OWNERSHIP, EGO, AND SHARING

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As my title suggests, I would like to think about alternatives to private ownership in terms of sharing. Sharing can take many forms and includes voluntary lending, contractual renting, gift-giving, pooling and allocation of resources, authorized use of public property, and unauthorized use by theft or trespass. There are also many different things that we can share; not only places and things, but also people and animals (to the extent they ours to share), as well as our ideas, values, time, and affection or animosity toward one another. I don't mean by the term share that by simple coincidence we "share" a common language, place of birth, or set of experiences. These are all involuntary coincidences that do not depend on volitional sharing. Instead, I mean the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and the act and process of receiving something from others for our use. The distribution may or may not make the access to things more equal and the receipt of shared goods may be for an indefinite or prescribed period of time, and may be for our exclusive use or for use by us as well as others. As givers we may share what we feel is ours and by this act of sharing, others come to feel that it is at least partly theirs. Givers and receivers of that which is shared can be individuals or groups, sometimes even very large groups.

Sharing is a culturally learned behavior. The same is true of possession and ownership (Furby 1976). In the West, children learn about possession and ownership first and not only learn to share as they get older, but also learn moral standards of social justice and what is fair (Furby 1978). However this is not a universal pattern. Because of their nomadic heritage, Australian Aborigines appear to learn sharing at an earlier age and more thoroughly than they learn possessiveness (Gould 1982; Testart 1987). Possessions are a burden in a nomadic society. Sharing is imperative for survival. The vestigial and strongly ingrained sharing ethos among Aborigines led to a number of problems following the introduction of automobiles (Gerrard 1989) and European private property laws in Australia (Maddock 1972).

Sharing is an interpersonal process and is sanctioned and prescribed by culture. Sharing by a giver can be judged as generous or stingy, altruistic or selfish, and fair or unfair, all according to cultural norms. Being the recipient of sharing can create feelings of gratitude or feelings of hostility. We can feel that we have gotten our fair share, more than our fair share, or less than our fair share. Sharing can reduce envy and create feelings of community or it can create dependency and foster feelings of inferiority. When someone shares with us, we can perceive their action as a sincere effort to please us or an insincere sop designed to pacify and placate us (Foster 1972). Sharing can take place under conditions of excess, but it can also occur under conditions of insufficiency. We may share broadly with anyone and everyone or narrowly within a couple, a family, or a business corporation.

Impediments to Sharing

For there to be sharing there must first be feelings of possession, if not ownership. Otherwise we have nothing to share and all things are held in common and available to anyone who wishes to use them. The latter context is a fascinating one that can be examined in the history of communes, kibbutzim, cooperatives, and communism, but I will not explore these institutions here. We can come to feel possessive about and have a sense of ownership toward things that are not ours in a legal sense—a panoramic view, our children, a seat in a classroom, and even our beliefs (Abelson 1986). If ownership allows sharing, feelings of possessiveness and attachment toward the things we own or possess discourage sharing (Belk 1992; Klein and

Baker 2004; Schultz, Kleine, and Kernan 1989; Sivadas and Venkatesh 1995; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). To the extent that we feel a possession is a part of our extended self, we are more likely to retain it (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). For example, the more we cathect or feel that a particular bodily organ is a part of our identity, the less willing we are to become an organ donor or pledge to donate the organ in the future (Belk 1987, 1990). The same unwillingness to share takes place for other possessions that are felt to be a part of self as well.

Another factor that inhibits sharing is materialism. Materialism is defined as the importance a person attaches to possessions and at the highest levels amounts to the belief that possessions are the key source of happiness or unhappiness in life (Belk 1985). One of three operational components in this conception of materialism is non-generosity, suggesting a partial explanation for why those who are more materialistic are also less willing to share. Although materialism is a socially undesirable trait and is almost uniformly condemned, it appears to be inescapable in contemporary consumer cultures. Ger and Belk (1999) found that although informants in Turkey, the US, northern Europe, and Romania all said that materialism is bad, shallow, and leads to unhappiness, they were also likely to want a higher salary, a nicer house, a newer car, and other apparently materialistic things. In order to resolve this paradox, members of each culture found a different way to justify or excuse their desires and to characterize them as non-materialistic. The Americans said that they worked hard and **deserved** these things as a reward. Romanians also said they deserved these objects of the "good life" because they had been **deprived** during years of harsh communism and now needed to try to catch up with the rest of the world. The Turks explained that these things weren't really so much for them as for their children who would be **disadvantaged** if they didn't have, for example, a color television set. And the northern Europeans said that it wasn't they who were the materialists, it was instead the Americans. The Americans, they said, spend their money on stupid gadgets, whereas the European informants claimed that they have far better **taste**. They know how to spend their money on good food, good wine, good travel, and other fine things in life; and that, they argued, isn't materialistic at all. Thus, we are very clever at finding ways to justify indulging ourselves materialistically rather than sharing our money and possessions with others. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Christmas (called the first global consumer holiday – Miller 1993) has changed from an occasion of predominantly charitable giving to one involving giving primarily within the household.

Another impediment to sharing is the perception that resources are scarce and if we share what is ours we may experience a lack of something we might have enjoyed. Consider the case of fine art. It might be argued that there is only so much truly fine art and that even apart from its unaffordability, there is simply not enough to go around. But public art museums provide one way in which we share art masterpieces with the masses. Nevertheless, it could be said that a Rembrandt painting that is locked up in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is essentially inaccessible to the population of Bangladesh. Still, this argument doesn't hold either because we can provide inexpensive copies of the Rembrandt original to people in Bangladesh or anywhere else on the planet. This is what André Malraux (1967) proposed in his book *Museum Without Walls*. We could also create copies of sculptures and other plastic works of art and this is something the Boston Museum of Fine arts did at an earlier stage in its history (DiMaggio 1982). Eventually however the reproductions were relegated to the basement and only originals were put on public display. One reason may be found in Walter Benjamin's (1968) lament that we lose the "aura" of the original when we substitute a mechanical reproduction. Another explanation however is that we lose the status-conferring power of the scarce original when we attempt to substitute a reproduction, forgery, fake, or counterfeit (the latter terms implying that there is also something sinister with the copy). Because we have come to accept and insist upon the authentic original, fine art collectors need not worry about the deflation of the value of their works of art as reproductions appear freely on the Internet, in books, or on postcards. Thus, while we may share in consuming the image of the original, we still sense that we lack access to the "real thing." Accordingly, someone who visits the Egyptian reproductions at the Luxor resort and casino in Las Vegas likely cannot claim the same status and cultural capital as someone who has visited the original Luxor in Egypt. And both people likely can claim greater status and cultural capital than someone who has seen only pictures of either location.

Incentives to Share

Incentives to Share Intangibles

Despite such impediments to sharing, sharing occurs in virtually all cultures. In order to appreciate how and why sharing may take place within a particular culture, consider first the culture of academic scholarship. We can come to feel possessive about and have a sense of ownership toward things that are not ours in a legal sense—a panoramic view, a seat in a classroom, or "our song." But some the creators of some intangibles like our ideas and designs have come to be vested with legal rights as owners of intellectual property. We claim ownership of our academic ideas by presenting them and publishing them. If we instead borrow "others' ideas," we may be accused of plagiarism. But we are also reluctant to charge money for our academic ideas. To do so suggests that we are seeking to profit from our ideas rather than to freely share them with others. We are less apt to impugn a scholar than a consultant because it is assumed that the consultant is in it for the money whereas the scholar is motivated by the joy of developing and sharing ideas. So we freely participate in a giant potlatch of ideas with our colleagues and students, often from a sincere and joyous desire to share our discoveries, creative theories, and critical interpretations. We are satisfied with the fame or reputation that may result and the people we may inspire in the process, even if we enjoy indirect economic benefits through the promotions and salary increases that may accrue from having a good publication record of original ideas. We can also have a collective sense of self that makes us more comfortable sharing our ideas with doctoral students, who may cite our influence, further our ideas, and perhaps include us as co-authors (or at least as citations) in their publications.

What about sharing our data rather than our ideas (Sieber 1991)? This could make research much easier, eliminate redundant data collection, allow specialists to collect data, and subject our insights to triangulation by multiple others. As much sense as this makes, we are reluctant to share data that we have collected. The most likely reasons are that 1) there just might be something further of value for us to gain from these data, 2) it might help others get ahead of us in research renown, 3) we will not gain the same reputation as sharing the finished products that result from our data collection, and 4) we might look foolish if we miss something that others find. We may be part of a community of scholars, but we would rather that our scholarly neighbors come over and admire our flower garden rather than borrow our seeds, tools, and potting soil.

There are, however, some things that we can share or give away without losing them—a song, a joke, our bodies, things we put up on our web sites, or music files shared on the web. Even with earlier information goods like books, journals, and videos, it is possible to make copies that can be shared freely as well as sold or rented (Varian 2000). Unlike original works of art, these copies are virtually indistinguishable from the originals. With the advent of the Internet and e-mail, some have even suggested that consumerism is being replaced by the gift economy (Pinchot 1995), the hi-tech gift economy (Barbrook 2005), or the society of the gift (Coyne 2005). A prime example is open source software like Linux, to which numerous people contribute source code anonymously and freely for the good of an even greater number of people (Bergquist 2003; Bergquist and Ljungberg 2001). Other examples include music and video file sharing (Giesler forthcoming), software or "freeware" sharing (Raymond 2001), and a variety of virtual communities sharing information and expertise via on-line bulletin boards, chat rooms, and web sites (Barbrook and Cameron 2001; Rheingold 2000).

Coyne (2005) considers four possible motives for giving away our possessions and productions on the Internet. The first is that while we give away the digital equivalent of a song, computer program, photograph, or text file, we still have it. In Annette Weiner's (1992) terms, it is a way of keeping while giving. Or as Coyne (2005) puts it, it is a means of cheap altruism. This is also the economist's argument, based on their belief that there is no real altruism and that considerations of calculated benefits underlie all apparent acts of kindness. The second explanation that Coyne (2005) offers is that this is true altruism and a return to tribal society in a digital age. In this view, the Internet is leading to a global community of sharing, communicating, and giving, with a free flow of information providing equality of access. The third view that Coyne (2005) contemplates is that the Internet precipitates something that has always remained beneath the surface in humans – the primordial and playful gift economy. This perspective argues that commerce is parasitic on the gift economy and that economics is subservient to the gift. Finally, the fourth interpretation of Internet gifts is that they are part of an unsustainable bubble, a momentary transgression from the market economy that is fraught and will likely lead to corruption, graft, exploitation, deception, and theft -- the worst of marketplace excesses. Coyne (2005) labels these alternative explanations of Internet gifts 1) utilitarianism (economic determinism), 2) romantic utopianism, 3) the primordiality of the gift, and 4) transgression. Ultimately he finds some truth to each position, but argues most strongly for the third. If we have not yet achieved a full gift economy of sharing, Coyne suggests that we are heading in that direction.

Possessions not only symbolize the self, they can act as marker goods (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) that symbolize membership in a group or class. The possession of certain goods can also convey status and power by demonstrating our command of what are taken to be scarce resources. And consumer goods may be expressive of lifestyle affiliations, some of which may take on cult-like characteristics centered around a brand such as the cult of Macintosh computer aficionados (Belk and Tumbat 2005). Cult-like followings are also evident among the fans of a particular sports team or musician. What is shared in such cases in not the particular computer, team souvenir, or musical recording but the "brand." In this sense brand sharing is a case of sharing an intangible, even though there are often tangible goods associated with the intangible brand. Expressing a similar affection for this particular brand rather than another, marks us as belonging to a group of kindred spirits. Because brand cult members are apt to enthusiastically proselytize and recruit others to their cause, such an affiliation is an incentive to share. A decline in the number sharing our loyalties is taken as a negative rather than a positive thing. However, to the extent that the cult gains its tenacious following through the members' feelings of minority status, persecution, and uniqueness, it may be possible that it could become too popular to sustain such feelings. Apple's iPod may currently be in jeopardy of such a fate.

Incentives to Share Tangibles

Consider the analogy of school girls or boys sharing clothing. Each student gains an apparently larger wardrobe at no cost other than that of risking damage to their own clothing that is lent out. Each has effectively leveraged her or his lifestyle without increasing her or his wardrobe expenditure. We can also often leverage our lifestyles by leasing instead of buying, at least in the short run. We can drive a higher price (and presumably higher status) automobile by leasing, because at the end of the lease period we are left with a debt rather than an owned asset. RealNetwork's Rhapsody online service allows the user to have digital access to more than a million musical tracks for US$10 per month. But if the user stops paying the subscription fee, access to the music disappears. By renting videos at Blockbuster or Netflix the viewer can see a much larger set of films than they could by spending the same amount of money buying these videos. As long as we accrue the same benefits as ownership conveys, such leveraging through rental or lease makes a great deal of sense.

Wingfield (2005) describes a related trend toward "virtual renting." Virtual renting takes advantage of the increased ease with which consumers can resell merchandise through online auction sites like eBay. Many people "flip" their computers, cell phones, iPods, and sporting gear every few months in order to have the latest and greatest models. They simply put the old one up for auction and get a new one. Callaway Golf clubs company makes the process more direct by offering to replace last year's model with this year's model for a trade-up price that is about 40 percent of the full purchase price. Another example is found in a service called Bag Borrow or Steal that rents designer handbags for a $50 a month fee, with the user being able to trade in for another model anytime they wish (Wingfield (2005). This leveraged lifestyle model may make increasing sense as we increasingly become a "disposable society." It is estimated, for example, that Japanese teenagers replace their mobile phones every three months on average. Some consumers use video games for as little as a weekend before selling them and acquiring others. Others buy music CD's new or used only to "rip" the music to a digital file and immediately resell the original CD.

One exception to our unwillingness to share possessions that are seen as part of our extended self is when the possession involves the more aggregate rather than individual sense of self. In this case there is a willingness, if not an eagerness, to share them within the aggregate group. For example, family heirlooms, as repositories of meanings and stories that contribute to family identity projects, are objects whose transfer to other family members is often carefully planned and rehearsed (e.g., Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000). There are other incentives to share tangible possessions that occur within collectivities. We share income, assets, home, food, and many other possessions within families and households because we feel that our family is a part of our self and that we have a moral responsibility to care for household members. We may belong to larger groups that share possessions in the case of time-share vacation homes, clubs that collectively own recreational equipment like sailboats, cities that share institutions like museums, and nations that share resources like national parks. In each case we feel a sense of aggregate self as a member of these groups and a sense of entitlement to their shared assets. But shared possessions can also defuse the sense of responsibility to care for these things and, without regulation or hired caretakers, the well-known tragedy of the commons can mean that eventually everyone suffers because no one feels it is their responsibility to maintain, clean, and care for the common property of the group.

Conclusions

Some types of sharing may be less desirable than others from a societal or individual perspective. In the United States home ownership rather than renting has been encouraged by tax incentives and today approximately two-thirds of Americans own their own homes (Cohen 2004). From a societal point of view, home ownership has been encouraged because it is thought to forge bonds of attachment to the community and thus promote civil obedience. From an individual perspective home ownership paradoxically creates a sense of independence and identity, and also acts as a long term investment. Nevertheless there remains a neo-Marxist objection that identity should be forged socially rather than through the ownership of things (e.g., Agnew 1981). Furthermore, despite the premise that home ownership builds attachment to community, most Americans no longer socialize with their neighbors (Putnam 2001). We have replaced social security with financial security; trust in money and things has supplanted trust in people, and economic capital has become more important than social capital. We continue to share resources within our nuclear families, but there is less attachment here as well. Former family possessions like the family radio, television, automobile, bathroom, and computer have increasingly been privatized, with members of middleclass households now being more likely to have their own than to share these things with other family members. The family meal is becoming an increasingly rare ritual. Individual bank accounts and credit cards are growing as joint accounts and cards decline. Perhaps it is because of the decline in such intimate shared attachments that we seem to increasingly seek virtual communities online. Ironically we are becoming more likely to share our deepest secrets, insights, information, and loyalties with someone whom we know only by an online pseudonym than our partner and with other members of our family.

There are other things that we also disdain to share. To rent a spouse, at least in terms of sexual services, is denigrated as prostitution. To rent a womb (i.e., a surrogate mother) is also morally problematic in that it introduces profane money into the sacred realm of motherhood (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). To rent a soldier for a mercenary army can also be seen as problematic because it replaces patriotism with mere economic motivation. Such rental decisions are troubling enough where they are mutually agreed upon by informed adults, but they would be far more so if we learned that parents were renting out their children in any of these capacities.

Within the realm of those things that are more socially desirable to share, it is easiest to envision more sharing of intangible goods like information, opinions, images, and ideas, especially when these things are in digital form and we do not lose them by sharing them. But there are limits here as well. As I have argued, academics can only gain credit for their work by freely sharing it. But they are largely unwilling to share their raw data with others. Many of the things we might wish to share are legally protected by intellectual property laws, as illustrated by the prosecution of the music file sharing site, Napster. The film industry is also battling to stop the online distribution of free or inexpensive pirated films. And patents, copyrights, and other legal protections are further impediments to freely sharing many ideas.

With tangible goods there are also many laws to protect private property from sharing, as well as other laws granting free shared access through private lands to beaches, fields, and forests. But the larger barrier to sharing material goods is attitudinal. Materialism, possessive individualism, and the conviction that self identity must be developed by extension into possessions, are all factors that inhibit sharing. Although Inglehart (1981) contends that affluent societies are moving into an age of post-materialism and Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggest that we are becoming an experience economy that values doing over having, there is very little indication that we are ready to sever our attachments to things and become self-defined by our actions alone. There is one form of renting that is benefiting from American materialism, however: self-storage facilities. Not only do such storage facilities house the stuff that has overflowed the capacity of our homes to house it, in southern California there are many cases of people who have become homeless but still pay to have their possessions stored (Clayton 2003). They cling to an identity forged in the crucible of materialism. Those who call for downshifting (e.g., Schor 1998), dematerializing (e.g., Hammerslough 2001), or voluntary simplicity (e.g., Elgin 1998), need to confront the tenacity with which we seem to cling to possessions (see also Boyle 1998).

Interestingly, it is business rather than consumers that seems increasingly ready to rent rather than buy. Virtual corporations retain the right to their intangible brand names, but freely outsource everything else from production to management, marketing, and customer service. The primary reasons that corporations are more willing than consumers to rent rather than buy seem to be financial – it is simply more economical as well as necessary in order to remain competitive. Still, we have seen that, as with leasing an automobile, consumers can also leverage their lifestyles in a similar manner. It seems that the virtual consumer has less allure than the virtual corporation. But there may be lessons to be learned here. There are burdens to possession, as any home owner can attest. With the increasingly rapid pace of technological change we may see a shift from the house advertising appeal of "Why rent when you can buy?" to an appeal more in tune with the rapid pace of technological obsolescence: "Why buy when you can rent?"

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