

## Innovation as an “imposition of will” or the “discovery of a hidden reality”?

# The Magic Eyes® of innovation: Ontological implications, I

The Magic Eyes® metaphor suggests that breakthrough innovation is the discovery of an underlying reality



Broadly speaking, one can suggest that individuals participating in the act of breakthrough innovation either **impose their will** or **discover a hidden reality**.

Those arguing on behalf of an imposition of the innovator's will perspective contrast innovation with science; their view is that innovation implies the creation of something new while science discovers what already exists. They emphasize the design and engineering aspects of innovation, that is, “innovators-as-imposers” – innovations and markets, to some extent, can be made to conform to our will.<sup>i</sup>

While “innovators-as-imposers” is a commonly held perspective – if even in an unarticulated way – and while there likely is some truth contained in each perspective, in this essay, I take the position attributed to Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo, who was said to view his role as freeing the human form hidden inside of stone;<sup>ii</sup> I argue on behalf of a view of innovation as discovery of a hidden reality, that is, “innovators-as-discoverers”. I suggest that it not only more accurately describes what occurs in the act of breakthrough innovation, but also that it carries significant implications in how we can identify those with the potential to become breakthrough innovators.

Even those who suggest that they change the behaviors of customers by introducing new products may, instead, be most adept at discerning that those behaviors will change in response to what they probe the market with. Clearly, one can make the case that all innovation can be seen as discovery or discernment of that which cannot be seen by others, others without the mastery or skill, the vision to see breakthrough innovative concepts before others.

All of this has serious implications on what philosophers refer to as ontology. Ontology is the study of what exists.

Ontology, then, deals with “whether or not a certain thing, or more broadly entity, exists.”<sup>iii</sup> It follows, then, that “innovators-as-imposers” hold an ontology in which there is nothing to discover. In contrast, **“innovators-as-discoverers” hold an ontology in which there is something to discover, something external to the innovator.**

### A metaphor: the innovator as a witness in a court of law

Retracing the steps we took to get to this point, I began in essays 4, 5, 6, and 7 by suggesting and developing the idea that Magic Eye® images provide a powerful metaphor for how Serial Innovators (SIs) collect and connect the dots in their practice of breakthrough innovation. In the present essay, I made the connection stronger, suggesting that SIs in practice discover a hidden or underlying reality that others do not discern. I now turn to an important implication of this ontological conclusion that some yet-to-be discovered, hidden reality exists and that SIs are those who discover it.

The behaviors and actions of “innovators-as-discoverers” display an uncanny resemblance to the behaviors and actions of a reliable witness in a court of law, exhibiting at least six traits in common.<sup>iv</sup> The significance of this connection is that reliable witnesses describe the reality that they observed; they do not fabricate stories, they relate to others what they were witness to.

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First, “innovators-as-discoverers” are highly idealistic individuals who seek to do what is right. While not sworn to tell the truth, as are witnesses in a trial, “innovators-as-discoverers” do so on their own accord.

Second, “innovators-as-discoverers”, in their “testimony” about innovative ideas, draw neither focus nor attention to themselves. Instead, as a witness in court is focused on the facts of the case, the “innovators-as-discoverers” focus on the concept, what it can do for customer and company alike.

Third, just as witnesses in a court of law are special in that they know something first hand of unique importance to a trial, “innovators-as-discoverers” also have unique, insider knowledge (not something universally known) of the right direction to take the firm – they have personally ➤

experienced it, just as the witness in a court of law has credibility due to their personal experience.

Fourth, because “innovators-as-discoverers” are reporting on factual insights, they more often than not are calm and collected, yet passionate; they are not inappropriately excited or excitable, as they simply are reporting the facts that they have witnessed.

Fifth, they play the role of advocate only to the extent that they want others to discover the reality, the facts of the situation; they do not advocate based on what they merely want to occur.

And finally, sixth, in order to serve as a witness in a trial, one must have courage – the courage of one convinced of the truth of their testimony. Witnesses in a court of law may be brow beaten by attorneys, threatened by the accused or ostracized in the press. In order to stand up to such treatment, while not doing so merely to gain personal attention, a witness must know that what they are testifying to is right. In the same manner, “innovators-as-discoverers” and aspiring “innovators-as-discoverers” may have their insights dismissed and often come close to losing a job over their stand regarding the underlying truth, the correctness of their views. Such a stand – courage to the point of being willing to lose a job – is only short of the extreme act taken by a trial witness threatened with death who still takes the stand to testify.

### Lincoln's riddle

A more humorous, simple, but no less powerful illustration of this ontological insight is found in the following riddle attributed to Abraham Lincoln,<sup>v</sup> although apparently apocryphally.

Son: *Father, how many legs would a dog have, if you called its tail a leg?*

Father: *Why, five, my son.*

Son: *No, father; he would have only four. Calling the tail a leg does not make it so.*

### Managerial application

So where does this leave us in terms of working within this metaphor and applying it for advantage to innovation in mature firms?

The “innovator-as-discoverer” represents a type of submission to reality, exactly like what is observed by scientists and engineers who submit to gravity, the laws of thermodynamics and Maxwell's equations. They don't impose themselves on these things, although they do seek new ways to understand and work within that underlying reality.

By looking for the marks, the characteristics of testimony or witness to the truth, managers can gain insight as to whether a scientist or engineer truly knows what they are talking about. To the extent that the focus of a self-described innovator in on themselves, is self-willed in terms of direction, or lacks a sense of comprehensive insight regarding reality, the manager may be justified in ignoring the technologist's argument. ■

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<sup>i</sup> This approach is very similar to Immanuel Kant's “Copernican Revolution” in which he reframed philosophy. As described by philosopher Anthony Kenny, “Instead of asking how our knowledge can conform to objects, (Kant proposed that) we must start from the supposition that objects must conform to our knowledge.” From: Anthony Kenny, An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) p. 276. This philosophical turn on Kant's part represented a significant change, yet one that was in line with the human-centric Enlightenment view of reality in general and directly descending from Descartes' philosophy established on the foundation of human thought, *Cogito, ergo sum*: “I am thinking, therefore I exist”.

<sup>ii</sup> Milt Liebson, Direct Stone Sculpture (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1991) p. 9.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/#Ont>; the entry on ontology in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<sup>iv</sup> After Daniel L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p. 276.

<sup>v</sup> Special thanks to Paul Trokhan of Procter & Gamble for sharing this riddle.

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*“On the Epistemology of Innovation: How Breakthrough Innovators Connect the Dots” is a series of brief, occasional essays addressed to executives, managers, and technologists responsible for innovation in industry. Its purpose is to challenge readers to reflect broadly and deeply on the practice of innovation – in particular on how innovators come to know what to do today – in order to succeed commercially in the future. Essays are available without charge at the University of Illinois' digital archive at <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/27667>. The discussion group at <http://epistemology-of-innovation.com> is a place to provide feedback and dialog with the author and others regarding these essays, as well as to register to receive notice of new essays as they are issued.*