The Economic – and Anthropological? – View of Supernatural Institutions

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Researchers from different disciplines tend to embrace different theoretical frameworks, empirical methods, even scientific outlooks. To expect their views of a given phenomenon to converge is therefore optimistic. If, however, they *do* converge, that perception of the phenomenon warrants special confidence, for it is robust to alternative disciplinary approaches. Such convergence, I submit, is displayed between Bendixen et al.'s view and the economic view of variation in supernatural beliefs and practices.

The economic view sees supernatural beliefs and practices as efficient institutional responses to problems of social cooperation (Leeson 2012, 2013a,b, 2014a,b; Leeson and Coyne 2012; Maltsev 2022). Such responses vary with the benefits and/or costs of governing behavior via supernatural incentives, hence with constraints on governing behavior via secular incentives. A simple example illustrates this perspective (Leeson 2014c).[1]

According to belief in medieval Francia, God would punish people who stole from monastic communities if the victims appealed to heavily helpers (usually saints) through ritual cursing. "Malediction," as this supernatural belief/practice was called, is unique to Francia during the 10th-12th centuries. It did not exist in Francia outside that period or in other European societies during the period.[2] Malediction's temporal and geographic variation requires explanation.

The economic approach to explaining such variation starts by asking how the supernatural belief/practice at hand would affect the incentives of people who believe in it. While often that requires effort to uncover, here it is evident: malediction would disincentivize believers from plundering monastic communities. By enforcing monastic property rights, malediction thus offers to diminish a threat to social cooperation.

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[1] While Leeson (2014c) does not focus on variation, the variation of the supernatural institution analyzed there is handy to consider here.

[2] With trifling exceptions.

The threat to cooperation that a supernatural institution would diminish measures its benefit and is setting dependent.[3] For example, where there are no monastic communities or where their property rights are perfectly secure, malediction would not diminish any threat to monastic property rights since none exists. Malediction's benefit in such settings is therefore zero. By the same token, malediction's benefit is positive where there are monastic communities whose property rights are not perfectly secure. The precise magnitude of that benefit depends on further setting particulars—chief among them, the setting's secular-governance constraints.[4] For instance, where courts of law reliably enforce monastic property rights, most of the threat to those rights is already diminished. The threat that malediction would diminish here is accordingly modest, so in this setting, malediction's benefit is small. Conversely, where secular institutions do not enforce monastic property rights the threat that malediction would diminish is substantial. In that setting, therefore, malediction's benefit is large.

Besides offering benefits, supernatural institutions entail costs: the rituals that support them consume resources. Malediction rituals, for example, temporarily consumed the whole labor force of monastic communities. While the cost of a supernatural institution may also vary across settings, across settings in medieval Europe the cost of malediction would not have varied much.

The benefit, however, varied greatly. Governments throughout medieval Christendom enforced the property rights of monastic communities in their realms.[5] Francia's government was no exception—until it collapsed. In the 10th century that kingdom's royal justice institutions crumbled, not to be resurrected until the 13th. For the centuries in between, Francia's monastic communities therefore lacked reliable access to secular enforcement while monastic communities elsewhere did not.

Malediction's temporal and geographic variation is thereby economically explained. Under the secular-governance constraints that prevailed in Francia in the 10th-12th centuries, malediction offered to diminish an imposing threat to monastic property rights. In that setting, malediction's benefit exceeded its cost. Under the different secular-governance constraints that prevailed in Francia before the 10th century and after the close of the 12th century—and prevailed in other

[3] More precisely, the cost of the threat it would diminish.

[4] Another setting particular: the value of the property rights threatened. The value of monastic property rights was high across medieval European settings, which I therefore assume here. If, however, in some setting the value of those rights were low, so would be malediction's benefit (no matter the setting's secular-governance constraints).

[5] Monastic communities lacked means of physical self-protection.

European societies even between those dates—malediction offered to diminish only a modest threat to monastic property rights. In those settings, malediction's cost exceeded its benefit. This supernatural institution thus governed theft from monastic communities where it was the efficient governor of that behavior, and not elsewhere.

Consider now Bendixen et al.'s cultural evolutionary account of variation in supernatural institutions, which finds support in their splendid data. "[T]he things that people associate deities with through appeals to and beliefs about the supernatural – will tend to be: (a) game-theoretic social dilemmas, that are (b) costly and/or (c) salient, (d) difficult to monitor and enforce with (appeals to) secular alternatives and/or (e) more convincingly and effectively enforced with supernatural appeals, and/or (f) where the ultimate actual consequences of norm deviation are difficult to foresee."

Their account and the economic one share explanatory cores. To wit: Criterion (a) associates supernatural institutions with threats to social cooperation; criteria (b) and (c), with threats whose diminishment by those institutions would confer a non-zero benefit; and criteria (d) and (e), with threats for which that benefit is large because of secular-governance constraints. Only Bendixen et al.'s criterion (f) does not find a place in the economic view. And for reasons I lack space to elaborate, I do not consider that criterion part of their explanatory core. Suffice it to say, Bendixen et al. also seem to have their doubts: "Whether this criterion requires revision…requires further consideration."

There is, however, a perhaps more significant difference between the views. Whereas the economic view sees supernatural institutions as *efficient* governors of the behavior they govern where they govern it, Bendixen et al.'s view does not—if I understand correctly, because of reservations about the responsiveness of believers' behavior to supernatural incentives.[6] Nonetheless, the views display remarkable convergence.

References

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[6] Different views of efficiency may be at work here. On the economic view, see Leeson (2020).

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