

CONNECTED SELF-OWNERSHIP AND OUR OBLIGATIONS TO OTHERS*

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Abstract: This essay explores the concept of the connected self-owner, which takes account of the metaphysical significance of relations among persons for persons' capacities to be owners. This concept of the self-owner conflicts with the traditional libertarian understanding of the self-owner as atomistic or essentially separable from all others. I argue that the atomistic self cannot be a self-owner. A self-owner is a moral person with intentions, desires, and thoughts. But in order to have intentions, desires, and thoughts a being must relate to others through language and norm-guided behavior. Individual beings require the pre-existence of norms and norm-givers to bootstrap their selves, and norms, norm-givers, and norm-takers are necessary to continue to support the self. That means, I argue, that the self who can be an owner is essentially connected. Next, I ask how humans become connected selves and whether that connection matters morally. I distinguish among those connections that support development of valuable capacities. One such capacity is the autonomous individual. I argue that the social connections that allow the development of autonomous individuals have moral value and should be fostered. On the basis of these two values, I argue that we can support at least two nonvoluntary obligations, one negative and one positive, that we can ground in our metaphysical essence as connected self-owners.

KEY WORDS: self-ownership, connected self, autonomy, relational autonomy, positive obligation, voluntary obligation, oppression

I. INTRODUCTION

Libertarians who appeal to self-ownership, do so to establish two things: first, that for each of us, our selves cannot be used or possessed without our individual consent; second, 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. Both of these conclusions are supposed to follow from the fact that our selves are ours—we own them—and therefore we have an exclusive claim over our selves. No one or no collective can force us to use our selves in ways that we do not voluntarily choose. This self-owner, who may not be touched and need not touch any other self, is the physical core of atomistic individuals that populate libertarian

* For helpful comments and questions, I want to thank Seena Eftekhari, Kurt Blankschaen, Geoff Sayre McCord, and the audience at the 2018 PPE Society conference. I also want to thank an anonymous referee, the other contributors to this volume, and especially Bas van der Vossen and David Schmidtz.

political theories.¹ Let's term those who employ the self-ownership thesis in this way "self-owner libertarians."

Self-owner libertarians typically construe selves initially as physical bodies, and that seems a natural place to begin for a concept that is supposed to ground a theory of rights over our bodies and their voluntary actions, and by extension, ground property rights in the world. But that need not, indeed must not, be all that constitutes our selves. Theories of personal identity, not to mention intellectual property, lead us readily to think of consciousness, thoughts, intentions, commitments, beliefs, and desires as also constitutive of the self who owns itself. Extending the notion of the self to include these attributes may seem not to extend the self in ways that go beyond the atomistic individual, but I shall argue that in fact such extension undermines the libertarian conception of the individual self-owner. Extending our notion of the self-owner to include its mental attributes inevitably involves social relations that are as essential to the self as the physical body it inhabits. A self-owner turns out to be essentially a connected self and not the atomistic individual who may legitimately reject all claims from others that have not been voluntarily chosen.

Once we embrace the concept of the connected self-owner as the foundation for political theory, we have to rethink the rights and obligations that are said to follow from the premise that we own our selves. Our essential connections among selves means that ownership has to be in some sense shared with other selves, and the relations between us become morally significant and laden with obligation. While we need not abandon normative individualism, we need to recognize that social connectedness is as essential to the self as biological existence.

II. THE METAPHYSICS OF THE SELF-OWNER

My goal in this section is to argue that self-owners cannot be metaphysically atomistic selves, but rather they are essentially constituted by their connections with other selves. The fundamental reason for this is because beings that can be self-owners are beings that can think, desire, and act, and that even these mental states rely on the individual being located in a socially constituted normative web of language and both norm-guiding and norm-guided actions. Therefore, the self essentially cannot be forever isolated from other selves.

¹ Many libertarians appeal explicitly to this atomistic concept of self-ownership, though they may not characterize the metaphysical notion of the self explicitly in this way. It is those libertarians who argue directly from self-ownership to libertarian moral and political conclusions that fall prey to my objections. I have in mind libertarians such as Murray N. Rothbard, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006); Eric Mack, "Self-Ownership, Marxism, and Egalitarianism, Parts I and II," *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 1, nos. 1 and 2 (2002): 75–108; 237–76. See also Peter Vallentyne and Bas van der Vossen, "Libertarianism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014 Fall Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/libertarianism/>.

The literature on self-ownership focuses almost exclusively on the concept of ownership, and the self is taken for granted to be a separable individual with no essential ties to other things, including other selves.² That is, it is a thing that thinks and acts in and of itself, unencumbered by connections to other selves. According to G. A. Cohen, the libertarian self-ownership thesis asserts a set of rights by a self over “a particular body, by the person whose body (in the natural sense) it is.”³ The self is understood as a primitive ontological entity, whose attributes and boundaries have a naturalistic interpretation.

I want to argue that insofar as any substantive consequence is derived from the unconnected, unencumbered nature of the self, this description leads to question-begging results. Why should we understand the self as entirely constituted by “its” rather than “theirs”? Many questions can be asked about what the self is, how it comes to be constituted as a self, and how the self’s identity changes over time. In my view, we must consider these questions in order to have a philosophically sound understanding of the self in “self-ownership,” the self that owns itself and that is fundamental in liberal political philosophy. I will argue that when we do so, we see that the self is essentially constituted in part by its connected, norm-guiding relationships with other such connected selves. Extricating an atomistic, unencumbered self from its normative web as the libertarian self-ownership thesis requires is not metaphysically possible.

To understand the metaphysical depth of the argument I will offer, it is important to begin by distinguishing between the causal origins of the self and the metaphysical constitution of the self. By causal origins I mean the physical, mental, and social causes that give rise to individual human beings. This can be viewed from the generic perspective of the causal law-governed necessities of physical human existence, such as the set of possible human genetic makeups, the thresholds of nutrition and shelter required for a human to grow into a body that can originate its own physical movements and make its own claims on resources, and the required nurturing relationships between the developing infant and its nurturing mother, family, or tribe. Alternatively, the causal origins of a self can be viewed from the perspective of any particular individual’s specific historical, physical, and social, causal origins. For example, we could say of a particular individual self that it was born to that particular woman, with

² The question of what is the self that owns has been taken up from the perspective of traditional theories of personal identity in Edward Feser, “Personal Identity and Self-Ownership,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 22, no. 2 (2005): 100–125. However, his examination still takes for granted that there is an individual self that can be isolated from its community, the assumption which I bring into question in Ann E. Cudd, “Feminism and Libertarian Self-Ownership,” in Jason Brennan, Bas van der Vossen, and David Schmidtz, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Libertarianism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 127–39, and which I intend to examine in greater depth in this essay.

³ G. A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 215.

this genetic makeup, in that particular physical and social environment, physically nurtured by those particular others.

We can also speak of mental and social causal origins in generic and specific ways. At this point in the story, though, we need to recognize that by “self” we mean something more than (or perhaps other than) a physical, human body. A self that can be an owner only if it is a moral and political person; minimally, a thing that can intend, desire, and act. Persons, essentially, have complex, norm-guided, mental states and these arise through both mental and social causes and processes. That is, what it is to be a person is (at least in part) to be a being that has normatively-guided mental states. Mentally to become a person, a being must take in perceptual stimuli and process those stimuli to produce thoughts and desires. Social causes include the necessity of being exposed to language and other social norms and normative guidance that will enable a self to develop language and other ways of being human. Once we recognize the importance of the mental and social causes of the self, we realize that the generic causal origins of humans discussed previously are contingent in some sense, even if they are necessary for the existence of a human body. That is, we can conceive of beings that have different causal origins that could still be selves. They could be robots; they could be other species on earth or on some distant exoplanet.

The metaphysical constitution of the self-owner differs from its causal origins in that to discover the former we have to ask what is metaphysically or conceptually necessary for a thing to be the kind of thing that can own itself. Metaphysical necessities of the self-owner differ from causal necessities because what is metaphysically necessary for a thing to be a self-owner—for that to be conceptually possible—need not be the same as what is causally necessary to instantiate such a thing in the natural world. As an analogy, chess pieces can be ivory carved figures that are moved manually from place to place in space, or digitally represented boards and digital representations of pieces that are electronically moved in virtual space, but regardless of how they are made, what makes them metaphysical chess pieces is the set of rules that govern their movements for chess players. That is, metaphysical necessities are conceptual, not causal; necessary, not contingent.

The claim that there are metaphysical necessities for self-owners is the claim that selves cannot be conceived as self-owners without certain metaphysical qualities. Another way to put this difference is that while a self-owner can be instantiated physically or causally in many ways, self-owners have some metaphysically fundamental, constitutive attributes. Thus, the claim that certain qualities or attributes are metaphysically necessary is a stronger claim than that of causal or physical necessity. If the atomistic self of the libertarian self-owner is metaphysically impossible or incoherent, then it is simply a non-starter for moral or political philosophy.

Specifying the metaphysical attributes of the self-owner depends in part on why we are trying to specify the metaphysics of the self-owner.

That is, what is the concept for?⁴ In this article, I am interested in the concept of the self that is *for* the purpose of constructing a political philosophy, which takes self-owners to be normatively fundamental, to have intrinsic value, even if they are not the only things that do.⁵ I aim to show that self-owner libertarians have a metaphysically incoherent view of the self that will not serve to ground a political philosophy, even libertarian political philosophy.

I have already suggested that the self who is a self-owner is nothing less than a person; now I want to argue for that claim. John Locke, in the *Second Treatise of Government*, suggests this is the case when he states his principle of self-ownership: “every man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself.”⁶ However, Locke could not have intended the contemporary sense of property, according to which property is subject to be used by its owner in any way whatsoever, including to be destroyed. In Locke’s view, humans were created by God, who therefore has creator rights to their bodies, which deprives the human owner of its right to destroy itself. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke defines a person as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places.”⁷ Persons are thinking things, capable of reason and reflection. Then what could he have meant by the “person” in the phrase in the previously cited quotation: “Property in his own Person”? Recall that this discussion of personhood, unlike his earlier discussion of personhood in the identity section of the *Essay*, a work of metaphysics and epistemology, comes in Locke’s political *Second Treatise of Government*. Here he is giving a metaphysical account of the person relative to its use for a theory of property. Locke proceeds to present the key argument for property rights in the same paragraph as the quote. Namely, he argues that by laboring on previously unowned nature, we can come to own it (under conditions he goes on to specify). But the point here is that a person is someone who intentionally acts to convert unused nature into sustenance for human beings. In both the epistemological and the political works, the person is identified primarily with mental states and the capacity for intentionally guiding our actions. As Seena Eftekhari concludes, “Lockean self-ownership consists in attributing responsibility and ownership over

⁴ Sally Haslanger describes what she calls an analytical approach to defining a concept, which seeks to define a concept for a particular project or purpose. I am specifying the purpose of the concept as providing an adequate foundation for a political philosophy. See her “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?” in Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 221–47.

⁵ Vallentyne and Van der Vossen, “Libertarianism.”

⁶ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, C. B. Macpherson, ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980 [1690]), 19.

⁷ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Boston: Cummings and Hilliard and J. T. Buckingham, 1813): chap. XXVII. Accessed on 21 April 2018 at https://books.google.com/books/about/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding.html?id=pDNIAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false.

actions, and not, as the contemporary libertarian so construes it, a property right in the individual's body that permits its destruction or barter and exchange."⁸

Locke's project is similar to ours, in that he is using the concept of person or self to ground a political theory. But our political project is broader than property rights, and not based on a theological presumption. So, let us consider again why we want a concept of self-owner in the first place, which is to establish a foundation for liberal political philosophy. The self-owner is to provide a moral premise, something of ultimate moral value whose attributes allow us to derive normative conclusions when we consider how self-owners can and should interact in relations with each other and with nature.⁹ Given this purpose, the self-owner must be morally intrinsically valuable, and persons often are seen as fulfilling this need in contemporary political philosophy. A self-owner cannot be a thing without intrinsic moral value; it cannot be a corporation, for instance, which derives its value from the persons who own or have some stake in it and its products. However, it is important not to beg the question about what a person is by making too many presumptions about what makes selves morally valuable.

Next consider the two parts of the term "self-owner." A self can have the identity of a person, as we have just established. It cannot be a thing with derivative value, but there may be many intrinsically valuable things. Can it have another identity, other than that of person? If the point of positing a self-owner is for the foundation of a political theory, that narrows down the range of potential identities to things that can participate in a polity or an informal community. By "participate" I mean minimally that they can guide their actions by some externally prescribed norms. This range includes, potentially, living and nonliving things, but essentially, I argue, it requires a thing that has mental states, including intentions, beliefs, and desires, and that can take in action-guiding rules or norms.¹⁰ To do such things, the self must be able to reflect on how its actions appear to others so that it can determine if its actions adhere to the norms. For political

⁸ Seena Eftekhari, *Constructivism and the Liberal Dilemma* (University of Kansas: PhD Dissertation, 2018), p.123. He is discussing here the work of Jeremy Waldron, *The Right to Private Property* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 177–80.

⁹ Vallentyne and Van der Vossen ("Libertarianism") argue that self-ownership provides a starting point for a theory of justice. Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen argue that self-ownership provides a foundation for rights. See Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Self-Ownership," *The Good Society* 12, no. 3, Symposium: Natural Law and Secular Society (2003): 50–57.

¹⁰ Daniel Dennett discusses and defends six necessary conditions for moral personhood: rationality, intentionality, the ability to attribute intentionality or take an intentional stance toward the purported person, the capacity for reciprocity, the ability to verbally communicate, and self-consciousness. In this essay my arguments concerning the metaphysics of the self-owner concern aspects of at least the first five of these. See Daniel C. Dennett, "Conditions of Personhood," in Amelie Oksenberg Rorty ed., *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 175–96.

participation to be fuller still, the self must also be able to reflect on the norms themselves and to determine whether others are adhering to the norms. Such things are just what I shall mean by “persons.” Without having attributable mental states, a thing cannot participate in a polity or a social group. Furthermore, the value of things without mental states must come from being valued by things that have mental states.

Finally, consider what it means to be an owner. Minimally it is 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. A “claim,” as I use the term here, is a morally laden concept. Having a claim is to have a justification, a reason that others recognize as legitimate. Making a claim, using, and possessing all require mental states, which, as I have said, is what in part constitutes persons. Based on our pragmatic need in political theory for the concept, and what that entails, then, a self-owner must be a moral person, a thing that desires, acts, judges, and intends, and that can take in and respond to norms.

Persons, then, are not the same thing as their bodies, “in the natural sense,” as Cohen puts it. Persons have mental states, including ideas that could also be said to at least partially constitute their personal identity, and these ideas can conflict with aspects of their bodily reality. Transgender persons, for instance, self-identify as a gender different from what has been attributed to them by a naturalistic understanding of their bodies. Thus, their ideas or mental states contradict their attributed natural bodily identities. While we once privileged the attributed natural bodily identity in identifying persons, now it is commonplace that we privilege persons’ (genuinely) self-proclaimed identities. For example, persons are commonly permitted to choose the pronouns by which they will be referenced. One of the things that we can learn from the testimony of transgendered persons is that gender identity can be a constitutive aspect of the self, that one can feel one’s gender identity as deeply as one’s sexuality or even rationality, that it is an essential way of being in the world.¹¹ The evidence for this claim is the testimony of some transgender persons that they are *mis-identified*, not just mis-described, when someone attributes the wrong gender to them. Gender is a socially defined attribute, connected no doubt to natural attributes of bodies and natural reproductive functions, but not reducible to or determined by those natural attributes.¹² This is not to say that gender is or is not an essential feature of the self. Although Charlotte Witt has argued for this claim,¹³ I won’t take a stand on that here. This argument from the

¹¹ Talia Mae Bettcher, “Full-Frontal Morality: The Naked Truth About Gender,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (2012): 319–37. Talia Mae Bettcher, “When Selves Have Sex: What the Phenomenology of Trans Sexuality Can Teach About Sexual Orientation,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 61, no. 5 (2014): 605–20.

¹² Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 2 (2014): 383–406.

¹³ Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

social construction of gender is only meant to show that the self cannot be naturalistically construed to be identical with its body.

Moral personhood involves attributes other than bodies, however. Namely, to be a person is to be enmeshed in a web of social relations. As social beings, we guide ourselves and each other through an emergent normative framework that we create collectively through our individual behavior in social interactions. We learn that things and states of affairs can be judged as good or bad to others and to ourselves from our earliest interactions with others, and these judgments are honed and shaped to create a constantly evolving framework for understanding our world. Each of us comes into existence and learns to engage in normative practices through an already existing and continually evolving normative framework. This emergent normative framework allows us to distinguish things and states of affairs as better or worse in multiply nuanced ways. Through these distinctions we come to see things as desirable, to choose and to intend to bring about some states and avoid others. This is not just a contingent explanation of how subjecthood comes about. To be a subject is to be able to produce meaningful thoughts, desires, intentions, and actions. Only a normative framework can make this possible. Therefore there must be a pre-existing normative framework to become a subject.

Contingently, for human subjects, families and communities provide the structure within which we understand the world through the language, institutions, and social norms they provide for us. Although persons respond to these structures in individual and unique ways,¹⁴ those reactions make sense only within and through the senses and meanings that these structures allow. Our choices only become choices rather than just random behaviors through the meanings that social structures provide.¹⁵ Social institutions are always already there; we then take them and make our individual contributions to the norms and institutions we live with that alter them for our collective future.

Self-owner libertarians need not hold that selves essentially have or are bodies. The libertarian does not deny that there are mental and social aspects of the self. The importance of the bodily aspect of the self in libertarian thought has traditionally been that through the ownership of one's body, one comes to own property through one's labor. Some forms of labor are purely intellectual, and all labor involves some intentional activity, after all. But when we acknowledge these mental and social aspects of

¹⁴ Persons with disabilities may be unable to fully master language or communication, but if conscious at all, most are able to respond to communicative cues and body language in regular ways that can be seen both as norm-guided and as norm-guiding.

¹⁵ This point has been made persuasively by, among many others, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1962 [1927]); Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

the self, we come to see the self as something more complicated than the conception of the self that is invoked in the literature on self-ownership. As I have just argued, the self that is a person is enmeshed in a normative framework that is socially created and maintained.

Self-owner libertarians might even prioritize the mental over the physical. One plausible libertarian view of the self of self-ownership is that it is the rational self whose intentions are guided by rational choice theory. Peter Vallentyne, whose left-libertarianism is less devoted to securing property rights in the world, holds this view.¹⁶ On this view, the capacity to form intentions is an essential aspect of the self; we do not have a subject, a self who owns without intentions. That makes sense as a minimal condition of selfhood for a political theory, because it seems to be the minimal condition for a self that could act or be held responsible. Yet, this view does not save the unencumbered atomistic conception of the self-owner. Allowing that intentions are essential to selves brings with it much richer metaphysical commitments. Because the self is in part constituted by its intentions, and intentions require a normative framework that allows judgments of proper/improper, true/false, apt/inapt, better/worse, and the like, the self must essentially be enmeshed in such a normative framework. Social connections are therefore also fundamental to its metaphysical constitution.

Furthermore, rationality is itself a normative practice, and we require social connection to engage in it. Practical rationality requires intentions to act in order to bring about our desired ends. I form belief B that performing act A will bring about desired state S, and so I do A. We have no beliefs and desires without thoughts about what they are and what they mean for us, and these interpretive moves immediately bring in social and linguistic norms. Things and states only become meaningful for us as desirable through our language and habits of thought that we learn in a social world of others who make that language available to us.

If the very meanings of our thoughts, desires, and actions are constituted socially, then even rational subjects, which must have meaningful thoughts, desires, and actions, are essentially social. To be a lone self is not to be able to behave in meaningful ways. Selves must then exist in connection with other selves, like a node in a web of connection, where these connections are linguistic, normative, and interactively evolving. The atomistic individual self, who can stand alone and have beliefs, desires, and intentions without any socially provided meaning or guidance, is therefore a conceptual impossibility.

The libertarian might respond that while the atomistic individual is a literal falsehood, we can take it to be an ideal concept for our theory of

¹⁶ Peter Vallentyne offered this view in his commentary on my presentation of "Towards a Feminist Libertarian Metaphysics: A Critique of the Self-Ownership Thesis," Central APA Division Meeting, Kansas City, March 1, 2017.

justice. The node can be extracted from the web as the most essential and important element. But in what sense is the atomistic individual an ideal? One might respond that it is primary normatively—more important than the connections in which it is enmeshed. Yet if the connections, the normative framework, make possible meaning and intention, and it is the meaning and intention that make a self-owner intrinsically valuable, then it is arbitrary to insist that the framework is separable from the self-owner. It is arbitrary to disconnect the framework as if it does not matter morally, since it is essential to the constitution of the self. Furthermore, a political theory that treats the self separated from the framework as fundamental will ignore fundamental needs of selves. Yet meeting those needs is, at least in part, what a political theory is for.

Sometimes ideals in science provide us with simpler forms that are literally false but allow tractable computations, and their value is to be seen in the predictions that the resulting scientific theory allows. Interpreted in this way the value of the atomistic individual is to be seen in the value of the overall theory it provides. But since the abstraction of the atomistic individual is precisely to ignore its connections to others, and the (or at least one) upshot of the theory is that we may (morally speaking) ignore unchosen connections to others, we cannot take the resulting self-owner libertarian theory's rejection of unchosen obligations to be a non-question begging result.

The Weberian concept of ideal type is perhaps most appropriate to invoke here. Ideal types are fictions, laden with subjective values. As a libertarian ideal, the ideal of the atomistic individual is quite self-consciously laden with values such as freedom and individual autonomy. But if we take the atomistic self-owner to be a subjective moral ideal, then we need to investigate the moral presuppositions and theories that underlie the claim that it is an ideal. Why should we take the self-owner libertarian understanding of the free, autonomous individual to be the Weberian ideal, when there are competing theories of relational autonomy that value the individual-in-connection? Again, it is question-begging to insist that the atomistic individual is the starting point of theory.

Perhaps it will be suggested that the way in which the atomistic self is an ideal is that it could ideally exist as a subject without others, like Robinson Crusoe on the island. But what created him as a plausible, conceivable subject is the set of relations that constitute him as a rational, intending being. Robinson Crusoe comes to the island with a fully formed, socially created, normative framework; he is not conceivable as a desiring, intending, judging being without some such socially created framework.¹⁷ These relations are social, even if the society that created them ceased to exist.

¹⁷ One might object that a computer algorithm could be programmed with a normative framework inserted into it and thus constitute a counterexample. But this just means that the normative framework is that of the programmer whose framework was socially created.

The norms that continue to guide Rob's thinking are social norms. Even if Rob alters and adapts them as he goes, so that they ultimately even conflict with his former norms, the normative framework in which he contemplates changing them, making them better, is a framework of social norms. He cannot kick them away because his very subjecthood is constituted by them. If he loses them completely, say by suffering amnesia, he cannot create new norms without the guidance of other norms. Norms are essentially social; and selves are essentially constituted by norms.

To summarize what I have argued to this point: the self is constituted in part by its relations with others and the framework of social norms which give its actions and intentional states meaning. The atomistic individual represented by the unencumbered, libertarian self-owner is not conceptually coherent, and therefore it is a mistake to try to ground a political philosophy on that foundation. In the next section I will argue that this normative framework is made possible by the causal framework of social interaction that biologically and socially supports human beings as intentional agents. Though many particular causal processes are possible, certain types of causes must be present to give rise to human beings who can be self-owners, and this makes those types of processes morally significant.

III. THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MATERIAL CONSTITUTION OF HUMAN CONNECTION

My goal in this section is to argue that because moral persons—persons capable of being self-owners—are metaphysically constituted as selves in connection with others, the material, causal conditions that are necessary to support such connections become morally significant as well. Furthermore, we can distinguish between those material forms that support persons who can be mere self-owners and those that support autonomous self-owners. These latter ones, which support a more valuable form of selfhood, are morally better, and better able to achieve the ideals of liberty that are valued in liberal and libertarian thought.

As I argued in the previous section, we are metaphysically reliant on some web of meaning-making, norm-guiding connections, but as the diversity of human ways of life on earth reveals, there are many possible webs and they can be materially embodied in alternative ways. Gish Jen writes about the differences between broadly Western individualistic and broadly Asian holistic conceptions of the self or personality.¹⁸ She describes the Western personality as like an avocado pit, focusing inward on its large central core and possessing an impermeable, leathery covering, while the Asian personality is the “flexi-self” that bends and adapts its preferences and intentions to support the needs of its community. She argues

¹⁸ Gish Jen, *The Girl at the Baggage Claim* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).

that these differences correspond with different ways of perceiving the world. While those with a more big-pit, individualistic personality tend to abstract objects from the background, those with more holistic, flexi-selves see the context and connections among objects.¹⁹ The big-pit selves, then, are more likely to conceive of themselves as independent selves, separable from others. But this is at best a temporary achievement of apparent social independence.

Despite the differences in how much their societies recognize and explicitly value the social connections between individuals, both big-pit selves and flexi-selves require networks of social norms and language for meaning, as well as physical and social support to achieve their preferred way of life. Though individuality, innovation, and competitiveness are valued more highly in some cultures, these are nonetheless themselves socially instilled and supported values, just as the values of modesty, respect for tradition, and hospitality are in others. Whatever set of values are most highly recognized and supported, they are instilled in individuals through the language, gestures, and familial, educational, and economic structures of the society. While someone can be adopted into a new community and develop a radically different set of ways of thinking about themselves and their connections with others, there must be some set that provides at least an initial framework within which one sees oneself as a node in a network of relations. Once enmeshed in some set, that particular set takes on a greater significance for many of us; we come to see ourselves as naturally that kind of self.

Our selves become who they are by being embedded in some particular materially embodied set of relations among selves. Because we are physical, biological beings we have generally definable physical, biological needs that provide causal thresholds for our survival. We need to be able to survive a certain amount of time in order to become biologically instantiated social beings that behave according to norms. Each of us is a biological locus of individual survival, growth, development, and ultimately, death. We are also each a source of thoughts, claims, and normative guidance. We also need to have viable social forms in order to develop languages and to communicate norms with each other. Thus, there are threshold needs for a physically instantiated being to become a node among the connected selves of a community. These requirements are morally and politically significant because they are requirements for creating and sustaining morally valuable beings. A society can be judged by its capacity for sustaining us within the thresholds necessary for us to be connected self-owners.

One might object that even if the metaphysical argument for connected selves succeeds, the material conditions of connection are not morally or politically essential. In one sense, this is true: if there are other ways of instantiating the intrinsically valuable, abstract, connected selves that can

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

populate a polity, then the possible conditions of such material instantiation are not essential. But given that human beings can be these valuable selves under the right material and social conditions means that such conditions do have moral significance. Insofar as the conditions create and support valued forms of life for moral persons, they are themselves morally valuable. Insofar as the conditions fall short of such support, then they stand in need of change.

These broad thresholds allow a great deal of variation, however, in the ways of life that can support connected self-owners, as the history of humanity clearly shows. There is a wide variety of types of nutrition and shelter that have sustained human life and ongoing, evolving communities of linguistically interacting beings, depending in part on physical environment and in part on levels of technological sophistication. Social and political forms vary across time and space at least as much, with many different ways of coordinating and enforcing interactions between and among persons that have successfully sustained human interaction across multiple generations.

While there are minimal biological and social thresholds for mere survival, we have more exacting needs in order to flourish as autonomous individuals. Without relying too heavily on any particular theory of autonomy, we can say that, minimally, autonomy requires the ability to see oneself as an originator of desires, beliefs, and claims. As I have argued, selves are connected through the language and social norms that make our thoughts intentional and meaningful. Thus, no one node in the interconnected web of norms could be seen as *the lone originator*; connected selves are rather contributors and participants in the making and giving of normative guidance. If a connected self is only a taker of norms, completely at the command of others and in thrall to the given normative framework in conceiving her world and acting within it, then she is not an autonomous connected self. To be an autonomous connected self requires that one see oneself as such a contributor and participant in creating and maintaining the social web of norms.²⁰ And therefore the framework itself must at least allow each node to become such a reciprocal participant. 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.

In summary, there are biological and social conditions that enable human beings to become connected selves, and these conditions can vary within a wide but definite range. Since connected selves hold intrinsic value, the material and social conditions that can create the network of connected selves are morally significant. We can evaluate a social order according

²⁰ Andrea Westlund, "Rethinking Relational Autonomy," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 26–49.

to its ability to sustain connected selves. Furthermore, social orders can create more or less autonomous connected selves, and therefore can be evaluated by the degree to which the order sustains autonomy. In the next section I argue that this social framework that constitutes connected selves creates for them both moral claims and unchosen obligations.

IV. RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS OF THE CONNECTED SELF-OWNER

We come now to my main purpose for investigating the metaphysics of connected self-ownership, which is to explore the positive and negative obligations that we, as connected self-owners, have toward others. I have argued that connected self-owners are the proper foundation for political theory, and that they are essentially constituted as intentionally acting beings connected to others within a web of social norms. I have also argued that the social connections that allow the development of autonomous individuals have value and should be fostered. On the basis of these two values, I argue that we can support at least two unchosen obligations, one negative and one positive, that we accrue by virtue of our metaphysical essence as connected self-owners.

Consider first how self-owner libertarians who begin from the atomistic notion of the self-owner derive a negative obligation not to encroach on other selves. The notion of ownership provides the key: we have an obligation not to violate the private property rights of others, and the self is taken to be the private property of the self.²¹ If the self is completely untethered to other selves, as the atomistic self is taken to be, then the self has clear boundaries without any essential connections to others. Owning a self is owning a physically and metaphysically separable entity that all others can be excluded from.²² Therefore, ownership rights of atomistic, unencumbered selves can be construed as rights to exclude all others from one's separable self.

The connected self is constituted in part by its relations and connections to others, however. Thus, ownership of a self involves ownership (in a sense yet to be specified) of these relations and connections. Yet those relations and connections are likewise owned by others, and hence they cannot be excluded from participation in those relations and connections. These relations and connections are collectively owned. So it does not follow simply from a claim to ownership of property in the self that all others are excluded from encroaching upon one self by another. If there is to be

²¹ I am not endorsing the assumption of a natural right to ownership, simply describing the form of the argument given by the self-owner libertarian.

²² This idea of the physical and metaphysical separability of the owned self explains why the questions of abortion rights and maternal bodily integrity are complicated for the self-owner libertarian. The pregnant woman is not fully separable from the fetus, and so if the fetus is taken to be itself a self-owner, then can the pregnant woman be taken to be a full self-owner, and if so, whose ownership rights prevail?

an argument for negative obligation not to harm aspects of connected selves, they must come from some source other than private ownership rights over a separable self.

A connected self is logically both individually identifiable as a node and socially enmeshed within the web of normative connections to others. Because we value the human connected self, and these two aspects are not metaphysically separable, we must value both aspects of it if we value the whole. We can't say "I'll take the node but not the connections," since the node is not a subject without them (even if they exist only as memories). And we can't say "I'll take the connections but not the nodes," since the connections wither and disappear without the sustaining nodes. So, let us begin with an identifiable node in the web, the person, who, while essentially connected, inhabits a biologically separable body and has separable mental states. This biological and mental separability means that the node can cease to exist without the rest of the web ceasing to exist, which is just to say that individual persons can die. However, death of a node in the web weakens the web in the sense that the normative guiding that would have been supplied by that individual no longer contributes to the development and maintenance of norms. Furthermore, individual persons can be damaged physically or psychologically so that they can no longer continue to participate in the web of normative connections.

Death of or damage to the normative capacities of the individual connected self-owner is a loss not only to the person who dies but also to those others who are and who value their connections through the normative framework. These inevitable losses allow one to derive an obligation not to violate the physical or psychological integrity of the person to the point where the person is unable to be a full participant in the normative web of connected selves. How one chooses to derive the obligation will depend on the favored theory of moral and political obligation. While a full defense of any particular derivation is beyond the scope of this essay, a couple of examples can show how different contractarian moral and political theories might go about deriving the negative obligation. A mutual advantage contractarian would begin from the notion of rational agreement on a set of moral and political rules that allow the affected selves to achieve maximal mutual advantage. Our rational valuing of our own persons and the necessary normative framework for moral personhood would lead us to adopt rules to preserve persons in a state in which we can contribute to the normative framework. A Kantian contractualist could have a more immediate route through the assumption of the duty to respect persons.²³ In either case, the ultimate value that rational contractors seek to preserve is the connected self, the node of a normative web that gives and receives normative guidance.

²³ Consider Jean Hampton, "Feminist Contractarianism," in *A Mind of One's Own*, Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt, eds., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993) as an example of this kind of contractarian view.

Political theory grounded in the connected self-owner thus can derive a similar obligation to that of the libertarian conclusion from self-ownership. Both theories claim to derive a negative duty to refrain from violating the bodily integrity of others without their express consent. For connected selves, mental consciousness is also necessary to participate in that normative web, and this can be destroyed by sufficiently traumatic psychological harm. Thus, we also derive an obligation not to violate the psychological integrity of persons.

However, the degree and kind of violation that is prohibited differs. Since the libertarian self-owner is an atom, with clear boundaries that separate the self from other selves, even incidental touching is proscribed. The connected self-owner on the other hand has fuzzier boundaries and essential connections to and relations to others. What makes her a moral person is at least in part her relations and connections to a community that forms her normative framework. The negative obligation not to harm others comes from the disvalue of the loss of connections. She can thus tolerate some incidental touching or jostling that is a normal part of community life. Examples that cause the libertarian to accept some unintuitive conclusions, such as minimally toxic levels of pollution or the small risk of planes flying overhead,²⁴ do not pose the same problems for my view. The connected self-owner does not derive protection of bodily integrity from a private property ownership right over a clearly separable entity. The value of creating a social community that sustains autonomous persons underpins the argument for individual bodily integrity, but this allows us to value other things that enable community as well, such as levels of risk that we agree to tolerate in order to move about freely. The connected self-owner need not put up with violations of her integrity that damage her ability to become an autonomous connected self, since this is the valuable thing that is to be preserved. Thus, oppressive, physically violent and psychologically damaging practices and violent crime are strictly prohibited. Of course, drawing the line between these cases of minimal risk and prohibited invasion will be tricky in some cases, and will require us to have a theory of oppression.²⁵ But that is beyond the scope of what I can do here.

Let us now turn to the question of positive obligation. As we have said, there are biological and social requirements with thresholds that must be met for the survival of the individual person as a connected self-owner. These requirements go beyond the need not to be actively damaged or destroyed by an external force and include needs to obtain nourishment or shelter even when we cannot do so through our own actions. To become

²⁴ David Sobel, "Backing Away from Self-Ownership," *Ethics* 123 (2012): 32–60, 35. See also Peter Railton, "Locke, Stock, and Peril: Natural Property Rights, Pollution, and Risk," in his *Facts, Values, and Norms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 187–225, at 219.

²⁵ Naturally, I would point to my own theory, presented in *Analyzing Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) to fill this gap.

and remain a connected self-owner we need social interaction that allows us to enter a linguistic and normatively rich social world. For each of us at some point in our lives, this requires caring others to reach out to us to help and offer support. The self-owner libertarian is not able to derive any obligation to supply support to others unless such support is required by a previously voluntarily chosen obligation. For example, choosing to be a parent engenders such a positive obligation to one's children, while simply passing by a needy stranger does not. Can we derive more than the negative obligation to refrain from damaging or destroying the connected self-owner? For example, can we derive a positive duty to rescue others when they are in grave danger? Or to nourish or care for those who are unable to nourish or care for themselves?

The notion of the connected self is too minimal a normative notion to derive such an obligation. However, taking the connected self as the starting point rules out the libertarian strategy of using atomistic self-ownership as an obstacle to such an obligation. What I mean is that beginning from the atomistic self-owner forces us to see positive obligation as an encroachment upon the boundaries of the self, on its ability to control its destiny, its autonomy. To overcome that strong claim against encroachment requires an equally strong claim to provide such a justification: a clash with another self's boundary, for instance, which one has a negative obligation to avoid; or the value to the self of having one's voluntary commitments respected, which upholds individual autonomy. By contrast, the connected self-owner is not separated from others, but rather shares connections and relations. Autonomy consists not in the ability to control one's destiny but in the ability to be a full contributor to the normative framework within which one lives. Thus, the requirement that obligation must be voluntarily entered into does not avoid or preserve encroachment for the connected self. We inevitably share in each others' lives in ways that make protection against encroachment impossible, and in many cases, undesirable. Instead what connected self-owners require in order to be autonomous is the ability to be a full participant in the normative framework, not the ability to voluntarily enter into any assigned obligation.

The web of social connection that consists in the linguistic, behavioral, epistemic, and affective norms that form the web within which connected selves interact and live meaningful lives is an essential aspect of the intrinsically valuable connected self. This suggests that there is some obligation to support the web as well as the other connected-self nodes who populate one's community. The connected self is not a self without this web in which it participates. However, unlike with the node in the web, not every fiber in the web of norms is essential to the existence of the connected self. One norm could change: we could change the timing of the hours of the normal working day, for example, and nothing terribly bad would happen. Further, many different sets of norms could create and sustain the connected self, and the other selves that form a part of any

given connected self's community could also be different. We cannot say of any other part of the normative web that, but for its existence, the node could not be sustained.

Nonetheless, to be a connected self-owner requires normatively rich connections to others. Because connected self-owners are intrinsically valuable, and their lives are most valuable to them when they are autonomous, those kinds of communities that support and maintain autonomous connected selves are the most valuable. Only connected self-owners can create and maintain these communities, and connected selves only exist sustainably within some framework or other. Again, then, there is a significant loss of value for those who are oppressed by the community norms, and those who value the contributions of the oppressed persons. Unless there is a generally accepted obligation to avoid oppressive normative frameworks, then, one runs a risk of finding oneself in a non-autonomy producing, oppressive community and either being among the oppressed or experiencing the loss of value from oppression of others. On either of the contractarian theories previously mentioned, connected self-owners ought rationally agree to assigning an obligation to create and maintain autonomy-producing normative frameworks, either to maximize mutual advantage or to preserve and respect each other as autonomous persons.

There are several points to note, then, about this obligation. First, there is no duty to participate in and maintain any particular community. The duty to uphold connections is imperfect because we can become autonomous connected selves in many different normative frameworks. Second, there is no duty whatsoever to maintain a framework in which a connected self is treated in ways that destroy her autonomy. Oppressive communities deny some people the respect and dignity required to be full participants in the construction of the normative framework. They are held to its norms without being able to shape the norms to better suit them and their interests. Thus, when the connections are oppressive or even simply against one's (connected) self-interest, the positive obligation to support the community is defeasible.

This may seem to be a rather weak conclusion about positive obligation. But I have two responses to this worry. First, it is important to see the strong contrast with the libertarian view, in which there are no positive obligations of the atomistic self-owner unless they are voluntarily entered into. Second, while this may seem to be too minimal of a positive obligation to others, much more can be said about what we owe each other if we combine this account of the connected self-owner with a full theory of moral and political obligation and a theory of oppression. The connected self-owner is simply the foundation for such a political theory.

In sum, let us enumerate the benefits of connected self-ownership over atomistic self-ownership in terms of the moral and political foundation it can provide. First, it is a metaphysically accurate portrayal of the self.

Second, by not allowing oppressive social connections, it also solves the problem of selling oneself into slavery or into death.²⁶ Third, the theory of connected self-ownership does not engender trivial infringement cases. Finally, we are able to generate a positive, imperfect duty to create and maintain a normative framework in which autonomous, connected selves can thrive.

V. CONCLUSION

The non-libertarian by now is wondering why we should bother with the concept of self-ownership at all. After all, the concept of ownership in the context of a self owning itself has long generated critique and controversy.²⁷ The value of the concept of self-ownership has been seen to be the preservation of a zone of individuality and independence from constraint by others. But if these qualities are brought into question, then what is the remaining value of the concept of connected self-ownership for moral and political philosophy?

This essay has not concentrated on the “ownership” side of the concept, and to do so would require additional study and critique. However, briefly and by way of a conclusion, I see several potential benefits to retaining the notion of ownership in the concept of connected self-ownership. First, by retaining the notion of ownership, we retain the idea that the connected self has claims over some aspects of itself. Second, it preserves the idea that the node of the web in which the self is located is of primary moral importance even though it is connected to others. Third, the idea of a connected self-owner suggests that ownership 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. Finally, it is a traditional way of looking at our relationship to ourselves.²⁸ Self-possession is considered a virtue or at least a complement, and that is related to our valuing our own self-government or autonomy, and that of others.

The self has been fundamental to all different forms of liberal political philosophy because of what has been seen as the normative value of individual human life. In arguing for a connected self as the metaphysically defensible understanding of what it is to be a human individual, we need

²⁶ Robert S. Taylor, “Self-Ownership and the Limits of Libertarianism,” *Social Theory and Practice* 31, no. 4 (2005): 465–82.

²⁷ See Alan Ryan, “Self-Ownership, Autonomy, and Property Rights,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11 (1994): 241–58; also Carole Patemen, “Self-Ownership and Property in the Person: Democratization and a Tale of Two Concepts,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no.1 (2002): 20–53.

²⁸ As we have seen, Locke embraces this way of speaking about persons. According to Richard Tuck as cited in Attracta Ingram, *A Political Theory of Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18, it goes back at least to the fourteenth century.

not give up normative individualism. Rather, I believe that liberal theory can be re-conceived to situate the connected self at the center, which simply forces us to see that human connection is not optional, even while there are many choices that can be made about the forms those connections will take.

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