

## Introduction

### Making sense of human possession

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Death is the issue. Knowing that one day we shall be dispossessed shapes our lives in unique ways. In the broadest and deepest sense, this is what this book is about, as dispossession is the necessary counterpart and defining element of possession. Without the knowledge of losing, we would not have any reasons to control and hold on to things the way we do. It gives us reasons to hope and discover faith, but also to despair and suffer existential angst like no other animal can. This knowledge comes with a sense of awe and absolute puzzlement. It has inspired millions of books, and shaped rituals and artistic expressions since the dawn of humanity. All can be said to revolve around the knowing of our pending dispossession of embodied self-experience.

The bottom line is that human psychology, unlike any other animal psychology, is in essence self-conscious: a psychology whereby subjects constantly reflect and elaborate upon their own value and place in the world, particularly the social world. Arguably, this is unmatched in the animal kingdom. As a case in point, humans are the only species having “fashion instinct,” putting makeup on, wearing clothes, decorating themselves with accessories manifesting insatiable care for their own reputation and what they project to the public eyes. We are the only species self-objectifying through the evaluative eyes of others.

### **Self-consciousness and possession**

This book is about how being the self-conscious creatures we are changes the way we relate to things, how we possess and experience having exclusive control over things, an inclination we share with all other living creatures. It is about how being self-conscious transforms the way we relate both affectively and cognitively to things: the way we get attached to them, how we cherish and fetishize what we own, fighting for it, but also how we are capable of relinquishing exclusive control over things by giving, sharing, or simply being forcefully dispossessed of them.

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The question of interest here is what underlies the human experience of possession. Likewise, and as a necessary counterpart, what underlies the human experience of *dispossession*? Indeed, in order to share one first needs to own. So, what is the interplay between possession and dispossession in the context of human self-conscious psychology?

In an earlier book with the same publisher,<sup>1</sup> I wrote about the social underpinnings of self-consciousness, which I view as a unique human adaptation. Unlike any other, human psychology is both symbolic and self-conscious. These two cardinal characteristics of human psychology are in fact inseparable, supporting each other: in order to be self-conscious one needs to have some capacity to be symbolic, and vice versa. By symbolic I mean the basic ability to be referential in thoughts, capable of holding and manipulating multiple representations about things, the capacity of fathoming that something might stand for something else. Symbolic means the mental ability of going beyond the literality of experience, capable of becoming “meta” and not just *literal* about the world. As part of this symbolic and self-conscious psychology, the goal now is to capture how humans develop their ways of expressing and dealing with possession.

I try to show that we develop specific ways of possessing and organizing our social lives around possessions. There is a necessary counterpart to the human ways of possessing expressed in irrational fears of being dispossessed and losing control over what we own and feel entitled to. As part of the same package, humans also develop devastating envies, insatiable needs for more ownership and control, more power over the environment, be it physical or social. These ways can be pathological and devastating, but also the source of great cultural and legal codifications meant to buffer deleterious effects on group harmony.

### **Onion metaphor**

As a general model, what is proposed here is to look at the phenomenon from a multilayered awareness perspective, what I call the *onion metaphor* of mind states. The idea is simple: in the course of development, as well as in evolution, various levels of awareness emerge or have emerged, piling up on top of each other, like the layers of an onion. Our awareness of the world is made of these various layers through

<sup>1</sup> Rochat, *Others in Mind*.

which we constantly navigate, through being non-conscious, unconscious, aware, co-aware, conscious, or co-conscious. Attached to these layers of awareness are a variety of possible mind states. Mind states are part of the experience of sentient creatures that are not just sensing the world but *feeling it*. I am referring here to creatures that, unlike machines, even minimally experience pain or fear for example – in other words and bluntly put, creatures that have affective life in them. It is within this simple schema that we want to approach the complexity of human possession psychology, particularly from a developmental perspective.

### Facts and ideas about possession

Important works exist on the psychology of possession. They come from a broad array of perspectives including interdisciplinary,<sup>2</sup> marketing/consumerism,<sup>3</sup> organizational/management,<sup>4</sup> or social psychology (social identity and social constructionist views on identity).<sup>5</sup> However, only a few major developmental works exist, primarily from the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Recently a timely resurgence of interest on the topic has occurred from the point of view of infant and child development. New experimental and theoretical takes are proposed.<sup>7</sup> For sure, books and articles abound on topics like attachment, money, property, territoriality, copyrights, etc., but there are few on the psychology of possession with a particular focus on the “origins” question from both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic point of view, particularly from a more phenomenological and developmental perspective.

The book compiles a large body of selected empirical and “falsifiable” facts relevant to the question of what the human experience of possession is made of at its origins and in development. What can be critically seen as less falsifiable is the meaning making of such facts and conceptual ideas that the book primarily intends to provide. The reader should know that this is not a survey textbook providing an exhaustive inventory of findings spanning the “possession field” as a whole. The book instead proposes a fresh look at the topic with the intention of providing

<sup>2</sup> Rudmin, “To own is to be perceived to own.”

<sup>3</sup> Belk, “The ineluctable mysteries of possessions.”

<sup>4</sup> Pierce and Jussila, *Psychological Ownership and the Organizational Context*.

<sup>5</sup> Dittmar, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions*.

<sup>6</sup> Furby, “Possession in humans.”

<sup>7</sup> See Ross and Friedman, “Origins of ownership of property.”

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novel ideas and integration of ideas by digging abundantly and opportunistically into philosophy, biology, sociology, anthropology, and developmental psychology, my own specialty. The goal is *meaning making*, not cataloguing or dressing a laundry list of existing research. It is to make sense of human possession psychology by providing new ontological parsing and a new framing of three main questions: *what makes human possession psychology unique compared to other animals? Where does it come from? What determines it?*

### Possession and morality

Probably the boldest, most provocative idea running through the book is that the human sense of what is right and what is wrong (i.e., shared and explicit morality) could arise from conflicts over possession. Think of it: six of the Ten Commandments are directly linked to issues surrounding possession and exclusive control over things: “Thou shalt not covet, steal, kill, commit adultery, bear false witness, or have other gods.” This is the Old Testament’s vindication that possession, particularly the risk of social disharmony via possession conflicts, is not estranged from the genealogy of morality. This is arguably true from both an evolutionary and a developmental perspective.

In the midst of competition over limited resources, moral principles are necessary requirements for group survival, be they implicit as in the reluctance to kill or engage in incest, or explicit as in the codified systems of retributive justice that exist across human societies. At a very basic level, human moral principles arise from the necessary selective pressure of avoiding conflicts and maintaining social harmony. Once again, these principles can be explicit as in written laws, or implicit as in the normative ways one ought to behave in relation to others. This would be the bottom-line warranty of group preservation and growth of the species, but also the preservation of individuals in relation to their social group.

If we accept that such a broad statement holds some truth, then we can gauge how relevant it is to engage in trying to make sense of the human psychology of possession, and its origins in both evolution and development. Group harmony and harmony of the individual within the group demand some solutions as to *who owns what and why*. It requires some shared principles on how to distribute justice when resources are scarce. Individuals are required to abide by these principles in order to survive and avoid being ostracized as freeriders or bullies. There is indeed an instinctive, innate need to affiliate with others and a universal fear

of being socially rejected, the driving idea of my earlier book *Others in Mind*.

The prevalence of conflicts over possession is an emotional minefield, both in human history and in the life of the developing child. For children and from the outset of their development, these conflicts are rich soil for the early learning of shared values and social norms. Possession conflicts provide the young child with the opportunity to experience and observe most conspicuously normative ways of handling social stress, the active attempts by adults and other peers at restoring group harmony, the enforcement and assertion of shared social practices, etiquettes, and ultimately shared moral principles.

Possession, as we shall see, is unquestionably an important part of social learning, because of what it reveals when conflicts occur, but also because it is in the context of possession that children can learn, in the most conspicuous fashion, normative ways of sharing with others, and hence can learn shared, acceptable (normative) ways of relinquishing and transferring ownership. It is also in this context that children explore, often with playful delight, how to transgress the norms, and the limits of these transgressions within their social group. Last but not least, it is also fertile soil for the development of self-conscious emotions like shame, guilt, or pride.

As already mentioned, in order to share, one needs first to possess. The ways we possess and experience possession, and relinquish it to others via gift, sharing, or any sorts of bartering exchange, is another central theme of the book that can be summarized as *the human psychology of owning and sharing informed by research in child development*.

### **Book summary**

There are three main parts to the book comprising a total of nine chapters. In Part I, basic aspects and principles of human possession psychology are laid out. In a second part, these aspects and principles are reconsidered, but this time specifically from the perspective of child development. Finally, in Part III, possession psychology is considered in relation to culture and context from both an adult and a child perspective. Below is a summary of the book as a whole, chapter by chapter. It is meant to provide an overview of the main ideas. To help the reader, two simple tables are included, providing a synopsis of the main ontological distinctions made in Part I (Psychology) and the developmental “roadmap” discussed in Part II (Development).

*Part I Psychology: principles of human possession***BASIC ONTOLOGICAL DISTINCTIONS**

KINDS OF POSSESSION TRANSFER	KINDS OF OWNERSHIP PRINCIPLES	KINDS OF POSSESSION PATHOLOGY
Violent (theft and usurpation)	Strongest (“lion’s share” and physical strength)	Expulsive (centrifugal dynamics), e.g., gambling
Generous (giving and obliging)	First possession (precedence of control)	Retentive (centripetal dynamics), e.g., hoarding
Agreed (exchanging and reciprocation)	Labor (effort and energy investment)	
	Creation (invention and originality)	
	Familiarity (history and ancestry)	
	Blood (biological relatedness and inheritance)	
	Luck (haphazard and chance windfall)	

Chapter 1 (“Experiencing possession”) discusses possession from a phenomenological (experiential) point of view. The goal is to emphasize the centrality of possession as experienced in our lives, as well as in the mental life of any other animals that live in groups. Etymologically, possession means to throw one’s weight over. At a generic level, possession is thus linked to the forceful experience of gaining control and agency over things. A strong case is made for the basic claim that, in order to possess, one must feel and have emotions. Machines cannot possess because they can only sense but cannot feel. They have no affective lives, nor any mental states. Feeling is indeed different from sensing. Feeling, including the feeling experience of possession, refers ontologically to mental states, and our task as psychologists is to document such states. All social animals qualify and meet criteria for having feeling experience. It does not require higher cortical involvement. The chapter goes on to show that we need to distinguish between implicit (non-conscious, self-contained, or private) and explicit levels of possession experience. These are ontologically different. At the explicit level, the experience of possession is shared and publicly articulated, but not at the implicit. In general, I suggest that the human capacity for feeling experience emerges very early on, with first signs already in the womb, by the middle of gestation. A crucial aspect of possession as feeling experience is *self-evidence*: the immediate

embodied evidence of possessing oneself, the “mine-ness” of experience. Schizophrenia but also drug- and other trance-induced psychosis demonstrate the foundational role of the immediate embodied experience of being the sole possessor of one’s own experience. In healthy feeling creatures like us, there is immediate experiential self-evidence. The chapter goes on to discuss the psychological mechanisms underlying possession as an experience. The mechanisms are construed as combining differentiation, projection, and identification processes. These mechanisms, in general, tend to blur the distinction between the Me and the Mine. The Me–Mine blurring is directly related to experiential phenomena like envy or jealousy, two specific emotions that are directly related to the experience of possession. The chapter then comes back to the basic fact that, from the outset, most conflicts are related to possession (envy and jealousy). It is therefore a fertile soil for the emergence of morality. I propose that possession experience is at the origin of our normative ways of being and sharing with others.

Chapter 2 (“Claiming ownership”) deals with the process by which the experience of possession is objectified in the claim of ownership. The claim of ownership is an active assertion of power and control over things (“That’s mine!”), made public by the mere fact that it is *enacted*, whether this enactment is instinctual or deliberate. At the most basic level, animals enact their feeling of possession in defense and attack postures. The neurobiological control of such enactment evolved from automatic and instinctual responses like freezing, and fight or flight responses, to more complex and inter-subjective regulations in social exchanges and communication. An analogous evolution is observed in child development. In general, animals need to carve secure space, evolving sophisticated ways to build nests and shelters. The instinct to mark and defend territory, as well as progeny and sexual partners, is the most basic and pervasive enactment of possession across species. Against this evolutionary and basic adaptive background, property emerges as a human invention that elevates the claiming of ownership to a formally recognized concept, legislated by implicit (etiquettes) or explicit rules (laws) that are normative and mutually binding to all group members. We are the only species that has created ownership codes. These codes specify in formal terms *who should own what and why*. Such codes, like the original Roman Law, are symbolic tools providing objective rationales for the ruling and arbitration of possession conflicts. From a less formal and motivational point of view, the case is also made that taking ownership is driven by an intensely rewarding and self-aggrandizing experience. It is an intrinsic part of possession psychology, and de facto what amounts to the engine of all economies. Dismissing such pleasures is only ascetic, religious, or

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ideological wishful thinking. In general, in the footsteps of Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith, I argue that greed is the trademark of social (group) psychology. Social harmony and avoidance of the tragedy of the commons can only rest on some formal ruling. It appears that the invention of private property is probably one of the necessary by-products of the pressure for formal ruling. The chapter then tries to show that delineating exclusive (private) as opposed to public ownership (the commons) is fuzzy at best, particularly in the current era of economic globalization and looming ecological threats. At this global scale, ruling on possession hits deadlock because threatened commodities like air or water cannot be fenced in. This second chapter concludes with an articulation of the idea that, from a general psychological and anthropological point of view, “belongings” are only tools to gain social control and for individuals to measure the extent to which they “belong” to the group. Possession and ownership are part of our affiliation capital.

Chapter 3 (“Possession and ownership transfer”) focuses on the psychology revolving around the transfer of possession. Dispossession is the counterpart of possession. Both are co-defined like two sides of the same coin. Possession does entail the possibility of its loss or transfer in exchange. Yet different ontological kinds of possession and ownership need to be distinguished from the point of view of transfer. *Proud possessions* define personal as opposed to interpersonal values of possession. Personal possessions echo who we feel we are, what defines us: ideas, creations, personal and family roots, traditions, past actions, moral rectitude, and principles we abide by as the foundation of our moral (idealized) identity. Some possessions are *inalienable*, like body parts, family members, or gifts that cannot be transferred outside of the social bonds they create. Across cultures, languages and traditions mark the ontological distinction between inalienable versus alienable possessions. Alienable possessions are those that allow transfer of possession and ownership. The chapter goes on to distinguish at least *seven principles* from which ownership of alienable possessions can be determined. These principles form deeply rooted intuitive and rational biases when trying to answer the question of who should own what and why: (1) *the principle of the strongest*; (2) *first possession*; (3) *labor*; (4) *creation/invention*; (5) *familiarity*; (6) *blood*; and (7) *luck*. Furthermore, at a more general level and on the whole, possession transfer appears to be of three basic kinds with radically different psychological experiences and consequences linked to each. In psychological and sociological terms, these basic kinds of transfer are distinguished and discussed as respectively: (1) *violent transfer* via theft and usurpation; (2) *generous transfer* via giving and obliging; and (3) *agreed transfer* via exchanging and reciprocating. It is argued that the agreed kind of possession transfer entails a particular form of reciprocity



that is of much greater psychological complexity compared to all other forms. A case is made for the distinction of various levels of reciprocity. These levels are, from low to high complexity: (1) symmetrical and reverberated reciprocity (*direct reciprocity*); (2) reputable reciprocity (*indirect reciprocity*); and (3) moral reciprocity (*strong reciprocity*). Each of these levels is thought of as entailing radically different cognitive and social capacities. The psychology surrounding negotiation (the agreed kind of possession transfer) requires complex mindreading, an exercise in which humans particularly excel. What is peculiar in the *Homo negotiatus* we are is the constant need to agree on things, to create inter-subjective values about alienable possessions. We always try to find agreements regarding the worth of our possessions in the *eyes of others*, hence in reference to our self-conscious capacity.

Chapter 4 (“Symbolic spinoffs of possession”) concludes the first part of the book. The main argument is that human possession psychology is particular and vastly complex because it is for the most part symbolic. It tends to be re-described into phantasms, sublimated phenomena, and compulsive obsessions, or what we call *symbolic spinoffs*. At the origins of the symbolic spinoffs of possession there is the unique human propensity to *project* feelings and mental states into things. We tend to impute forces and intentions where there are none, creating uncanny attractors to things. Human symbolic endowment changes the nature of the phenomenal experience of being in the world. From direct and literal, this experience becomes also referential and non-literal (i.e., *symbolic*), changing fundamentally our relation to things, hence their possession. In general, objects participate in peculiar ways in the lives of symbolic individuals. They become part of individual and group identity. They start to stand for personal and interpersonal ideas and beliefs projected into the past and into the future. The idea that possessions are part of the symbolic capital of individuals and groups is central to human possession psychology. Beyond exchange or commercial values, objects of possession stand also for the reputation and prestige of possessors, the marks of social distinction and stature in relation to others. Symbolic dimensions of human possession make their transfer connoted with higher meanings. This is evident when considering that human possession transfers tend to be highly ritualized across cultures, from the most primitive to the most technologically advanced. Across cultures and social strata, the tendency to breathe life into things (i.e., animism) is pervasive, the source of superstition and magical thinking in relation to possessions. In humans in particular, objects of possession can become objects of affective fixation and cult. *Fetishism* is a concept that captures the three pillars of human possession psychology: symbolic creation, compulsion, and animism. I try

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to show that fetishism is pervasive in humans. Another important point made in the chapter is that human possession psychology can become pathological, and its symbolic spin the mark of many extravagances. In general, a case is made that this happens when the circle of reciprocal exchanges is broken, spinning out of control. All pathologies of possession have compulsive and obsessive components. In general, they are of either retentive or expulsive kinds, characterized by centripetal or centrifugal dynamics that break normal give and take circles of reciprocal exchange. The chapter ends by showing that decoration (aesthetics and intentional beautifying) is an intrinsic aspect of human possessions, particularly one's own body. Cultivated as a mark of distinction, aesthetics is part of the symbolic capital of individuals and groups. Even money, the most fungible of all possessions, carries ornamentation.

*Part II Development: human ontogeny of possession*

**DEVELOPMENTAL ROADMAP OF UNFOLDING LEVELS**

AGE (approx.)	MIND STATE	OWNERSHIP	SHARING	RECIPROCITY
Around birth	Aware and feeling	Biological (innate latching)	Innate (biological) co-regulation	Direct (reverberated)
2 months	Co-aware	Controlled (self-agency)	Inter-subjective	Direct (tit-for-tat turn taking)
7–9 months	Co-aware	Shared (jointly attended)	Referential	Direct (tit-for-tat + initiated)
18 months	Conscious	Inalienable (“Mine!”)	Intentional	Direct tit-for-tat + initiated + Indirect (projected)
3 years	Co-conscious	Alienable (exchangeable and reciprocal)	Mutual	Direct + indirect (reputable)
5 years and up	“Conscientious”	Ethical property (normative and codified)	Negotiated	Direct + Indirect (reputable) + strong (moral)

Chapter 5 (“First possession”), is the first of three chapters dealing specifically with possession in the perspective of development. What is tentatively discussed here is the nature of infants’ subjectivity in general, which I term primordial subjectivity: what newborns feel and live as sentient creatures, the early experiential context from which first feelings