

Unfreedom as development? Innate differences and the wealth of nations

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Abstract. I remark on the explanation that innate differences account for why some countries are wealthy and others poor. I draw a distinction between two versions of this explanation.

Why are some countries wealthy and others poor? “Surely the question is well-covered. What can a philosopher possibly add?” I anticipate readers thinking. I searched online and I found a student essay competition set by a bank in Minneapolis on this very question, but more than a decade ago. It also provided introductory information which entrants were expected to take into account. But the information did not include any reference to an answer I expect some people to give. The answer I have in mind is quick and bold: “There are innate differences between the races – that is why some countries are rich and others poor.” Perhaps such differences are actually covered by the introductory information, by its reference to natural resources. I am not sure. Of course, I desire to enter the competition, but this is no belated entry below.

Answers which appeal to the innate are given in response to the question of why some country is doing better in some field than “ours.”¹ I mostly reject such answers, but I wish to distinguish between two versions of the innateness answer. The distinction is more or less entailed by some of the introductory information combined with our focus on the innate. There is the version that occurs to “everyone,” which is roughly this: the innovators in some societies are innately more innovative than the

¹ “What were the causes of this earlier development and more abundant manifestation of womanly intellect in France? The primary one, perhaps, lies in the physiological characteristics of the Gallic race...” (Eliot 1854)

innovators in other societies – “Our natural geniuses are not such natural geniuses!” – including the people who come up with good ideas for new technology, for military strategies, for running the economy, and more. And then there is another version: the innate differences which prevent some nations from flourishing, in terms of wealth, are not differences to do with the talent for innovation. Here are two idealized examples to illustrate the distinction.

Geometry. Let us imagine that geometry is independently developing in two societies, society A and society B. In each some people are coming up with proofs, such as that the angles of a triangle add up to the sum of two right angles. But there are skeptics in each. The Skeptic says, “What is the point of this project? Your proofs do not involve measurement. But we can just measure the angles and get these results.” The people who started these projects had the ingenuity to devise the rule “Make a proof without measurement” and to develop some proofs. And their results are good; but so far they are not that impressive. In this idealized example, there are two kinds of people who might join in. There are people who join in after geometers have a certain number of proofs, ten let us say. They say, “Okay, I will help out.” Let us call them Helpers. Some of them add proofs, some of them supply “funding,” and so forth. And then there are people who need the Skeptic’s question answered before they help. Let us call them Skeptics. In society A, there are five Helpers and fifteen Skeptics. Society A just innately produces more Skeptics. In society B, there are fifteen Helpers and five Skeptics. Society B just innately produces more Helpers. Once the Helpers join in, results arrive which convince the Skeptics as well. With its geometrical knowledge and its applications, society B flourishes. The help is never enough in society A for geometry to get going.

The novel. Imagine that there are some good myths and fairytales in a society

and some people start producing novels with more realistic situations. The Helper says, “If you can get more than fifteen readers, I will help out.” But the Skeptic says, “Who is going to read such a long text full of ordinary people? And most readers cannot understand these emotional subtleties! And even if you somehow get some readers, how can you be confident that it is nothing more than a passing fashion? Good myths and fairytales are clearly timeless.” In Society A, the novel never takes off. Once the helpers join in within society B, which innately produces more of such people, results arrive which convince the Skeptics as well.

At this point, someone might say, “What does the novel have to do with differences in wealth?” I am not sure and I am actually on the side of myths and fairytales, or at least my own efforts. I think the general distinction I have in mind is graspable by means of this example, despite the question it gives rise to. Also, sometimes I read novels from a certain country and am struck by the quality of the English, threatened even, and wonder what is going on there to produce that.

Note

“The idea that more assistance is available for some new projects in some societies is nothing new,” I anticipate someone responding. But there are various differences between this familiar idea and the material above. Most obviously, it does not refer to what is innate. There is a distinction between two innate explanations for societal differences in wealth: one focusing on greater innate capacity for innovativeness in some societies, and the second focusing on other innate variations, such as to assist. When someone says, “It’s innate,” I think it is natural² for people to contemplate the first explanation, overlooking the second. Also I do not deny that new

² But I don’t mean innate by this.

projects can get going in the more skeptical society described. This is closer to the situation: new projects have to be dazzling in their outcomes very early on. It is not mere newness which is the obstacle, but the fact that this quality of being dazzling is absent in the early stages. (Nevertheless, I would not support some new projects.)

References

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