

Origins of Possession

Human possession psychology originates from deeply rooted experiential capacities shared with other animals. However, unlike other animals, we are a uniquely self-conscious species concerned with reputation, and possessions affect our perception of how we exist in the eyes of others. This book discusses the psychology surrounding the ways in which humans experience possession, claim ownership, and share, from both a developmental and a cross-cultural perspective. Philippe Rochat explores the origins of human possession and its symbolic development across cultures. He proposes that human possession psychology is particularly revealing of human nature, and also the source of our elusive moral sense.

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Origins of Possession

Owning and Sharing in Development

Philippe Rochat



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Foreword

It is a privilege, though a somewhat daunting one, to introduce the reader to this striking book. For though the subject of possession is an ancient one, it is a forever difficult and controversial one. While “possessing” something is a crucial feature of what we call ownership, it is by no means the only aspect of that conventionalized phenomenon. Indeed, as Rochat puts it, the “transition from possession to property” is the main issue of this challenging book.

It is argued that this “possession-to-property transition” is governed by three distinctively human characteristics: human self-consciousness, human symbolic capacity, and characteristically prolonged human immaturity, and this volume sets forth a rich and detailed account of each of these.

What is particularly striking about Rochat’s account of this transition is the breadth and depth of his inquiry. This is a scholarly book in the deepest sense. It scans a vast body of literature and treats it with genuine respect – whether it is in a close look at Aristotelian essays, particularly well explored, or in considering the most recent literature on the behavior of young infants carried out in the last decade or two. Indeed, the discussion of changing conceptions of mind in the early and late nineteenth century as well as in our own times is masterly – not to mention his rethinking of the years leading to the French Revolution at the close of the eighteenth century.

It is no exaggeration to classify this book as an excursion into the cultural history of our conceptions of human development, and yet we must recognize its vivid contemporaneity as an exercise in classic intellectual history. I, for example, am currently much concerned with the evolution of legal systems (as in my recent *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (2002)). I wish there had been the opportunity of reading Rochat’s book before I’d written mine!

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One last point. I have long felt that the human sciences risk superficiality by moving further and further from the classic epistemic concerns of philosophy – concerns about the nature of “knowing.” I see this book as a sign that things are changing. For surely it is concerned as much with epistemology as with psychology. And so it should be!

Jerome S. Bruner

Preface

This book was on my mind for some years, particularly while doing cross-cultural research with children in the South Pacific, Brazil, and other regions of the world. As far as I can remember, possession always struck me as a crucial aspect of psychology, rarely considered in full by intellectuals and other researchers in the behavioral and developmental sciences. It always seemed to me that most conflicts and concerns in the animal mind pertain to protection of what one controls and feels entitled to. Everything always appeared to me as deriving from issues revolving around possession or ownership. I became obsessed with the idea and started to look at the world in terms of possession as others tend to reduce psychic life to sex or violence.

After a few aborted attempts, I started writing the book while visiting and teaching at PUC University in Rio de Janeiro in August 2012, a first fresh breath of great freedom surrounded by welcoming friends and colleagues: my friend Pedro Salem, my generous host Carolina Lampreia, and Octavio Domont de Serpa and his wife Fernanda who offered me a quiet, bright, and comfortable place to stay and write. I enjoyed every minute, thank you. I finally got down to it and wrote the book in one intense period in the spring of 2013 while on sabbatical leave in Paris, enjoying a total absence of constraints to drift and explore the topic *ad libitum*. I want to express my appreciation to my employer institution, the College of Arts and Sciences of Emory University in Atlanta, for allowing the absolute freedom and open horizon required for such an enterprise.

Warm appreciation to my faithful friend François Bertrand, who followed my progress every step of the way and with whom I shared ideas almost twice weekly, taking long walks, roaming the streets, and having lunches, each time at a new, memorable place with memorable people in a city he knows, inhabits, and loves like nobody else. He gave me constant encouragement and undivided attention, always ready to share his vast experience and knowledge, at time even with bibliographic references . . . Thank you Francesco, I'm lucky to have you as a friend.

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While writing this book, I met people on the streets of Paris, at random talks, cafés, and old bookstores, particularly the one on my street, the Librairie des Alpes, on rue de Seine, in the shadow of the Institute and the French Academy cupola building, as well as the adjacent Bibliothèque Mazarine where I wrote almost daily. I had conversations with the bookstore manager and now friend, Pierre Masson, an erudite, curious, and irreverent storyteller. We talked over cups of bitter coffee at this soulful bookshop, surrounded by old mountain climbing books and pictures of victorious mountaineers bending pine shelves. Conversations with Pierre and all the bookworms, history bum derelicts constantly roaming the shop, oriented some of the book's content and certainly influenced its spirit.

My appreciation also to Barbara Carnevalli, whom I met by luck at a crisp talk on “glory and the struggle for reputation in Thomas Hobbes” she gave in Paris early in my stay. I enjoyed her brilliance and benefited from her intellectual passion and philosophical guidance.

Michael Heller, my childhood friend, has been instrumental, as always, in cleaning up my ideas, playing devil's advocate, and giving me renewed intellectual impetus in my research and soul searching. There is nothing I value more than his wit at detecting wrong intellectual paths and weak arguments, his ability to zero in to what's important. Since adolescence, I have benefited from his encyclopedic culture and provocative thoughts. I continue to do so. His friendship is invaluable. Likewise, my gratitude to another, more recent friend Gustavo Faigenbaum, whom I finally located in the Argentinian town of Gualaguaychú, of all places, after reading his 2005 precious book on children's economic experience. We eventually taught together at FLACSO in Buenos Aires. Riding buses and driving across the pampas toward other teaching gigs (Parana and Gualaguaychú), with Gustavo lecturing me on Hegel and Greek tragedies, and hanging out with his lovely family, we had long conversations that changed and shaped my views on possession but also my views on psychology in general that I always tend to construe too much in individualistic terms, isolated from institutions – to a fault – probably because of my Piagetian background. He keeps reminding me of the collective and it has been a real education, even though he thinks this book is still lacking much of the institutional view he tries to instill in me. What can I say? I confess that I am primarily attached to the temporality of embodied experience. I cannot take as seriously as I should all the things that will survive us.

A warm thanks to my faithful former doctoral student Erin Robbins, for letting me keep rambling on and bouncing ideas for the past six years, for her friendship and support, and for all her diligent help in making sense of

the mountain of data we collected together in the USA but also in remote places of the South Pacific and Central America. Her good work, kindness, humor, understanding, and intelligence made a huge difference.

Finally, thanks to the French taxpayers for maintaining and allowing public access to wonderful historical and very aristocratic study places like the seventeenth-century Bibliothèque Mazarine, the oldest public library in France. That is where most of this book was written, under the gaze of old dignitaries' busts lining the vast reading room with its high ceiling, three-story-high book shelving, tall ladders, and parquet floor crackling under each step of the roaming librarians desperately trying to be quiet. Descartes and the French illustrious intellectual past haunted the room. It was very solemn and reverential.

While writing, I had the spirit of these long-gone ancestors hovering over my shoulders, keeping me in check. They comforted me. My hope is that I did not betray the tradition of excellence they are supposed to stand for. I dedicate this book to all of these illustrious ghosts and the French taxpayers allowing them to remain alive.