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Mutualistic Interpretations of Self Ownership

Blazing Truth

August 25th, 2012

The problem is how one interprets self-ownership. This requires a “theory of the subject” or some way of constituting the “self”. I do not think anarcho-capitalists can be successful in this endeavour without ceremoniously sacrificing private property in the process. Proudhon, for instance, perhaps taking after Rousseau’s co-constitution of the self by way of the Other (amour-propre), has a theory of the individual as a “collective force”. It is this kind of framework which inserts EQUALITY into the equation — and it is this kind of principle which anarcho-capitalists fail to recognize due to their lack of theory of a subject.

I have a few loose arguments that I haven’t tied together well in one place, concerning the self as an “identity” that cannot be determined from within, and how it must instead be determined from with-out (i.e. that identity, like property, is a social phenomenon and can’t be determined a priori) by others in society (Who am I? I am a carpenter, I am a mother, I am a transgender, I am an immigrant, etc.). Judith Butler’s work on sexuality is especially pertinent here. I’d like to tie some of these loose ends

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here. Throughout all traditions of philosophy, I think that despite their differences most hold a conception of self which is not so simple as the anarcho-capitalist may think. In fact, this same kind of reductionism is at work everywhere throughout libertarian rhetoric, but I digress.

It is, as Kierkegaard recognizes (“the self is a relation that relates itself to itself”, instead of just simply being-for-itself we have a self in despair), precisely the “I” which is the problem — while language makes everything look the same, when one says “I”, one cannot even do this without evoking that which is not-“I” simultaneously. To name a few examples:

Freud/Lacan have the concept of “split subject” (denoted by \$, this one is probably the most clear to me), co-opted by Žižek;

Hegel has the “master-slave dialectic” whereby “the development of self-consciousness as such in an encounter between what are thereby (i.e., emerging only from this encounter) two distinct, self-conscious beings; the essence of the dialectic is the movement or motion of recognizing, in which the two self-consciousnesses are constituted each in being recognized as self-conscious by the other.”;

Badiou and Deleuze toy with the idea of the self as a kind of “(pure) multiplicity”;

Heidegger has his “thrown-ness” or “fallen-ness” of Dasein (“being-there”) into the world;

Levinas has his “ethics as first philosophy” whereby he questions even the Da of Da-sein (by asking: “It is just to be?”) because, taking Heidegger’s reasoning to its absurd end, through one’s own existence one is taking the place of an-other who might-have-been in my place, and so the self is subject to an “infinite demand” from “the Other”;

Nietzsche has self-overcoming as self-creation;

Sartre has his originary inauthenticity, self-negation and “bad faith”,

Wittgenstein has his “bad conscience”;

Derrida has his auto-affectivity which must be always a kind of “hetero-affectivity”;

Critchley has a beautiful concept called “dividual”;

All in all, I think this idea (perhaps summarized by saying “No man is an island, alone to himself”) of a broken or always-incomplete self is something pretty straight-forward if not EASILY from our day to day experiences (the feeling of a “void” inside us, that is also an excess, the ant crawling on the Mobius strip, that we all have our vices, our desire for love, our depression, etc.) then if one has any familiarity with philosophy outside of Rothbard. I believe he goes wrong on the very first clause of his formulation of self-ownership found on page 28 in *For a New Liberty*: “[E]ach individual must think, learn, value, and choose his or her ends and means in order to survive and flourish,”

Also, one thing I found interesting, and I’m sure this can be expanded upon and turned into a hefty argument, is that etymologically speaking, the term “liable” has its roots in the 15c. term for “ligament” (Source), and carries the sense of “being bound to”. The point of anarcho-capitalist self-ownership arguments is to pave the way for their desire for private property. All the time and effort seems to go into supporting private property from any and all criticism — something which I do not understand the purpose. Provided that “ownership implies responsibility”, and this is the kind of purpose they may have in mind. I think the trick is to strike at this root, and ask them straight-forwardly: What is so desirable about this kind of stringent responsibility?

I like etymological arguments because they open up new space for interpretations, although they’re often easily misunderstood. I think that if we are to look into “liability” a bit more, we find that what the proper sense of what is desired is not responsibility to Law, but a kind of response-ability that is found in our ligaments,

in sharing a common condition of animality. This “being bound to” ought to lie in between, like a spirit that dances between to star-crossed lovers.

This fixed and “rigid” structure of “ownership” is alienating (I would say this is Marx’s strongest argument), dehumanizing, and machine-like in its methodology — and it is this emotionless and apathetic side of ownership which I feel is what I find most objectionable. There is no consideration of ETHOS present in anarcho-capitalist discourse.

This desired ethos then, as I touched on earlier, is one of co-operation and equality.