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Connected self-ownership: Implications for online networks and privacy rights

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Contextualizing self-ownership

• Basic moral/political question: What do persons have a right to do and to say and what can society or other individuals do to us or force us to do, on pain of social sanction?

• Philosophical method: establish basic concepts and principles that achieve broad consensus, then build a theory that answers the question through argument, analogy, example, counter-example

• Self-ownership is a basic concept for libertarian liberalism.
Self-ownership: concept, rights, obligations

- Self-ownership— the idea that we each have an ownership relation over our selves.
  - Ownership rights are stringent claims to use, possess, exclude, dispose, transfer
- Libertarians appeal to self-ownership to establish:
  - That for each of us, our selves cannot be used or possessed without our individual consent;
  - That our duties to others must arise from voluntary actions, and that there can therefore be no obligations to others that we have not consented to;
  - Rights to property in external things.
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Self-ownership ideal

- Individualistic – the self is to be (fully) identified with an individual
  - A physical body (on some theories)
  - A rational individual (on other theories)
- Atomistic – individuals are completely separable from the external world, at least in principle.

I deny both of these aspects of self-ownership and argue that the self-owner is necessarily connected to other self-owners within a network of norms and the social practices of guiding and being guided by others.
Descriptive v. normative individualism

- Descriptive individualism claims that the human self can be fully described and explained by reference to forces and causes that act only on the individual and without referring to irreducibly social facts.
- Normative individualism claims that the human self is of ultimate, intrinsic moral value.
- Liberalism rests on normative individualism but need not embrace descriptive individualism.
  - Libertarianism embraces both normative and descriptive individualism.
  - Communitarianism denies normative individualism.
My thesis of connected self-ownership:

Self-owners cannot be the atomistic individuals portrayed by the concept of libertarian self-ownership; they are essentially constituted by their connections with other selves.

- I offer a *metaphysical* argument, which is a more stringent argument than a merely causal one.
- If successful, then the libertarian self-owner is not even conceivable, let alone physically possible.
Causal v. metaphysical origins of self-owners

- Causal origins: the physical, mental and social causes that give rise to individual human beings.
- Metaphysical origins: the necessary conditions for entities to be selves that can own themselves.
  - Assumes that self-owners are intrinsically valuable and are capable of making and respective ownership claims
  - Does not assume that self-owners are human, biological, or even embodied
  - Analogy: chess pieces and chessboards
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Metaphysically possible self-owners

Physically possible self-owners

Actually existing self-owners
The argument for connected self-owners

1. If self-owners are to be foundational for moral/political theory, then they must have intrinsic moral value and the ability to participate in a community or polity.

2. To “participate” means, minimally, to guide one’s actions by some externally prescribed norms, and more fulsomely, to so guide others’ actions.

3. That means that self-owners are things that have mental states, including intentions, beliefs, and desires, and that can take in and reflect on action-guiding rules or norms.

4. To be an “owner” is, minimally, to have some claim over the thing that is owned, a claim against others exclusively claiming it, and an ability to make use of or to possess it.
Argument for connected self-owners, cont.

5. Therefore, a self-owner must be a thing that intends and acts, and that can take and respond to norms—a moral person.

6. What makes a self’s existence as a moral person possible is being embedded in a normative web of meaningfulness.

7. Hence, self-owners are essentially connected.
The normative web as constitutive of selfhood

• To be a person is to be enmeshed in a web of social relations.
• The normative web is an emergent normative framework that we create collectively through our individual behavior in social interactions.
• Social institutions are always already there; we make our individual contributions to the norms and institutions we live with that alter them for our collective future, but we are not subjects without them.
• Therefore, the normative web, including linguistic norms, that connect individuals capable of moral personhood and without which there are no moral persons, is intrinsically valuable.
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Moral significance of the causal origins of connected selves

- There are many possible webs and they can be materially instantiated in alternative ways.
- Gish Jen: Western v. Eastern culture; big-pit selves v. flexi-selves
  - These differences notwithstanding, all selves require material support and social connection for survival and development of social norms.
- Physical and social threshold needs for connected self-owners are morally significant because connected self-owners are intrinsically valuable.
Autonomy as a moral ideal for connected self-owners

• Autonomy – ability to self-govern
  • ability to see oneself as an originator of desires, beliefs, and claims.
• Autonomous connected self-owners – ability to participate in collective self-governance.
  • No one node in the interconnected web of norms could be seen as the lone originator of norms.
  • Autonomous connected selves are rather contributors and participants in the making and giving of normative guidance.
• Therefore, the web of connection ought to allow each node to become such a reciprocal participant in order to promote (relational) autonomy.
Atomistic v. connected self-owners

**Atomistic self-owner**
- Complete in itself
- No necessary connections
- Definite boundaries (bodily)
- Autonomy requires rational guidance by self-given rules, morality

**Connected self-owner**
- Nodes embedded in web of connections
- Fuzzy boundaries
- Necessary connections to others through normative web
- Autonomy requires ability to give and take normative guidance
Autonomy enhancing networks

- A framework of norms can allow and encourage this reciprocity by including norms of human dignity and equality.
- Connected selves can nourish autonomy in each other by teaching and encouraging autonomous capacities, and by discouraging violence and other emotionally or psychologically damaging practices.

Networks, or communities, that are not autonomy-enhancing have no right to exist as such, and persons have moral obligations to reform them or to help those who are oppressed by them to find autonomy-enhancing ones.
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Implications for online communities

- Is there any reason to privilege material over virtual communities?
  - No – the appropriate question is about autonomy enhancement, not materiality, tradition, or biological relations.

- Like communities in the material world, online communities can be oppressive or autonomy enhancing.

- We have an imperfect duty to develop communities and normative practices that foster autonomous connected self-ownership.

- E.g., developing techniques to eliminate flaming behavior and to enhance constructive dialogue

- E.g., eliminating users who spread false news
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Implications for data privacy rights and wrongs

- We have a duty not to harm others, and norms of trolling behavior, false news that gaslights persons, false light defamations, and the like cause harm.
- We have a duty to avoid harvesting personal data without permission or passing on data that has been legitimately collected in ways that lead to these types of harms.
- Software developers have a duty to avoid allowing their products to be used to harvest personal data without permission or pass on data that has been legitimately collected in ways that cause harm.
Conclusion: Why preserve self-ownership?

1. Retains idea that the connected self has claims over aspects of itself.
2. Preserves the idea that the node of the web in which the self is located is of primary moral importance even as it is connected to others.
3. Suggests that creation of selves is a collective endeavor, and that the entire collective has a stake in the preservation of the individual nodes as well as the overall web.
4. The metaphor of ownership suggests investment, implying that we have an obligation to invest ourselves in the project of norm-creating in order to practice autonomy.
5. It is a traditional way of looking at our relationship to ourselves.
Thank you!