

On Lockean Self-Ownership and the New Mutualist Manifesto

Blazing Truth

September 25th, 2012

Well, for most libertarians, Self-ownership is most unshakeable fundamental conviction:

In *The Ethics of Liberty*, Murray Rothbard argues that "100 percent self-ownership" is the only principle compatible with a moral code that applies to every person - a "universal ethic" - and that it is a natural law by being what is naturally best for man.

The controversial thesis that I am going to put forward is that the anti-capitalist thinker need not disagree with Rothbard when he makes this statement.

After all, as an axiom, Self-ownership apparently cannot be rejected without seeming irrational or nonsensical. Moreover, so as to avoid playing in to an ideological field dominated by uncompromising libertarian dogma (i.e. if you reject self-ownership, you apparently are in favor of others owning your organs, etc.), one is left with very few options of addressing it.

The first and most popular way of approaching this "concrete universality" (which is like a double disagreement in Hegelian terminology), seems to be ignoring libertarians altogether and moving on with your life. That always works, and maybe I just have too much time on my hands. Instead, in solving both of these two problems, I think one ought to agree with Rothbard on this matter. Yes, you heard me correctly. Yet more than just an agreement, however, I think one ought to super-agree in order to over-load the libertarian ideological framework **from the inside**.

In a fairly Zizekian move, we can say along the anarcho-capitalist "Yes, yes, of course I agree with you, we do indeed have 100% full Self-ownership, and this principle does in fact obtain universally to every person." Here, one has successfully "penetrated the castle" so to speak, and this approach completely destabilizes any rehearsed replies to the matter and prompts genuine new thought. In presenting my *New Mutualist Manifesto*, my point was precisely to keep the Lockean mechanism of Self-ownership in place, but to throw a brand new twist on its interpretation through analysing the implications of a split subject.

The reason for this is that libertarian ideology completely neglects the subject. However, through their interpretations of Self-ownership as implying absolute private property, they implicitly assume a unified subject, or absolutely sovereign individual as such. Given our historical

and contingent limitations, the thesis of a unified subject cannot obtain due also to the nature of our subjectivity in the world.

This is the crucial lesson of the phenomenological tradition of Husserl through Heidegger, and the thesis of a split subject is one of the most important concepts in modern (especially continental) philosophy, perhaps first and most famously articulated by the poet Arthur Rimbaud when he states "Je est un Autre" (I is another).

In responding to complaints that my writing was unclear, I would like to outline a general logical sequence of my argument in more depth so as to make myself better understood:

New Mutualist Manifesto: General Sequence of Logical Argument

A. Subject and Self

(Sections I and II of the Manifesto)

1. The subject is undergoing a process of subjectification. (definition 1)
2. The process of subjectification is limited by a particular contingent framework. (definition 3)
3. The subject is limited by a particular contingent framework. (from 1, 2)
4. The subject is not complete, i.e. it cannot know itself fully. (from 3)
5. The Self is the incomplete subject. (4, definition 2)

B. Self and Property

(Sections III and IV of the Manifesto)

1. Property is to be determined on the basis of Lockean Self-Ownership (see definition 4)
2. The Self is the incomplete subject. (conclusion of argument A)
3. The Self is incapable of completely or absolutely mixing its labour. (2)
4. In Lockean Self-Ownership, the mixing of labour is a continual process. (3)
5. Property is to be determined on the basis of possession. (1, 4, definition 5)

C. Definitions:

1. The subject – one individual and unique subjectivity.
2. The Self – the subject as it experiences itself.
3. Process of subjectification – the subject's phenomenological experience.
4. Lockean Self-ownership – The theory that the Self can justly acquire property through the "mixing of labour" with land natural resources, coming to own it exclusively as an extension of the subject itself.

5. Possession – continual occupancy and use.

D. Notes and other implications:

- In order for absolute private property to take hold, either a unified or complete subject must be proven, the historical framework must be denied, Lockean Self-ownership must be denied, etc.
- Property cannot be determined a priori.
- All ownership is in fact use-based ownership, with differing criteria for what qualifies as “use”.
- Absolute ownership – whether individual or collective – is impossible.
- For more on what property on the basis of possession might look like, see section IV and V of the *New Mutualist Manifesto*.

Now, I would like to push the issue back to vulgar libertarians, who lack a theory of the subject but require a theory of the unified subject in order to justify themselves.

Here, it is not enough to simply disagree with the theory of the split subject, or to find a flaw in my argumentation shown (at least loosely) above. Not only must one first show where my argumentation goes wrong, but the second problem libertarians now face is to develop a **positive** argument that shows the real existence of a unified subject, and thus a complete Self – and by implication their beloved absolute private property. The premises required to do that seem to rely upon facts which are completely ridiculous, religious, dualistic, etc. As such, I do not think this task can be done. In fact, if my argument holds, that task is impossible (in tandem with Proudhon’s claim that “Property is impossible”) from even a subjective and theoretical perspective.

I would also, like to address the question of Locke’s provisos, which I believe would apply on top of this if the Lockean mechanism is used. Proudhon’s fact/right distinction would come into play, alongside Locke’s provisos, to determine just possession (mixing in accordance to a certain ethical criteria/proviso) as opposed to de facto possession (mixing). For more on this project, see Shawn Wilbur’s A Tale of Three Provisos, specifically as it concerns the “gleaning” proviso. On this matter, and in relation to my work, he writes:

Arguably, you don’t have to go that far afield. The Lockean model only really makes sense if “property in one’s persons” simply describes one aspect of personhood as such. *One* of the things that we might say about a “self” is that is characterized by “ownness” or “property, and that is specifically one of the things that we say when we want to talk about the distribution of resources. If we had a kind of self which did not require (or was even incapable of) the appropriation of resources, we could still talk about “self-ownership,” but we wouldn’t have any particular reason to. So “property,” in its simplest form, simply describes one aspect of selfhood, which we find the need to talk about because selves are fluid and potentially overlapping. *Materially*, we are not, in Whitman’s terms, neatly “contained between our hat and boots” (and if we were at any given moment, we know we would still have to reach out and appropriate external materials to continue to survive), and yet *phenomenologically* we are radically separate.

The problem with dualistic accounts of self-ownership is not that mind-body dualism is wrong, or that a self can't own itself. Arguably, selves own themselves *by definition*. The problem is that propertarian accounts of "property in one's person" tend to treat that "self-ownership" as if it was an instance of the ownership of "external" objects, rather than being the quality of human existence upon which a theory of the appropriation of new properties might be based.

The self does not, and cannot, exercise complete *material* control over "itself" or its properties, no matter how defined. That's not how the world works. But "property" is essentially a legal or ethical distinction anyway, so this is not a particular blow against the notion of property. What it does suggest, however, is that if "rights of property" are to be derived as "natural rights," based on the character of our experience and reflective understanding of the nature of human being, then rights of "complete control" may be pretty hard to derive. Propertarian accounts of rights seem to assume that our phenomenological experience of separation is the best model for dealing with our material existence, while our reflective understanding of the material realities suggests much less natural precedent for anything like exclusive, "private," individual property.

I suppose one could see my own project here as a kind of phenomenological re-interpretation of the proprietarian false-phenomenology of experienced separation which Shawn, as usual, is quick to correctly describe. His approach, on the other hand, is inclined to one of a matter of emphasizing the material fact through the thought of Stirner's "ownness", whereas I feel mine is more fixating on the matter of sense and sensations (cue all of the Deleuze that I have been reading lately). I feel as if I am trying to correct for a certain sensitivity to particular matters of subjectivity – namely it's limits in complexity, flexibility, ideology, and desired ethos (which, altogether, I have called "ornament" as the intersection between form/content). Arguably, mine is idealistic in this way.

Put otherwise, in contrast to my current examination of the subjectivity (in particular, subjective limitations, my talk about "subjects") of our phenomenological experience, your approach seems to be more concerning the objectivity (again, objective limitations, your talk about "external objects") of our phenomenological experience. Of course, in a kind of dialectical way (and this was Derrida's point about Marx), there is little difference between Idealism and Materialism. Two sides of same coin. It appears as if our two strains of thought converge on exactly the same point on phenomenology, exclusivity, and so on. It looks as if the role of my Manifesto going forward is to bring these two trends together.

Certainly what he says is true, and I'll leave him the last word here:

I guess my question is how, to the extent that this is a conversation about "property" in some fairly conventional senses, we can afford not to deal fairly directly with the material. In the Lockean context, this is in large part a story about the very physical mixing of material selves with natural resources.

My approach starts with the notion that the human self is at once objective and subjective, an insight drawn in part from Pierre Leroux, and shared by a range of early anarchists including Proudhon, Greene, and Dejacque. What I've been arguing for several years now is that we won't have an adequate theory of the self – and, thus,

we won't have an adequate theory of property – until we can reconcile the "unique" of the egoists with the "universal circulus" of the Leroux-influenced communists (or some near equivalent.) That will give us the subject to go with Proudhon's "synthesis of community and property."

As such, stay tuned for many new additions to the New Mutualist Manifesto on this issue.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Blazing Truth
On Lockean Self-Ownership and the New Mutualist Manifesto
September 25th, 2012

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120927020806/http://www.blazingtruth.com/mutualism-lockeanism/>

theanarchistlibrary.org