

Peer Review

Review of: "Universalism and Innovation: The Influence of Impartiality and Inclusiveness on National Innovativeness"

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Innovation and morality

I am concerned about this paper for several reasons. First, there is one large and significant correlation between the GII (Global Innovation Index) and a measure of universalist morality (as opposed to a context-driven morality). At the same time, other measures of universalism yield no results. Conceptually, it seems to me that the measures with null results would have actually been better candidates to explain innovation, as they relate to the inclusion of outgroups in the economic process. The measure that did achieve a positive correlation appears to tap deontological morality (e.g., one based on commandments). Deontological morality makes a virtue of rigidity, which on the face of it is inimical to innovation.

Prima facie, the findings do not make sense to me. This might rather be my problem and not a reflection of the quality of the science. By deontological morality, my beliefs should yield to the data. Then again, prior beliefs do play a role. I would be more inclined to accept the findings if the conceptual distance between the available measures and behavior on the ground were smaller and if the concept of universalism itself were not open to interpretation in light of confounding variables. A society with a high score on universalism may have a history of innovation, a history of immigration, a history of political upheavals or economic crises, a history towards or away from other markers of an open society (in the sense of Popper, von Hayek, and other Austrians).

My other concern is a reflection of the times we live in. The prose of the paper looks rather like something an AI engine might produce. It is smooth but lifeless. Let me be clear that I do not mean this

observation to be read as an accusation, but merely as an impression. As other readers may share this impression, the authors might wish to provide a statement about how they went about the writing.

Relatedly, the first section of the paper reads like a textbook introduction to prevalent theories of morality. There is no clear arc leading up to the research question to be pursued. As far as I can tell, the characterization of the various schools of thought is valid. Incidentally, I had an aha! experience when reading this section. One might argue, I now believe, that classical utilitarianism in fact has a deontological core. When Bentham, Mill et alii insist that the well-being of every individual should receive the same weight in our decisions regarding how we allocate our limited resources (this is a deontological move), they must have asked themselves if they would be willing to flip a coin to decide whether to rescue their own child from a burning house or the neighbor's child. The theory of evolution has addressed this issue and provides moral heuristics that work in the real world – without legitimizing nepotism.

As a minor point, I note that the correlation matrices present the numerical results twice, once above the main diagonal and once below it.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.