adoption: in this case, then, it seems that the notion of immorally acquiring a moral obligation is quite intelligible.

What perhaps we ought rather to be considering is whether it is equally intelligible to talk of a moral obligation to do what would be immoral. In this connection what does seem clear is that there would be something very odd indeed about speaking thus if both the word ‘obligation’ and the word ‘immoral’ were being employed in what has been called the ‘verdicitive’ sense, the sense in which “we say, after having weighed up the pros and cons and made up our minds, that, in this particular situation, we ought to do this or that.” But as long as one or both of the words is being used ‘deliberatively’, that is to say, with a ceteris paribus proviso, I can see no special problem about saying that if we promise to do something immoral, we thereby acquire a moral obligation to do something immoral. Kant’s worry about whether we would be justified in telling a lie to a homicidal maniac in order to avoid revealing to him the whereabouts of his intended victim seems to be describable in just this sort of way: we have a moral obligation, other things being equal, to tell truth, but to do so in these circumstances would constitute aiding the maniac in his fell design, which, other things being equal, is something we ought morally not to do.

Nothing that Mr Kading has to say concerning immoral promises presents any logical impediment to construing the obligation to keep a promise as a moral matter. Indeed, it might be thought that the immoral promise in certain circumstances suggests a reason for believing the obligation to be a moral one. Situations which may be described as having a moral obligation to do what is immoral are, of course, the stuff of which moral