

Nobody Owns Anything

Throughout my tenure as an anarchist one thing has always set me apart from everyone else: my beliefs around the concept of property and ownership. These are some real foundational beliefs for me, because it is based on them that I evaluate various things like “capitalism”, “socialism”, “communism”, even “economics” writ large. My beliefs on ownership are ones that I have largely kept silent about, but recently I have been feeling the need to sit down and elucidate my thoughts on the subject. So here it goes.

As I see it, the concept of “ownership” is a fiction that does not really exist except to the extent that people believe in it and act accordingly. People can chose to believe in it and live their lives by it, or not. Ownership is of course a very popular and prevalent concept that people believe in, but it is by no means inevitable that people have to believe in it. It is up there with other concepts in that regard, such as “money”, “government” and “religion”, that have shaped history and dominated people’s lives and that I think that we all can and should do away with in order to live more free and fulfilling lives.

I opt for a perspective that I consider to be more natural and real, one that I tentatively am calling “non-ownership”. This applies to everyone and everything, in that nobody owns anything. This includes all people, places, things and ideas, all of it is unshackled to the concept of invisible lines binding such-and-such with so-and-so. I am not saying that “government” owns everything, or that “the community” owns everything, or that “society” owns everything, I am saying that **nobody** owns anything, since *ownership does not exist*.

The rationale behind this is that everyone comes into the world naked and carrying no possessions, and leaves the world taking no possessions with them. The interim period between birth and death is when people usually ascribe the concept of ownership to people and things, but this is a faulty concept given that people can and do accidentally break, misplace, or have their “property” taken from them against their will through various means. If somebody really “owned” something, then at the very least it could not be accidentally broken or misplaced, since it would always be under the complete control of the owner and it could not do anything that goes against the owner’s will. The fact that things can go their own way regardless of the desires of the so-called owner shows that there is no invisible sanctified bond between object and owner. It’s just make-believe.

As far as property being taken against people’s will by other people, whether we call it “theft”, “fraud”, or whatever, I would say that this is a case of people with different ideas of who should have what things. Different systems that we call law, trade, fair and just business transactions, justifiable means of establishing ownership, all of these are different rules for playing different games with the same basic fiction that we call “ownership”. It is

similar to how different computer games exist focused on 'Star Wars'. Star Wars is still a work of fiction, even though different games exist that are focused on it, and none of the particular rules or codes that these different games abide by are more "true" or "legitimate" than any other, because it is all still premised on a work of fiction. It is just a game, and we can choose to play different games, or we can stop playing games altogether. The same goes with "ownership".

Often people bring up the idea of finding things and making things as being the basis for ownership. However, people find things (and lose things) and make things (and break things) all the time, usually with the help of predecessors and those around them. To find out the original discoverer or creator of something or somewhere, among a species that goes back hundreds of thousands of years and that is fundamentally social in nature seems like an absurd and arbitrary game of catch-up. People exist, places exist, things exist, let's go with that.

People often bring up the idea of one's own body, "don't people own their own physical bodies?" I would say, no, even that is not really owned by people. I would say that the fact that injuries, illness, aging and accidental deaths all occur are proof that people do not own their own bodies. If people really owned their own bodies, then none of these things would ever occur, because people would control it. This kind of control is an illusion, as is the concept of "ownership".

Usually at this point people are imagining a world of some kind of violent madhouse free-for-all, filled with people whimsically taking whatever they want and doing whatever they want to everybody else. My response to that would be to ask: wow, what kind of dark twisted psyche are you carrying around with you? All of this segues into my ideas around what concepts should be used in lieu of the concept of "ownership" in order to support there being more peace, harmony and happiness for everybody.

First off, I think that it is essential that people have a real sense of care, consideration and connection with both those around them as well as with themselves. If people really knew, understood and cared about the happiness and well-being of those around them, they would not blithely be acting in ways that cause hurt or distress for others. People would be openly talking about situations, thinking things through together, and coming up with creative ways to meet the needs of everyone.

Now that I have just used that word, "needs", I feel that mention should be made of another concept that I find supportive here, and that is of "needs" as articulated by **Nonviolent Communication**. In this case, "needs" are the underlying motivational drives that inspire all actions, thoughts, and feelings that human beings have. Needs are not quantifiable, they do not look like any particular thing or course of action, and they can exist in the intellectual, emotional, and social realms, as well as the physical. All human

beings have the same underlying fundamental human needs, people just express these needs, and their desires to get these needs met, in a wide variety of different ways. Also, the strategies that people use to try to get their needs met can look very different and can be in conflict with other strategies used to get needs met.

An important process that can be used to navigate life in a non-ownership world is that of continually identifying the various different fundamental human needs that are at play. What needs are “on the table”, so to speak, what needs are which people wanting to have met in any given situation, and how can we try to meet these needs with the various different resources that are accessible right now? These are the kinds of conversations that I would like to see people develop their skills and capacities for having.

This then begs the question: what needs am I anticipating being met through people pursuing the strategy of adopting the perspective of “non-ownership” instead of continuing on with using a variation of the already more prevalent concept of “ownership”?

My first answer is that more resources and possibilities are freed up and made available without the arbitrary constraints of who-owns-what. “Ownership” creates a whole vast minefield of different tripwires that can go off and areas that are foreclosed on right off the bat. Without that concept existing, the whole world exists filled with different things and places that can be used to meet people’s needs. The sky’s the limit.

The second part of my answer is that a perspective of non-ownership really forces people to confront the question of what it is that they are really needing. What is it that would truly make them more of a happy and healthy human being? In a world of “property management”, of relentlessly pursuing and maintaining that which one supposedly “owns”, people lose track of that which is really important to them and what really makes them happy. Non-ownership forces those questions right to the forefront of people’s minds: existential self-examination is required.

A third part of my answer is that “non-ownership” provides an additional incentive for people to have strong intimate connections with the other people around them, to have more and better “community” with other people. With the concept of “ownership” being the main operative fiction used in a society, it is easy for people to wall themselves off into separate little enclaves of “me” and “mine”. In a world of non-ownership, the question of “how are you doing?” becomes a real and vital question that people ask each other, as well as “how am I doing?” The quality of people’s relationships with one another becomes a very important matter for people in a society of non-ownership.

If it is not apparent already, this concept of non-ownership has elements to it that go into both the personal individual realm as well as the interpersonal social realm. It ties in with how people view themselves, their own lives and the various different objects and places

that surround them, and it also ties in with how people relate with one-another, how people get along with each-other, what concepts they hold together, as well as what social systems and structures people create together to support one-another.

Non-ownership is not implemented by a lone individual adopting this perspective and deciding to go off and live their lives by it. And non-ownership is not implemented by a group of people collectively deciding to live their lives this way and making sure that everybody abides by it. It is simultaneously both individual and collective, it is a way that people relate with both themselves and each-other. One-sided perspectives with this do not work.

People sometimes mention the possessive language that we use now, such as “mine” and “yours”, or the strongly entrenched habits that people have as showing the “inevitability” of the concept of ownership. But these too are areas that people can change if they really wanted to. For example, more neutral language can be used, “the” and “that”, for example. And habits can be spoken of and acknowledged directly as such, “that house that you like to sleep in”, “that toothbrush that I usually use”, etc. If people want to ensure the continuity of their habits, they can openly state it. Likewise, people can also take the opportunity to examine their own habits and see if it is really serving them, or to see if something else could perhaps serve them better.

I also want to acknowledge that people often do have strong emotional attachments to particular things, places and people. These strong emotional attachments do exist, I see that. In the kind of non-ownership society that I am talking about here, these emotional attachments would be openly recognized and spoken of, and they can be worked around or dealt with as needed, depending on the situation and the people involved. The point is not to trample over people or to force them into particular ways of being, but to more clearly see where we are at and where we would like to go. I believe that non-ownership helps with that.

A key here is that of pursuing freedom, the freedom of knowing that infinite possibilities exist to meet all of the different needs we have. The strategies that can be implemented to meet needs are by no means fixed or limited.

Likewise, this freedom is linked together with being in community with others, it openly acknowledges the interdependence that people have with one another, and as such the social relationship becomes an area of prime importance as well.

And tied in with all of that is the quest for increased self-knowledge and self-understanding. For if one does not really know oneself how can one ask for what would truly be supportive for oneself?

All of this is bundled together in this concept that I am calling “non-ownership”. This is a

concept that I have had for quite some time now, yet it is also one which is always evolving as time goes on. This concept is one important part of my anarchist views, for it is one way that the various systems of authority and domination can be exposed, and freedom and community can take their place. All of this is by no means my original idea, it is rather an idea that I have tweaked and adjusted in my own way. Make of it as you will.