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When Doing What's Right is Wrong: The Psychology of Personnel Security

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The applied science of industrial-organizational psychology was already well on its way in the late 19th and into the early 20th centuries (1). At issue were assessing and increasing efficiency, productivity, safety, and security of a novel category of people—viz., *personnel*—and their interactions with the non-personal—viz., materiel. The issue was becoming ever more important with the burgeoning significance of the social constructs of *industry* and *organization*. This article describes the psychology behind failed attempts to improve security, regardless of whether the service and product of industry and organization is one of education, health, commodity, process, or security itself.

In fact, three of the greatest contributors to identifying the psychology of failure are not even industrial-organizational psychologists. The first is Immanuel Kant, the 18th century German philosopher, who wrote on the *categorical imperative* and *deontology*. The *categorical imperative* can denote an unconditional moral and ethical obligation irrespective of a person's disposition or purpose. *Deontology* can denote the study of what behaviors require such an obligation via what constitutes one's duty. Convergence on which behaviors require an obligation and duty eluded Kant and has eluded neo-Kantians as well as industrial-organizational psychologists. So, in the educational realm, some administrators continue to falsify test scores, provide right answers to test-takers, and at least implicitly foster a culture of corruption (2). Doing what's right leads to wrong.

The second great contributor is the 19th century English philosopher John Stuart Mill, who further developed and popularized the *utilitarianism* of two other philosophers—his father, John Mill, and Jeremy Bentham. Variations of *utilitarianism* include what's right is what yields the best consequences for me, people like me, some other people, or all people. Problems in application here include both convergence and calculation—the latter bearing on how to weight convergences. So, in the health realm, waiting times to see physicians are intentionally and inaccurately shortened, mortality rates decreased, errors in diagnoses and prescriptions discounted or covered up (3). Doing what's right leads to wrong.

The third great contributor is the 20th century American social psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who identified six *moral development stages* affecting conceiving what's right and whether to act on this conception. These include avoiding punishment, seeking reward, maintaining good relations with others, following formal rules, doing what's mutually advantageous, and identifying and following transcendent, universal principles. If only everyone followed a stage or the rules, but both can be variously interpreted. And the same individual may operate differently through situation and time. So, in the security realm, there's mishandling of sensitive and classified information and straight out treason and espionage (4). Doing what's right leads to wrong.

Industrial-organizational psychology's attempts to confront the above challenges continue to proliferate. But they almost all seem to be predicated on reinforcing or increasing intrinsic reinforcement through external reinforcement. Unfortunately, there's much empirical data to illustrate how the latter doesn't always or even frequently buy off the former but can decreases it (5). And this is what might be expected for a human nature—whether from a secular or sacred perspective--that is born in Original Sin.

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Disciplines: Other Psychology, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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