

Engineering the truth??

Phil Jump reflects on the morality of engineers in the wake of Volkswagen scandal, and suggests that “much is required of those to whom much is given”.

As someone whose background is in engineering, it has been somewhat comforting to avoid the barrage of moral outrage that has beset other professions in recent years. Retailers and coffee chains might avoid tax; the financial sector limp from scandal to scandal; even charities of late have been accused of rather dubious fundraising practices. But surely not engineers – we're the good guys who make things, fix them when they're broken and invent stuff that makes everyone else's lives better. But in the ongoing saga of corporate misdemeanour – engineers are now in the spotlight.

I am of course referring to the scandal that has embroiled the German car manufacturer Volkswagen. In short it seems that their very clever engineers have worked out a way of enabling a car to sense that it is being tested, reduce its emissions accordingly, then return the engine to a state of better driving performance once the test is complete. So now engineers too are counted amongst those who cannot be trusted.

The Volkswagen story, with its steady stream of public apologies has fought for media air space with another of those seemingly perpetual scandal stories of FIFA's mismanagement and corruption. Sepp Blatter, it seems really, really has been forced to stand down

amidst yet another barrage of corruption allegations (or is it just a further raft of evidence in relation to the old ones?). I cannot even watch the "beautiful game" it seems, without the accompaniment of scandal and corruption.


The classic Christian doctrine of original sin is not one we tend to speak of much these days – it feels a bit cold and judgemental to declare every human being as morally flawed, simply by virtue of their existence. Yet whether we derive it from traditional Christian theology, or by quietly observing the realities of our contemporary world, left to their own devices, unchallenged and unchecked, human beings do have an uncanny tendency to resemble "sheep that have gone astray".

Regulations, designed originally to give substance to our shared concern for our planet's environment have somehow, in less than a generation, become just another difficulty to be got around. And for all our disdain, no-one can deny that the Volkswagen emissions software is the outcome of significant human ingenuity and even creativity!

It seems that two of the biggest growth industries in our world today are the production of an ever increasing raft of regulations, accompanied by an equally

formidable commitment to finding ways of getting around them. Such regulatory frameworks are of course no new phenomena, and the early books of the Old Testament are pretty much dominated by laws and statutes for human society which include a fair number of business practices. Yet what is perhaps overlooked is that these are not presented as a set of constraints and controls to be got around, but the natural expression of being a people who "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love their neighbour as themselves".

Is it nothing more than romantic nostalgia to expect the world of business and commerce to also be one that is riven through with moral principle and virtue? Is it simply a reality of today's economic climate that business leaders will make money by whatever means possible, and it is down to regulators to contain and constrain them, like a dangerously wild animal fenced in at the zoo?

We might usefully remember that corporate business has a huge influence not only in relation to the economic fortunes of developing nations, but in setting the moral and cultural norms for emerging business practice. It is perhaps in more than simply economic terms that "much is required of those to whom much is given" 



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