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# Profiles of an Ideal Society: The Utopian Visions of Ordinary People

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## Abstract

Throughout history, people have expressed the desire for an ideal society—a utopia. These imagined societies have motivated action for social change. Recent research has demonstrated this motivational effect among ordinary people in English-speaking countries, but we know little about the specific content of ordinary people's utopian visions in different cultures. Here we report that a majority of samples from four countries—Australia, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States—converge on a small number of utopian visions: a Modern Green utopia, a Primitivist utopia, a Futurist utopia, and a Religious utopia. Although the prevalence of these utopia profiles differed across countries, there was a cross-cultural convergence in utopian visions. These shared visions may provide common ground for conversations about how to achieve a better future across cultural borders.

## Keywords

utopia, ideal society, culture, cross-cultural

Since long before Thomas More's *Utopia* (More, 1516/1965), humans have engaged in utopian thinking, that is, imagining an ideal society. Utopias are found in myths (e.g., the Garden of Eden), political theories (e.g., Plato's *Republic*), social movements, intentional societies, and fictions (Claeys & Sargent, 1999; Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Levitas, 1990; Sargisson, 2000). Although some scholars define utopia restrictively as a literary genre (Kumar, 1991; Moos & Brownstein, 1977), here we understand utopianism broadly as *imaginings about an ideal society* including those of ordinary people (see (Levitas, 1990; Sargent, 1994). As many scholars (e.g., Chomsky, 1970; Levitas, 1990; Mannheim, 1961; Polak, 1961; Sargent, 1994) have suggested, utopianism is a potential driver of social change. From a psychological perspective, a utopia presents an ideal toward which people strive by reducing the discrepancies between the

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ideal state and the current state of society (Fernando et al., 2018; Higgins, 1987; Kashima & Fernando, 2020). Indeed, emerging research supports this conjecture: Fernando et al. (2018) reported that inducing participants to think about their version of an ideal society increased motivation to take action for social change. Similarly, Badaan et al. (2022) found that reading a text about a utopian society elicited greater hope, which in turn predicted intentions to engage in collective action for social change.

Given these findings, investigations about what utopian visions people have are critical for understanding the directions in which they wish to change their society. The *content* of people's utopian visions represents what kind of society they aim to attain by engaging in actions that are designed to change the status quo (Kashima & Fernando, 2020). Thus, it can inform us about the direction in which social change may trend, and the ways in which different societies may approach contemporary global challenges (e.g., climate change) differently by supporting some social policies while rejecting others. For example, a Green utopia—a society characterized by environmentally sustainable technology and moderation in material wealth—is often found in popular fictional and nonfiction writings, at least in the English language (e.g., Garforth, 2005; Pepper, 2007). Fernando et al. (2020) showed that priming American participants with a Green utopia elicited greater willingness to engage in pro-environmental actions, and the likelihood of donation to a proenvironmental charity, when they evaluated this Green utopia favorably

In this article, we investigate the prominent utopian visions that are present in different countries. Cross-cultural investigations of utopian visions have both theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, utopianism provides a conceptual apparatus that looks at people's visions for their *societies* or *collectives*, as opposed to their individual selves. Since Triandis' (1989) and Markus and Kitayama's (1991) seminal theoretical statements, cross-cultural research has developed a large and complex literature about how people around the world construe themselves (for a recent review, see e.g., Goto et al., 2021). Much less, however, is known about how people construe their current societies and how they wish to develop their future societies. The perspective of utopia brings cross-cultural research to the level of societal and political discourse rather than highly abstract cultural dimensions such as individualism and collectivism or independent and interdependent self-construal. Consequently, cross-cultural research on utopianism can yield practical dividends, particularly in terms of establishing cross-cultural dialogue and mobilization. The extent to which utopian visions are shared (or not) within and between cultures may indicate common ground and areas of divergence in dealing with global challenges, such as climate change. For example, if some people favor a Green utopia, while others do not, there is likely to be political debate, if not polarization, within a country (Smith & Mayer, 2019), and international disputes and inaction on climate change. By contrast, if many people share a particular utopian vision, we may observe greater cooperation and progress toward realizing aspects of that vision.

## Utopias as Cultural Innovations

Utopias are symbolically constructed imaginary ideal worlds. Theoretically speaking, they are *cultural innovations*—cultural constructions that are new to people at the time of their generation (Kashima et al., 2019; Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2016). Many cultural innovations are not entirely new but rather reconfigurations of existing ideas and practices in response to the current cultural and historical context (Schumpeter, 1934). Likewise, we suggest that contemporary utopian visions are likely to be reconfigurations of available cultural elements (Kashima & Fernando, 2020). Theoretical scholarship on utopianism suggests that, despite the volume and diversity of utopian visions, they tend to cluster around a limited number of themes (Avilés, 2000; Davis, 1983; Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Sargent, 1994). They are akin to prototypes (e.g., Rosch & Marvas, 1975), representing typical configurations of features and providing good examples of

**Table 1.** Utopia Prototypes.

Prototypes	Davis's typology	Brief description
Abundance	Cockaygne	Resources are unlimited; all desires are satisfied
Ecology	Arcadia	Humans and nature harmoniously coexist
Morality	Moral Commonwealth	Humans are all moral and behave ethically
Religion	Millennium	Supernatural powers transform society
Institutions	Utopia	Laws and governments regulate resources and desires
Science		Science and technology transform society

categories. For a taxonomy of utopian content, we turn to Davis (1983; cf. Avilés, 2000; Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Sargent, 1994) who proposed five prototypical utopias (see Table 1). Very similar typologies of utopia prototypes have also been developed by Frye (1966) and Kumar (1991), attesting to the consensus.

Davis (1983) regarded utopias as solutions to a fundamental collective problem of satisfying human desires within the boundary of limited resources (see Table 1 for Davis' utopia prototypes, with alternative intuitive labels; see also Kashima & Fernando, 2020). Construed this way, there are different means by which the collective problem can be resolved, and these give the utopia prototypes their character.

First, the collective problem is resolved in a world where resources are unlimited (*Abundance*). Called Cockaygne by Davis after the medieval poem, *The Land of Cockaygne*, all that one desires, is available for consumption in this utopia. Second, human desires may be reduced to be in line with available resources; two prototypes describe a world in which this is accomplished in different ways. The first of these is what Davis called *Arcadia*, following a poetic representation of harmony with nature from Greek antiquity. Here we call this *Ecology*, in which human nature is such that people have desires that are commensurate with what the natural environment provides. While many early ideal societies (e.g., myths of a Golden Age, Garden of Eden) were of the Arcadian type (de Geus, 1999; Kumar, 1987), more recent versions of this prototype can be found in modern ecological utopias which are an established genre in contemporary utopian texts (see Garforth, 2005; de Geus, 1999; Pepper 2007; Stableford, 2010, for reviews). Another prototypical utopia of this type is the *Perfect Moral Commonwealth* (or *Morality*, in our terminology). In this utopia, society could achieve order, justice, and happiness via the moral actions of individuals and commitment to the common good. The resource-desire dilemma is resolved by moral and altruistic humans who spontaneously share available resources.

The remaining utopia prototypes do not necessarily specify what the ideal world looks like but describe how to achieve the ideal world by balancing human desires and limited resources. One prototype suggests that God or other supernatural powers transform both human desires and environmental resources so that they are in harmonious balance. This is Davis's (1983) *Millennium* or *Religious Millennium*. The second is what Davis called Utopia, following the tradition initiated by Thomas More (in our terminology, *Institutions*) where optimal social institutions such as laws and government can achieve the balance between human desires and limited resources (Avilés, 2000).

There is one more common utopia prototype that was not listed in Davis' typology—science and technology—likely because Davis' work is derived from his analysis of pre-18th-century literary utopias, written well before the advent of modern technology. Scientific discoveries and technological developments have, however, long been a part of literary utopias (see Ferns, 1999; Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Kumar, 1987; Sargent, 2006 for reviews). In these utopian visions, the desire-resource problem is resolved by using advanced science and technology to overcome material limitations. We will refer to this sixth type of utopian prototype as *Science*.

Further attesting to the prominence of these utopia prototypes, many of these are echoed in people's imaginations about the future of society. Boschetti et al. (2016) conducted a factor analytic study of what they called "myths of the future" in which a representative sample of Australian participants responded to a battery of questions about their imaginations of the future world. They identified five archetypes: one of them, "techno-optimism," clearly maps on to our Science prototype; their "eco-crisis" and "power and economic inequality" appear to reflect dystopian versions of Davis' (1983) Arcadia (Ecology) and Utopia (Institutions), and their "social crisis" and "social transformation" are arguably dystopian and utopian forms of Davis' Perfect Moral Commonwealth (Morality).

Thus, we will use as a starting point for our investigation a set of prototypical utopian visions derived from the Western utopian literary tradition. Our research is designed to consider, first, the extent to which these prototypes are currently endorsed within culturally similar Western societies that are familiar with this utopian tradition (Australia, United States, United Kingdom). Second, we will investigate the universality of the endorsement of these utopia prototypes in China—a country in which people may be less familiar with these utopia prototypes and indeed where it has been argued that there has been no true utopian literary tradition (e.g., Kumar, 1991). We theorized that people would combine the utopia prototypes described earlier to construct their utopian vision—a *profile* of utopia prototypes—endorsing some but rejecting others.

### *Cultural Similarities and Differences in Utopian Visions*

Although Davis' typology was developed from English writings, these prototypes are likely available in other cultures as we assume that the resource-desire dilemma is equally relevant across cultures, and the number of methods for resolving it is limited (constraining the imaginable set of prototypes). Supporting this approach, there is evidence of utopian thinking in many cultures beyond the Christian West (Sargent, 1994, 2000), and globalization means that people from different cultures are likely to be exposed to the utopia prototypes described earlier through media and popular culture. We therefore hypothesize that similar profiles are likely to be found across cultures but that the *prevalence* of utopian visions will vary across societies depending on their historical and societal context (see Boiger et al., 2018 for a similar approach to emotional experiences).

Given the bottom-up nature of our investigation and the lack of existing research in this area, it is difficult to make hypotheses regarding cultural differences in utopian visions; however, we can make some broad speculations based on related research and theory. As the utopian visions comprised of combinations of the prototypes will be revealed by our analysis, these speculations will primarily address the prevalence and distribution of the prototypes themselves.

Beginning with the Ecology prototype, most societies have some myth of a Golden Age, which typically takes the form of an "original" condition characterized by simplicity and sufficiency (Kumar, 1991), for example, the Greco-Roman images of the Golden Age and the Biblical depiction of the Garden of Eden. Similarly, Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* famously depicts a peaceful and harmonious community, *Taoyuan Xiang* (桃源鄉), isolated from the rest of the world and discovered by a fisherman. Edward O. Wilson's (1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993) biophilia hypothesis suggests that there is an innate human tendency to have a natural affinity with nature. On this basis, utopian visions incorporating the Ecology prototype are likely to be endorsed in many, if not all, human cultures.

Similarly, we expect little difference between the PRC and the Anglophone countries in endorsement of the Morality prototype. Hornsey et al.'s (2018) investigations found relatively small cross-cultural differences in people's ideals for society including morality. Participants were asked to rate their ideal societies on attributes such as friendliness, morality, and equality of opportunity on a scale of 0 to 100. In a comparison of 27 countries, average ratings were similar across China (75.06), the United Kingdom (77.87), the United States (79.03), and Australia (76.92).

This same study may also provide some clues as to the endorsement of the Abundance prototype between cultures. Ideals for the self, including traits like happiness and pleasure, were found to be higher in nonholistic cultures (including the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom) than in holistic cultures (including China). This suggests that participants from the Anglophone countries may have a greater desire for a pleasurable life. This does not necessarily imply, however, that this will be derived from material abundance specifically. The work of Inglehart and colleagues (see Inglehart, 2007) showing that prolonged prosperity (as has been experienced in the three Anglophone countries) would encourage postmaterialist values suggests that a desire for high levels of material abundance may not feature heavily in the utopian visions of people in the United States, Australia, and United Kingdom. For this reason, we expect little difference in the endorsement of the Abundance prototype.

We do, however, expect cultural differences in three of the other utopia prototypes. The first is *Religion*. The United States is considered a highly religious country (especially compared with other industrialized nations) and consistently rates higher in various measures of religiosity than the United Kingdom and Australia (see Norris & Inglehart, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2018), and so we expect that utopian visions emphasizing religion will be most prevalent among Americans. In China, religious beliefs may reflect traditional folk beliefs, which are considered to be relatively widespread (and possibly underreported; see Yang & Hu, 2012), or growing belief in Christianity or Buddhism (see Stark & Liu, 2011). Nevertheless, China is regarded as an atheist country in which religion is strongly regulated (Lin, 2018; Wang & Froese, 2019), and China ranks among the lowest countries in measures of religiosity (Pew Research Center, 2018). For these reasons, we expect that the China may have the lowest level of endorsement of Religion, and the United States may have the highest.

The second is the emphasis on societal *Institutions*. All Anglophone cultures, and presumably many Western European cultures, have been exposed to the utopian literary genre initiated by More's *Utopia*. Arguably, the institution of democracy itself and associated institutional arrangements are all part of the public discourse to improve the societal condition. Thus, we surmise that societal institutions will feature significantly in the utopian visions of our Anglophone samples. The role of societal institutions in Chinese utopian visions is less clear, however. On the one hand, as Kumar (1991) noted, the genre of fictional writings like More's *Utopia* does not seem to have existed in China, and so this means of changing society is likely to be much less culturally available than in the West. On the contrary, Zhang (2005) has noted that this utopian tradition may be available in China via Confucianism which contains utopian thinking which emphasizes human efforts and institutions as a means for achieving a harmonious society. Furthermore, considering the Chinese Communist Party's more recent emphasis on institutional methods for achieving an ideal society, it is possible that in the PRC too, we will find the presence of Institutions among the prominent utopian visions.

Finally, there may be a cultural difference between the PRC and the three Anglophone countries in terms of the role of *Science* in bringing about an ideal society. On the one hand, science and technology has been a highly ambivalent utopia prototype in the West (e.g., Claeys, 2010). As we noted earlier, there are prominent fictional writings of scientific utopia (e.g., Wells' *A Modern Utopia*) as well as scientific dystopia (e.g., Huxley's *Brave New World*). In contrast, the dystopian perspective on science and technology may not have been imported into PRC as much. Indeed, in Kashima et al.'s (2011) work on societal perceptions, Chinese university students in PRC thought their society was socially and economically less developed in the past but would develop in the future much more, relative to their Australian and Japanese counterparts. A major part of this belief in societal progress was the development in science and technology. This finding appears to suggest Chinese students' greater optimism about, and trust in, science and technology as a driver of societal development into the future. This line of reasoning suggests that the Science prototype may feature more strongly in utopian visions in the PRC, or conversely, that

we may observe a greater prevalence of utopian visions that reject science and technology in the Anglophone countries.

## The Current Studies

The primary aim of the current research was to examine contemporary utopian visions as derived from combinations of endorsement of six utopia prototypes identified in Western literary utopias. To do this, we created a scale to assess the endorsement of the prototypes and then administered this scale in three studies (two with participants from the United States and the United Kingdom and one with participants from Australia and China).

In the current article, we examine *profiles* of utopia prototypes, that is, how each prototype is evaluated relative to the other prototypes within individuals. There are three reasons for this approach. First, we conjectured that utopian visions as cultural innovations would be constructed by drawing on existing cultural elements (i.e., utopia prototypes), embracing some while rejecting others. Therefore, we expect that people's utopian visions may be best characterized by patterns of endorsement versus disendorsement of different utopia prototypes. Second, a profile of endorsements and disendorsements can inform us about which prototype is seen to be *more* or *less* important relative to each other. For example, someone may endorse both religion and science as two prominent utopian prototypes; however, they may endorse science more than religion in relative terms. This person would place more emphasis on science than religion in their utopian vision and may *choose* science, rather than religion, to realize their ideal society. Finally, by examining each person's profile, we can avoid the pernicious problem of assuming the scalar equivalence of the scales, that is, the mean levels across countries can be compared directly. It is well known that there are a number of measurement issues in cross-cultural comparisons (e.g., van de Vijver & Leung, 2011). However, by computing the deviation of a person's endorsement relative to his average rating, we can avoid the methodological complexity of testing for measurement equivalence.

We analyzed these profile data using latent profile analysis to identify common configurations of utopia prototypes (what we will call "utopian visions") and then examined the relative frequency of these utopian visions across countries to understand cultural differences.

## Method

To examine the most common utopian visions and their relative prevalence across countries, we developed a measure of utopian profiles that asked respondents about their endorsement of the six utopian prototypes and collected three datasets. Ethics approval for the collection of all three datasets was received from the University of Melbourne.

There were 451 participants in Dataset 1: 201 residents of the United States were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (104 males and 97 females, mean age = 33.90, standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 12.14), and 250 residents of the United Kingdom were recruited via Prolific (109 males and 141 females, mean age = 36.73,  $SD$  = 12.35).

For Dataset 2, 14,494 participants were recruited via online participant recruitment company ResearchNow, stratified on age, gender, and region within the country. Six hundred and fourteen participants were removed because they had zero variance across the items used to measure endorsement of utopian prototypes (431 Australian, 186 males and 245 females, mean age = 43.34) and 183 Chinese (101 males and 82 females, mean age = 37.18). This left a total sample of 6,808 Australian (2,931 males and 3,877 females, mean age = 48.66 [ $SD$  = 13.11]) and 7,072 Chinese participants (3,571 males and 3,501 females, mean age = 38.60 [ $SD$  = 9.85]). These datasets were collected to be broadly nationally representative of age, gender, and region within the country.

For Dataset 3, 770 participants were recruited from the participant recruitment platform, Prolific. Five were excluded because they had no variance across the utopia prototypes items, leaving a final sample of 765: 383 residents of the United Kingdom (108 male, 275 female, mean age = 37.19 [ $SD = 12.09$ ]) and 382 residents of the United States (190 male, 187 female, 5 other gender, mean age = 33.71,  $SD = 12.11$ ). All data and analysis codes are available from the authors by request.

Participants in each of the three studies were asked to think about their own personal utopian vision—"an ideal or best possible society which is hoped or wished for" (see Fernando et al., 2018). They were then asked to rate the extent to which a series of items, each of which assessed one of the six utopia prototypes (5 items for the Morality prototype, 4 items for the other five prototypes), was an accurate descriptor of that imagined society (1 = *very inaccurate*, 7 = *very accurate*). Participants from Dataset 1 completed the full 25-item measure, while participants from Datasets 2 and 3 completed an abridged 18-item version (items were chosen by selecting the 3 items with the highest factor loadings in Dataset 1). Full details of this measure and its development are contained in the Supplementary Materials.

For *Abundance*, items described a world of abundant material resources where there is no need to work for a living (e.g., "All things are provided for so that people do not need to work unless they want to"); the *Ecology* items addressed harmony between humans and nature, including a decrease in human material desires (e.g., "Nature provides people in this society with enough resources to live a simple, natural life"); *Morality* was characterized by an increase in the morality and virtue of citizens (e.g., "In this society all people are honest and good"); *Religion* was assessed by items describing a complete change to society's institutions, people and natural environment brought about by God(s) (e.g., "Laws and institutions are completely transformed by God or Gods"); *Institutions* emphasized changes to the government and other societal institutions to bring about an ideal society (e.g., "There has been a substantial change in the way society is governed"); and *Science* tapped people's beliefs that scientific and technological advances can transform humans and nature (e.g., "People transcend their wants and needs through science and technology").

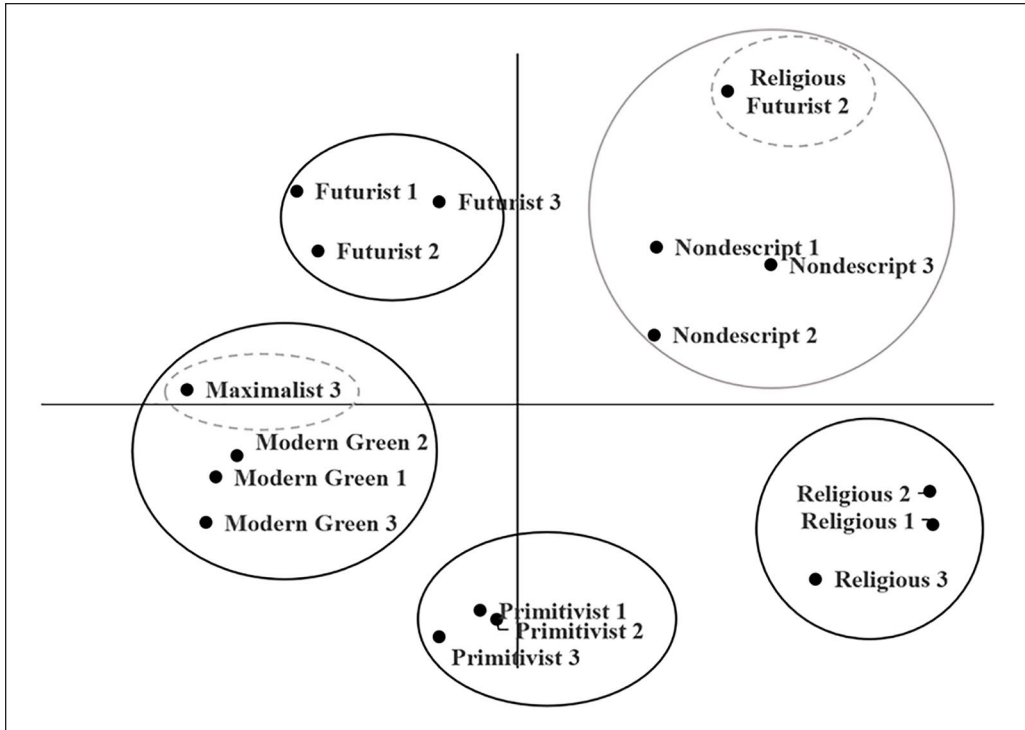
As described subsequently, we conducted latent profile analysis on the utopia profile data followed by chi-square tests to examine cross-national differences in the prevalence of utopian visions. As we were unaware beforehand how many profiles would be identified, we could not conduct power analyses prior to sampling. Instead, we adopted a policy of recruiting a minimum of 200 participants per country (i.e., 400 per dataset).

## Results

Prior to analysis, each respondent's ratings of the prototypes were standardized by subtracting the respondent's mean rating and dividing by the  $SD$  of the respondent's ratings (Fischer, 2004). This enabled us to examine each respondent's utopian profile, that is, the configuration of relative endorsement and disendorsement of the utopian prototypes.

As we noted earlier, rather than endorsing one, and only one, of the six utopia prototypes, we expect that individuals combine the prototypes to construct a more complex *utopian vision*. This implies that individuals will endorse some, but not other, prototypes, and therefore, there should be individual differences in *profiles* of endorsement of utopia prototypes. To identify each respondent's *utopian vision* (i.e., *profiles* of endorsement and disendorsement), we used a person-centered, rather than variable-centered, approach (see Bauer & Shanahan, 2007; Osborne & Sibley, 2017). Instead of centralizing the variables by examining individual differences in the extent to which a particular utopia prototype is endorsed, we centralize the person by examining their relative standing on all the variables of interest (see Zyphur, 2009). This was accomplished by looking for the most common utopian profiles using latent profile analysis.

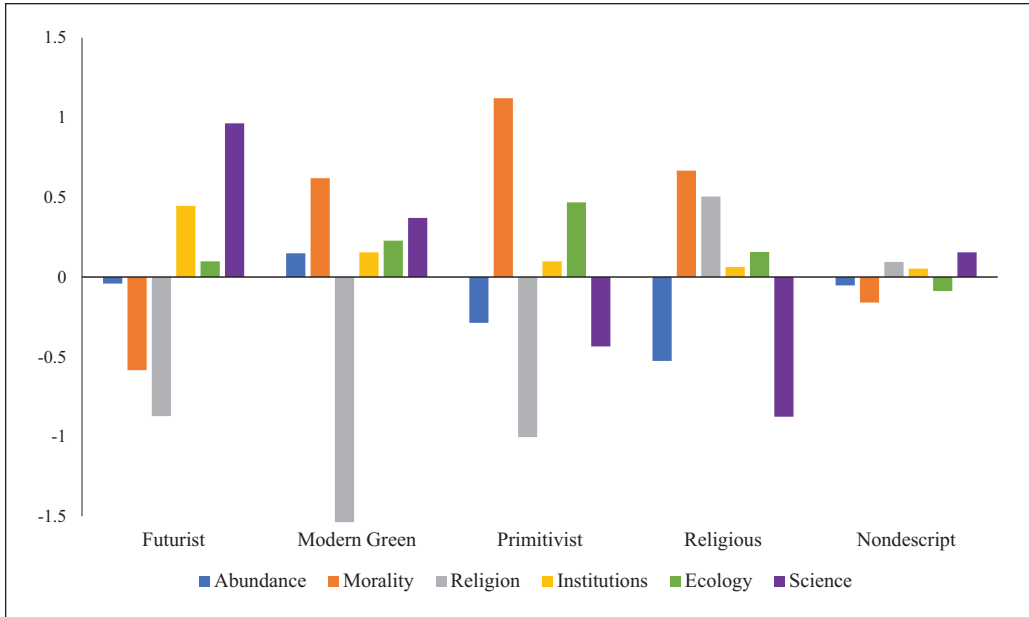




**Figure 1.** Multidimensional scaling of Utopia profiles from three datasets.  
 Note. Numbers indicate the dataset from which each profile was derived.

Earlier we hypothesized that similar utopian visions may be observed across different cultures but that the prevalence of those visions would vary between societies. In keeping with that perspective, we combined the data from the two countries for each dataset. To identify the optimal number of profiles, we began with a two-profile model and added one profile at a time. Since fit indices such as the bootstrapped likelihood ratio test are affected by sample size and will continue to suggest that fit will be improved by the addition of more profiles in large samples, it has been recommended that “elbow plots” of information criteria (Akaike’s Information Criterion (AIC), Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), and sample-size adjusted BIC (SABIC)) be examined as an additional criterion, with the point at which the slope flattens indicating the optimal number of profiles (Morin & Marsh, 2015; Petras & Masyn, 2010). We also considered two other criteria from those specified by Nylund and colleagues (2007) (see also Stanley et al., 2017): no profile containing less than 5% of the sample, and posterior probabilities greater than .70 (i.e., the probability that the individual belongs to the assigned profile and no other profile). For Dataset 1, we selected a five-profile solution, and for Datasets 2 and 3, six profiles provided the best solution. For all three datasets, all profiles contained more than 5% of the sample, and all posterior probabilities were  $>.80$ . The elbow plots and decision criteria for each of the three samples are contained in the Supplementary Materials.

We then constructed a new dataset using the mean prototype values from each of the utopia profiles derived from the three sets of latent profile analyses (17 utopia profiles in all). We used this data to conduct two additional analyses—multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analyses—to examine the similarity of the utopia profiles obtained from the three datasets, and to validate our characterization of profiles as equivalent across datasets (e.g., were the profiles to which we allocated the same label sufficiently similar to one another in their mean ratings on the six prototypes?) Figure 1 displays the distribution of utopia profiles on the two dimensions



**Figure 2.** Mean Utopia prototype ratings by profile membership.

derived from the multidimensional scaling analysis. Visual inspection of this figure, first, supports our characterization of similar utopian visions across datasets/cultures and, second, shows five major groupings of profiles (with labeling explained below). Two additional profiles (labeled Religious Futurist and Maximalist) were proximal to one of the five major groupings and may represent variants. In Dataset 2, there was a variant of a profile like the Futurist utopia, but with a positive evaluation of the Religion prototype, which we labeled *Religious Futurist*. This profile was consistent with some Futurist utopias which have been described as embedded within religious societies (see Ferns, 1999; Fitting, 2010; Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Moos & Brownstein, 1977; Sargent, 2006). In Dataset 3, we observed a more traditional Sci-Fi utopia, which we labeled *Maximalist*. Unlike the Futurist utopia, this profile entailed endorsement of Morality and Abundance as well as Science and Institutions and a rejection of the Ecology prototype.

For the hierarchical cluster analysis, we specified 5-cluster and 7-cluster solutions. The five-cluster solution (solid lines in Figure 1) was consistent with our visual observation of five groupings in Figure 1 and included the two variant profiles within the nearest major cluster. The seven-cluster solution maintained these five clusters and allocated the variant profiles to their own clusters (dotted lines in Figure 1). This, again, supported our theoretical categorization of utopia profiles across the three datasets. Figure 2 presents the mean values for each prototype derived from the five-cluster solution. Each average profile was computed as the weighted average of the ratings of each utopia prototype in each of the five clusters, with weights being the number of respondents for each dataset. The mean values for all profiles in each dataset separately are in the Supplementary Materials, along with a figure showing mean utopia prototype endorsement levels by country.

Counter-clockwise, from the top left corner of Figure 1, first is the *Futurist* utopia, which mainly endorsed Institutions and Science but, unlike most science fiction utopias, was either neutral or negative on Abundance (see Figure 2). It resembles some 19th-century (and earlier) utopias that emphasized the role of scientific and technological development in solving social problems (see Ferns, 1999; Fitting, 2010; Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Moos & Brownstein, 1977;

Sargent, 2006). Participants in this profile also tended to negatively evaluate the Morality and Religion prototypes.

Second (left in Figure 1) was the *Modern Green* utopia, which strongly endorsed Morality as well as showing some level of endorsement of all of Abundance, Institutions, Ecology, and Science but strongly negative on the Religion prototype (Figure 2). Although this profile was not necessarily a strong ecological or proenvironmental utopia, uniquely, this profile showed comparable levels of endorsement of Ecology and Science. Thus, we interpret this as suggesting an ecological modernization perspective, where science and ecology are both present and complementary in an ideal society.

Third (bottom of Figure 1), the *Primitivist* utopia was distinguished primarily by the endorsement of Ecology and Morality, contrasted by a rejection of Science, Religion, and Abundance (Figure 2). This profile is reminiscent of the Arcadian utopia in Davis' typology. These first three utopia profiles accounted for a majority of participants in all three datasets.

The fourth recurring profile (right in Figure 1) was the *Religious* utopia, characterized by the endorsement of Morality and Religion (5%, 5%, 9% in Datasets 1–3; Figure 2). In addition to these four profiles, we observed one profile in each dataset with a very low variation on all the utopia prototypes and may indicate a group of participants which rated all the prototypes evenly or gave inattentive responses (labeled the *Nondescript* profile)<sup>1</sup>.

We note that the three major profiles were secular and seem to be differentiated primarily by their endorsement of Morality, and their relative endorsement of Science and Ecology. The Modern Green and Primitivist utopias both endorsed Morality, while the Futurist utopia was clearly negative on that prototype. The Futurist and Primitivist utopias clearly endorsed either Science *or* Ecology, while the Modern Green showed similar levels of endorsement of both those prototypes. The Religious utopia was distinguished from the three major profiles as it was the only profile to endorse the Religion prototype.

Finally, we examined the extent to which the obtained utopia profiles (using the five clusters as above) were equally or unequally distributed across the two countries within each dataset using chi-square analysis. In all three datasets, the distribution of the utopia profiles varied significantly across countries; Dataset 1:  $\chi^2(4, N = 451) = 28.79, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .25, p < .001$ ; Dataset 2:  $\chi^2(5, N = 6,940) = 413.37, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .24, p < .001$ ; Dataset 3:  $\chi^2(4, N = 765) = 18.73, p = .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .16, p = .001$ . Figure 3 displays the proportion of each dataset—separated by country—which was accounted for by each utopia profile. Full details of the Chi-square analysis and proportions by country can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

A clear majority endorsed one of the three major secular profiles in every country (United States  $\geq 78\%$ ; the United Kingdom  $\geq 90\%$ , Australia, 66%; China, 62%). A small minority (with the United States being highest at 10%) endorsed the Religious utopia. Among participants endorsing the secular profiles, the profiles with a strong Science theme (Futurist and Modern Green) were most prevalent in China (89%), followed by the United States (77% and 67%) and Australia (70%), and were least prevalent in the United Kingdom (61% and 67%). The Primitivist utopia was a small minority in China, whereas its share was sizable in the three Anglophone countries, most prominently in the United Kingdom. There was also a proportion of Nondescript respondents in each country whose profiles did not (in relative terms) endorse or reject any utopian prototypes. These may reflect (a) inattentive or careless responses, (b) an inability to express one's utopia using the prototypes, or (c) an equal endorsement of all the prototypes.

## Discussion

Utopian theorists have conceptualized utopian thinking as, first, an activity that can inspire social change and, second, something in which ordinary people (not just authors, revolutionaries, or

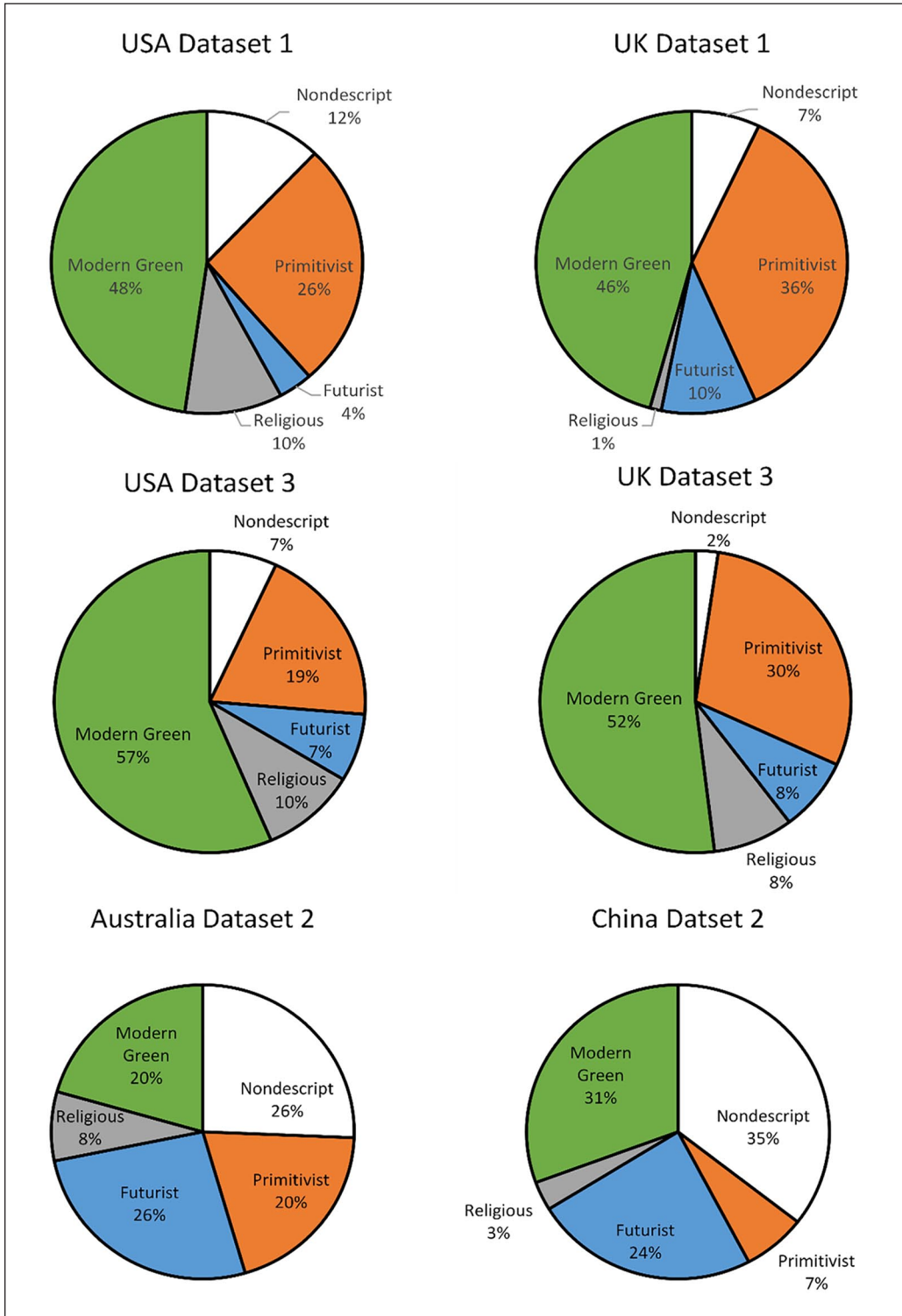


Figure 3. Prevalence of each Utopia profile within each country sample.

political philosophers) engage (see e.g., Levitas, 1990; Sargent, 1994). Emerging research supports this conceptualization and has shown that utopian thinking can inspire motivation for social change (Fernando et al., 2018) but also that this motivation may vary depending upon the content of those utopian visions (Fernando et al., 2020). For these reasons, it is important to understand the content of people's utopian visions. Here, we conducted a large-scale cross-cultural investigation of the content of ordinary people's utopian visions and found that similar utopian visions exist across cultures, but their prevalence differs between cultures. We identified three major secular utopian visions, *Futurist* (science and technology), *Modern Green* (ecological modernization), and *Primitivist* (primitivist ecology), and a small, but distinctive *Religious* utopia in every country. We observed a strong degree of correspondence in these utopia profiles across datasets despite large differences in sample size and culture, especially between China and the three Anglophone countries. These results suggest that these predominant utopian visions may represent contemporary global cultural patterns (i.e., dominant cultural themes of morality, ecology, science/technology, and religion). While replication of these utopian profiles across a broader selection of countries would be required to validate this notion, the correspondence in utopian visions across countries suggests areas of common ground for building a shared future.

Two of the profiles we identified contained significant ecological themes. This is unsurprising, given the contemporary salience of ecological issues (e.g., climate change) but suggests that ecological thinking is not monolithic. Indeed, these utopias bear a great deal of correspondence to existing streams of thought in environmental thought and previous Green utopias. Garforth (2018) in her book, *Green Utopias*, identifies two major orientations in modern environmentalist thinking, which broadly map on to the Primitivist and Modern Green utopias identified here. The Modern Green utopia is reminiscent of a sustainable development perspective, characterized by more environmentally friendly technology and governance (e.g., United Nations, 2020). The Primitivist utopia, however, can be identified with the limits to the growth approach which encouraged the conservation of resources and small, communal lifestyles. Given that research has shown utopian thinking to inspire motivation for social change (Fernando et al., 2018; Fernando et al., 2020), proponents of these two Green utopias may not align on strategies and actions for environmental preservation and climate change mitigation. For example, those endorsing the Modern Green utopia may favor green technologies, whereas those endorsing the Primitivist utopia may tend toward degrowth.

The other major utopian profile was Futurist, a scientific-technological utopia with well-functioning institutions. Although past examinations of utopian thought have associated scientific-technological utopias with the principle of maximization (versus moderation) (see Carey, 1999; Fernando et al., 2020), the *Futurist* utopia seems more like a "business as usual" perspective. Research on folk theories of social change (see Bain et al., 2015; Kashima et al., 2009; Kashima et al., 2011) has shown a common belief that society is becoming more competent and technologically developed over time but less warm and moral. The Futurist utopia, with high levels of scientific and technological development but low levels of morality, would represent a fulfillment of this perceived societal trajectory. This kind of vision may be an exception to the motivational effects of utopian thinking (Fernando et al., 2018) and instead may induce escapism (see Fernando et al., 2018; Levitas, 1990) or system justification and system-supporting action (Jost et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2019) which maintain society along its current trajectory.

### *Cross-Cultural Differences*

Consistent with our hypothesis, we observed little cross-cultural difference in the Abundance, Morality, and Ecology prototypes, but the Science-themed utopian profiles (Futurist and Modern Green) were more prevalent in China. Notably, the Modern Green utopia was far more prevalent than the Primitivist utopia in China, unlike in the Anglophone countries. One explanation for this

difference is that the Anglophone countries have experienced prolonged prosperity and a rise in postmaterialist values (Inglehart, 1990; Inglehart & Abramson, 1994), leading to the idealization of a return to a simpler, less materialist time. In China, however, which experienced what Angus Deaton called “the Great Escape” (Deaton, 2013) from concerns of poverty and material scarcity more recently, a return to an agrarian society may appear less appealing.

Also consistent with our hypothesis, the Religious profile (although endorsed by few participants overall) was most prevalent in the United States and least prevalent in China. We acknowledge, however, that our samples were from relatively secular societies, and the prevalence of this profile will likely be higher in more religious societies.

With regard to the prevalence of utopia profiles, we observed that while the proportion of participants endorsing the Modern Green utopia was much higher than those endorsing the Futurist utopia in the U.S. and U.K. samples, these two profiles were much more evenly distributed in the Australian and Chinese samples. These two profiles differed primarily in their endorsement of the Morality (Modern Green high and Futurist low), Institutions, and Science (Modern Green low and Futurist high) prototypes. This may point to a between-country difference in the perceived role of individuals versus institutions in bringing about an ideal society. This conjecture is supported by levels of trust in government being somewhat higher in Australia than in the United Kingdom and the United States (Mabillard & Pasquier, 2016, see also Pew Research Center, 2020 for declining trust in government in the United States), while levels of public confidence in government are typically observed to be high in China (Yang & Tang, 2010). This observation may point to the kinds of cultural or society-level differences that are likely to predict the endorsement of different kinds of ideal society.

### *Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions*

The utopian visions identified here may shed light on some fundamental dimensions of people’s thinking about society. In Figure 1, the vertical axis can be interpreted as a time perspective (futuristic visions at the top, past-oriented utopias toward the bottom) and the horizontal axis contrasts religious (right) and secular (left) profiles. The more backward-looking tend to emphasize morality most strongly (i.e., Religious and Primitivist), again consistent with folk theories of social change (Bain et al., 2015; Kashima et al., 2009, 2011) that forecast decreasing societal warmth and morality. These folk theories may inform people’s thinking such that it is assumed that to achieve a more moral society, one must look to the past, perhaps motivating compensatory escapism (Levitas, 1990) or *reactionary social change* (Becker, 2020). Yet, the Modern Green utopia represents an exception by combining endorsement of morality, ecology, and science, suggesting that scientific pursuits can be aligned with social and ecological consciousness.

Our results can inform current debates about how societies should respond to environmental issues such as climate change. Modern Green sees Science and Ecology as complementary ideals, while the Primitivist utopia treats them as contradictory. The relative prevalence of these two utopias in a population may reflect the perceived relationship between Science and Ecology. Consistent with this, the correlation between incorporating Ecology and incorporating Science into one’s utopia was clearly negative ( $r = -.21$  to  $-.49$ ) in the Anglophone samples, replicating the frequently observed negative relationship between faith in science and pro-environmental attitudes in Western cultures (Kaplowitz et al., 2013; Kilbourne et al., 2002; Xiao, 2013). This was not the case in China, however ( $r = -.07$ ), suggesting that this perceived incompatibility is less prevalent in some countries than others. This suggests that Western governments may face greater obstacles in persuading citizens to adopt, for example, renewable energy technologies if many people in those countries perceive ecological sustainability as being achieved primarily through primitivism.

While our work represents a first attempt at identifying utopian visions among ordinary people, it is limited by its grounding in Western scholarly research on utopianism. Although our six prototypes capture the most prominent utopian themes, a proportion of our participants did not distinguish between the prototypes (Nondescript profile). Our data suggest that many of these are likely to have been inattentive responders (responses clustered around the scale midpoint), or indiscriminate endorsers (responses clustered at the top of the scale), but others may view none of the prototypes as reflecting their ideals. We also note that the proportion of the sample accounted for by the Nondescript profile differed between countries (higher in Australia and China compared with the United Kingdom and the United States). This discrepancy can be partly accounted for by the method of data collection; data from Australia and China was collected as part of a larger study, and as such, we may expect a greater level of participant fatigue. The remaining discrepancy between Australia and China may be due to the utopian visions of Chinese participants not being captured by the six prototypes presented, which would not be surprising as the prototypes were drawn from Western cultural traditions.

Thus, we can assume that while our prototypes account for significant themes in contemporary utopian thinking, we have not provided an exhaustive account. There are a number of factors that may have contributed to this. Some participants may have found the prototypes too broad, and future research may take a more fine-grained approach. Several of the utopia prototypes can take a variety of forms, which may be assessed in greater detail. For example, when participants endorse a more moral society, they may be endorsing specific forms of morality such as care, fairness, or loyalty (Graham et al., 2018, 2011; Haidt, 2012). Similarly, some participants may have wished to specify institutional arrangements, rather than merely indicate a change to societal institutions. As noted earlier, we may not have adequately captured elements of a utopian society derived from non-Western cultures. Thus, we may learn more about other utopian visions through qualitative analysis of people's free descriptions of utopia, and from a deeper examination of non-Western utopian visions.

Future research can take several other directions. First, it can examine the psychological antecedents of utopia profiles. Utopias often represent the realization of important ethical systems or sets of values (Moos & Brownstein, 1977). Thus, we would expect utopia profiles to be associated with value orientations (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2012) or moral foundations (e.g., Graham et al., 2018, 2011; Haidt, 2012; Janoff-Bulman, & Carnes, 2013). In addition, as we have followed Davis' (1983) conceptualization of utopias as resolving the collective resource problem, we may also expect factors such as gross domestic product and income inequality (at the collective level) and personal income and perceptions of wealth distributions (at the individual level) to contribute to the preference for, and societal distribution of, utopia profiles.

Second, future research may examine the consequences of endorsing certain utopian profiles for motivating action and policy support. As Fernando et al., (2020) showed, an ecological modernization utopia produced greater levels of motivation than a scientific-technological utopia. Here we observed a similar utopian vision (the Modern Green) to be prevalent in contemporary societies. This suggests, first, that a utopian vision that has been linked to significant motivational effects is prevalent in contemporary societies (especially the United States and the United Kingdom, in our data). It also suggests that appeals to such a utopian vision by those interested in driving societal change are likely to be supported by the community. More broadly, understanding people's visions for a better world can help to design and promote policies in ways that will likely be met with support. Here we have identified many areas of convergence in utopian visions (despite many geopolitical and cultural divergences) which may provide common ground for building our future as well as some areas of potential divergence within societies across which compromise may need to be found.

## Conclusion

Throughout human history, people have imagined a better way of living and expressed it in stories, artworks, political manifestos, and small-scale communities. In recent times, the role of ordinary people's utopian visions in driving social change has been recognized by utopian theorists, and psychological research has demonstrated the motivational capacity of utopian thinking (Fernando et al., 2018, 2020). Here we showed some of the prominent ways in which ordinary people, across cultures, prefer to bring about a utopian society that resolves the tension between limited resources and potentially unlimited human desires. The study of utopian thinking has the potential to tell us much about where we are now, where we want to go, and the paths we may take to get there.

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The authors would like to dedicate this article to our colleague, Hollis Ashman, who sadly passed away before the completion of this project.

## Data Availability

All data are available from the authors by request.

This research has been prepared in accordance with ethical principles, and ethical approval for the studies conducted was received from the University of Melbourne.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Note

1. Examination of the unstandardized mean values by prototype showed that members of the Nondescript profile, on average, had the smallest difference between their least-endorsed and most-endorsed profiles. This was the case for Dataset 1:  $M(\text{Religion}) = 3.30$  v.  $M(\text{Institutions}) = 5.20$ ; Dataset 2:  $M(\text{Institutions}) = 4.99$  v.  $M(\text{Morality}) = 5.17$ ; and Dataset 3:  $M(\text{Ecology}) = 4.10$  v.  $M(\text{Religion}) = 5.72$ . For Dataset 1, these were clustered closely around the scale midpoint of 4, suggesting that this group gave fairly undifferentiated responses around the midpoint of the scale. For Datasets 2 and 3, ratings were all above the scale midpoint, suggesting an undifferentiated endorsement of the utopia prototypes.

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