

THE DEADLY “MAMA”, THE PERILS OF POSSESSION

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“Even this body/self is not mine, or else, the entire world is mine”
(Uttered by King Senajit, in MBh XII, 25.19
and by Janaka the philosopher-king, in MBh XIV.32.11)

Must analyze the idea of *belonging*... Must examine, more closely than I have done as yet, the nature of the relative dependency of being and having: our possessions swallow us up.”

Gabriel Marcel

Introduction: Mining “Mine”

The word “*sva*” in Sanskrit stands both for self and wealth, for what I am as well as for what one possesses. Can we have a sense of self without a sense of possession, an *aham* without a *mama*? If nothing is mine, can I be myself? Can I even be a self if I do not own at least my body? Can I both be and have the body? If the meanings that my words possess are not private—as meanings are rules and no semantic rules, qua rules, can be privately followed—how can I claim my thoughts to be mine, as long as thoughts are essentially meanings of sentences made up of words? Can I never have a private thought then? Karl Popper and others have written on the logic of scientific discovery, but there is no discourse which could be called “the political economy of scientific ideas and theories”, except some Applied Ethics discussions of patenting practices and copyright laws. Can anyone claim ownership of the Pythagorean theorem (which Baudhayana also formulated but did not give a proof of) or of Quantum Theory? These are some of the questions this essay wishes to be about. Starting from my name—which seems to belong to me though not uniquely, for, I am aware that numerous others are called “Arindam”—all the way to my face, my DNA, my memories, my *belongings* seem to make me who I am. Yet even as a spiritual vice

“I’ (Ego)-ism (*ahamkāra*) does not seem to be quite the same as “Mine”-ism (*mamakāra*). If a homeless destitute who has sold out his own body to someone else arrogantly claims “I am the only person in this area who owns nothing, not even his own body” he would be *nirmama* but not *nirahamkaara* (perhaps this is why *Bhagavadgītā* II.71 mentions these as two distinct features of a person of firm wisdom) for his *ahamkāra* will be of having nothing he can call “*mama*”.

“Having” or “possessing”, marked by the genitive or possessive 6th case-ending in Sanskrit, can stand for an enormous variety of ties. Almost any relation can be expressed through the use of the “x has y” schema, as long as one adds a further specifying clause of the form “as F” when “F” is a relational predicate. Thus, we could state that Aristotle has Plato *as his teacher*, Anscombe has Geach *as her husband*, Calcutta has Darjeeling *as its nearest hill-resort*, and Gautama has “Siddhārtha” *as his name* and Modi had Kejriwal *as his major adversary*. Yet some relations seem to be more directly and naturally expressed through the “has”-formulation than others. A whole *has* parts. A word *has* a meaning. A surface *has* a color. A person *has* knowledge of biochemistry. And most crucially, a certain businessman *has* a million dollars, and I *have* a body.

Possession of property in the sense of wealth, money or land seems to be so central that even the widest metaphysical use of the term ‘property’ as a feature or quality that something has seems to be derivative of the legal-economic sense of belongings or possession. No wonder Draupadi’s pointed question: “If Yudhisthira lost himself, how could he stake me in a gamble as a ‘wife belonging to him’ since a slave cannot own any property?” had no “clear answer” from the experts. For, even the notion of staking oneself in a betting game presupposes “I am a property belonging to myself”, which Janaka says, does not make sense: “even the self is not mine”.

Upon a quick survey, I can think of twelve sorts of “mine” each of which deserves a separate treatment before we try to find either a common or family resemblance kind of thread running through all these occurrences: “my shirt/house/money”, “my body”, “my words/ writings”, “my thoughts”, “my parents”, “my labor”, “my needs”, “my child/children”, “my food”, “my actions (including their consequences?)”, “my time”, “my country”.

In this paper I examine three fundamental possession relations from these different types of having: [a] the relation between a person and her mental states (of which cognitive states would be a proper subset); [b] the relation between a word of a particular

language and its meaning in that language; [c] the relation between a person and the property or money that she or he owns. Now, I do not need to belabor the obvious centrality of these three relations to human life in general. Indeed much of classical Indian as well as contemporary Western philosophy of mind, philosophical semantics and social and political philosophy have centered round these three varieties of possession. And I am not trying to discuss all the issues that have come up in those three major branches of philosophy between these two equally virile and equally disputatious traditions of thought.

What I wish to attempt is an *interlinking* of these three problem areas: *mind*, *meaning* and *money*. It is not only the two uses of the English word ‘property’ –for an attribute and an estate—which suggests this interconnection. Sanskrit, though it does not use ‘*dharma*’, the word for property-as-feature, for property-as-wealth, does use the same word ‘*artha*’ for both meaning and money. And more tantalizingly, it uses the same word ‘*sva*’ for property-as-wealth as well as for the self. Yet, when the scripture dictates “*parasvam na ādadīta*” it is not prohibiting identity theft, do not take another’s self, it merely tells us not to steal other’s property.

Besides these lexical associations, even in philosophical writing, their explicit interlinking is not new. Ownership of a mental state has been polemically compared and contrasted by Vasubandhu to possession of goods or cattle. And the meaning of a word has been thought of as a speaker’s mental content (property?) at the time of using the word (by Bhartūhari as well as by Locke). But I would like to argue that an insight need not be mine alone or in me for the first time in order to be genuinely mine. Indeed no insight can belong exclusively to one person because unless it is communicable that is sharable, hence not privately owned, it does not even count as an insight or thought.

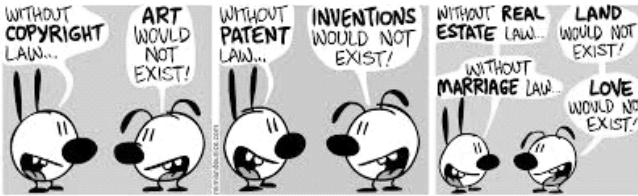
In spite of the fact that both Buddhist and Vedic social ethics endorsed the idea of private property, the attitude towards ownership of wealth as well as authorship or proprietorship of knowledge was very different from the standard Western liberal attitude of exclusive personal right. Both traditions regarded an exaggerated sense of “mine” as the root of all evil and suffering. Thus, at the end of the *Mahābhārata* (in a part called “Post-Gītā”, i.e. *Anugītā*) Kṛṣṇa admonishes: “Two letters: ‘mama’ (mine) spell death and three letters: “na-mama”(not mine) spell everlasting Brahman”. On behalf of the Buddhist side, Dharmakīrti says:

One who sees an ego, would have permanent attachment to

this 'I', his thirst would make him see attractive qualities of commodities which he would then try to make 'mine' by all means... Given such self, there would be the title 'other', and from such separation of ego and the other... all the other evils would ensue (Pramanavarttika Of Dharmakirti, 1989, verses 219-221: Pramāṇasiddhi, 219-221).

Either through the doctrine of no-self which renders private ownership of even one's self a matter of convenient designation and linguistic fiction or through the doctrine of obligatory gift-making reminding one of the owed character of all that one owns, the Buddhist and Brahmanical thinkers, in spite of widely divergent ontologies, have both given us conceptions of ownership from which we might learn important lessons in these days of shameless unbridled privatization.

We have tended, hitherto, to set aside Sanskrit Dharmashastra discussions of inheritance law and division of property right (dayabhaga) as pre-modern religious jurisprudence, of little interest to philosophers of the logico-metaphysical stripe. But it has come recently to the notice even of Western scholars that a whole bunch of 16th and 17th century New Logicians paid very keen attention to what Kant called, more than a century later, "the metaphysical elements of justice". And this philosophy of rights begins with the question of defining ownership and owned/propertyhood (svaamitva and svatva)



1. Who owns mental states?

One rather weak argument against the physicalist Cārvāka used by dualists was the argument from the possessive case: "John could not be the same as the body of John because the owner and the possession could not be the same." The general premise of this argument is, of course, easily challenged because the locution "x of y" is often used without implying any real difference between x and y, as in "the city of London" or "the head of Rahu" (when Rahu is a demon

with nothing but a head), or “the body of a doll”. That premise also backfires on the dualist, as the ancient physicalists have been quick to point out, when one hears uses like “the soul of John”. However, the possessive case in locutions like “My desire”, “Her pain”, “Your pleasure” seems to be ontologically deeper. I seem to be able to distinguish myself from my desire or my pain. The distinction seems to be lost in extreme pain because the feeling and I seem to fuse. But two clues of the distinction are available to reflection, even if such reflection is impossible, for most unenlightened feelers, until the pain abates. The first clue is that the more intense the pain is, the more acutely I am aware of my past and future existence minus that pain, because my desire for the pain to stop consists in my believing in the possibility of my staying myself in the absence of this pain, and my sense of this pain having started at some point comes with the unmistakable memory of my having once been without it. The second clue to this complex felt content “my pain” being divisible into I and the pain is that the pain can get more intense or fade away but it makes little sense for me to feel that there is more or less of myself, since the idea of degrees of I is unintelligible. As for desires, the possession relation is clearly an indicator of difference between the desirer and the desire, both because I seem to have, one after another, many distinct desires, and because I am able to find myself simply without the desire when it is fulfilled. Indeed, what I desire could be described as the state of cessation of the desire, in almost all standard cases. Thus, my states, pains, wishes, decisions, memories seem to belong to me by the close relationship of *inherence* – a kind of asymmetric inseparability in distinction. That particular wish or anguish cannot exist without being in me. But I could easily be without that wish or anguish.

The most general argument for a substantial self other than the body as well as other than passing mental states in Indian Philosophy was given by Vātsyāyana Pakṣilaswāmin in his commentary to *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.3 and 3.1.4: (Gautamiyanyayadarsana With Bhasya Of Vatsyayana)

- i. Wishes, anguishes, decisions and cognitions, etc. are tropes (unrepeatable qualities).
- ii. Tropes cannot exist without a substance to which they belong (qualities are never self-standing).
- iii. The body, the inner sense or any other external substance cannot be the substratum of introspectible mental qualities (qualities

of the body being either externally perceptible like colors or imperceptible (even if material, such as magnetic field) like weight).

Therefore there is a special non-material permanent substance to which all these co-personal mental states belong, which re-identifies itself across different sensory modalities (with unifying judgments like “I touch this thing which I saw before”) as well as connects its own remembered past states with the present owner of those memories.

Although Buddhists are not physicalists like the Cārvāka-s, they reject the conclusion of the above argument because they reject any permanent substance in either the inner or the outer world. They rebut the above argument by rejecting premise ii. Without needing any permanent substance to run through or under them, a causally connected series of qualities can ‘own (=include as a member) a particular quality. That series or stream of conscious states can be “conveniently talked about” as a separate entity to which an individual mental state belongs just as a soldier is said to belong to an army or a chariot-part can be said to belong to a chariot. We cannot here go into the elaborate debate between the Buddhist reductionist and the Vaiśeṣika realist about the intelligibility of the concept of inherence as a mind-independent relation between properties and property-possessors. The Buddhist strategy seems to be a two-step process: first reduce inherence into some causally tightened mereological (part-whole) relation, and then expose the mereological whole to be a merely titular entity no different than its components. The Buddhist point is not that tropes such as a particular sensation of blue or a particular twinge of desire *can* just exist or happen on their own without being owned by or ascribed to something that calls the sensation or the desire “mine”. For one thing, the Buddhist rejects the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika assumption that the introspectively available mental state is at all a trope or *guṇa* (distinct from a trope-possessing substance). So even the first premise of the argument would be rejected by the Buddhist. As is well-known, the so-called self of a person is reduced by the Buddhist to a flowing stream of five psycho-physical factors (*skandhas*). The particular ephemeral entities that fall under the *nāma-skandhas* (psychological factors) are most generally called “*dharmas*”. But the Buddhist’s *dharmas* do not cry out for a *dharmīn!* They are like David Hume’s impressions and ideas that are not even causally connected in any ontologically deep sense. They bunch together like a bundle but are not held together like a Kantian “synthesis”, let alone requiring

any synthetic or transcendental unity of apperception. Some of these are more basic *cittas* while the others are derivative *caittas*. Thus I am, at any point of time, a bundle of bodily events causally (merely through succession) connected with some sensations, feelings, tendencies and judgements. None of these passing *citta*-states are independent. For nothing that arises is independent. Indeed, an intentional cognitive state depends upon many kinds of causal conditions: a (posited) object, an immediately preceding state, a sense-organ (which, in Yogācāra, is itself a mental entity) and the right environmental conditions. But what it does not depend upon is a self or immaterial substance of the kind that Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika postulates, because first, it is ontologically redundant, second, it is empirically unverifiable, and third, in being allegedly uncaused and permanent it is impossible under the scheme of dependent arising of all positive things.

In Yogācāra psychology, there is also a diagnostic story told as to why the undivided self-grasping cognitive state first bifurcates itself into the grasper part and the grasped object part, and then as the objective grasped part appears to be outside the mental state, the subjective grasper part finds a "house" in an erroneously imagined ego which seems to own the cognitive state. This is a no-ownership theory of mental properties insofar as the only owner here is a linguistic fiction called "the fluid conglomeration of emerging mental and physical factors".

In spite of this general reductionist account of persons that takes our sense of "possessing" our own mental states to be nothing but an entrenched error, a mask of make-believe unity, Vasubandhu felt the need to take the idea of personal possession of mental states seriously. To translate the relevant section of his *Pudgalaviniścaya* which is added onto the last chapter of his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*:

"If there is no self, who is it that remembers? What does 'remembers' mean? It means: grasps the object of recall... Who then does the recalling? Who does it has been already said: the specific antecedent psychic event (*citta*) that causes the recall... When it is said "Caitra remembers", given that there is no self, *whose* is this remembrance? What is the meaning of this sixth/possessive case? Well, it means the owner. Who is the owner of who, for instance? Just as Caitra is the owner of his cow. How does he become her owner? Since her employment as a beast of burden or for milking is under Caitra's control. But here, where is the memory to be employed such that we are looking for its owner? It has to be employed towards what is remembered. Why does it have to be employed? So that it is remembered.

Oh well said indeed! That recalling has to be used towards itself! How exactly is the *employment* done here? By production or by sending it from one place to another (the cow-owner does not produce the cow, but controls its movements)? Since a memory cannot move from place to place, it must be simply by production. Thus it can be concluded that whatever is the cause or producer is the owner (*svāmin*) and whatever is its effect or product is the owned property (*svam*). Indeed there is no one single entity called “Caitra” and not even a cow. Thus even in the example case, *there is no owner-owned relationship besides cause-effect relationship.*

Whether this Buddhist critique of a substantial self is cogent or not is not my concern here. It is the clever way Vasubandhu unpacks the ordinary language meaning of “owning” and then reduces *all cases of possession* to cases of “producing”, which interests me. Suppose my grandfather owned a coal-mine. When he dies, neither the coal-mine nor me undergoes anything but what is called a “Cambridge-change” (as when a line becomes shorter because another longer line is drawn next to it). Yet, I may, by the legal force of his will, come to inherit that coal mine. Vasubandhu’s account tells us that the mine can become mine only if I have produced it. What we acquire by means of inheritance or surplus value of a product that nobody produced or somebody else produced or spent their labors on, by this criterion, should not be ours, unless we believe that just the death of a parent or grand-parent causes a new “ownership” property in me. Of course, if I cause the death of the father which in turn produces my ownership property then I might be said to have indirectly produced the inheritance. Though not at all rare in the history of royal and not so royal families, this kind of causal agency or credit is not usually claimed by the claimants of ancestral wealth. Besides, both the owner and the owned, under Vasubandhu’s analysis, are nominal or titular reals. All owners are themselves impersonators of identity and personhood. “Having” thus gets all its power from an ego-rigging and thing-making *language!* Our *entitlement* to wealth is very much a matter of the *titles* we give to ourselves and to those collections and their possible uses we call wealth. Thus, this error-theory of possession naturally leads us from the question of owning of mental states to the question of words’ possession of their “own” meanings.

2. From Mind to Money, to Meanings: How does a word have Meaning.

I cannot make my words mean whatever I wish them to mean. In *Alice in Wonderland*, Humpty Dumpty was rather concerned that he

should be the master of his own words' meanings rather than the other way around. This led him to a private language where the word 'impenetrability' meant "a nice knockdown argument". He was (and looked) so literally full of himself that he did not care that with such fiat of individual semantic decisions what he was creating was not a language at all because it could not manage to be a rule-bound social practice.

Unfortunately, Bhartṛhari, the greatest philosopher of language from (4th century) India, comes very close to regarding individual word meanings as mental entities existing in the intellects of the speaker rather than in the external world. Of course, he strikes a Buddhist note by speaking of two levels of the meaning's being: being in the speaker-hearer's intellect (*buddhi*) and being externally, *bauddha* and *bāhya sātta*. Somewhat like the two truths of Nāgārjuna, his philosophy of meaning operates at two levels. At the level of ultimate reality there are no words separable from the sentence and no sentences separable from the entire language, and language and the world are also one and the same. Similarly in the world out there, the distinction between one thing and another is also a fiction created by semantic analysis which is a useful fiction of the grammarians. At this level Bhartṛhari is a supreme holist, and eventually a non-dualist who believes that speech and reality are two aspects of the same self-expressive reality which he characterizes as "language-stuff" or "word-Brahman".

At the level of convenient abstraction he argues that each word must be eternally and naturally connected with its most intimate meaning, although this meaning is primarily the form of the word (or the type-word?) itself along with the meaning in the mind of the speaker (which speaker would that be, given that the idea of a speaker-in-general is itself very much a word dependent abstract idea?). In spite of my difficulty with the notion of this internal (subjective) intellectual meaning as the first meaning, I want to draw attention to one valuable insight that Bhartṛhari shares with Śābara the Mīmāṃsaka. This is the anti-Humpty Dumpty insight that an individual speaker cannot make her own language by means of arbitrary noise-object correlations without presupposing an already given language which is not of his own making. Even the act of correlating or association presumes a set of pre-established word-world relationships. The very establishment of the initial conventions would require a language, since outside the context of a language even ostensions (finger-pointings) cannot be interpreted, let alone general features being recognized. When this insight is packaged as the doctrine of eternal pre-conventional semantic rules, modern

students of Bharṭṛhari find it hard to swallow. But even Donald Davidson (in “Communication and Convention” *Synthese* 1984) tells us that some presumed semantic relations have to be there for even the first conventions to work as a social contract. Language cannot be a result of a contract since the very idea of contract presupposes language. The lesson I learn from this idea of authorlessness of basic semantic rules is that even an innovative speaker or writer (like e.e.Cummings or James Joyce) cannot claim semantic private ownership over a language, since the basic purpose of using words is to be understood by others. And one can do all sorts of creative things with language only thanks to one’s immersion in one or more traditions of shared and handed down lexical and syntactic rules.

Bharṭṛhari starts his long and complex chapter on relations by arguing that neither inherence (*samavāya*) nor contact (*saṃyoga*) nor any logical product of those relations can ever be the relation which is expressed by that sixth, possessive case-ending in phrases like “this is the significandum *of* that signifier”. Needless to say, the semantic relation could not be contact, for otherwise the word “water” would always be wet. He gets into a paradox by confessing that this word-meaning ownership relation is unsignifiable. But he extricates himself deftly out of the paradox by drawing an object-versus-meta-language distinction. Eventually he gives that argument which I summarized above that no individual (and this should include a personal God!) can claim to have established this basic word-meaning relationship. But I think he mars it all by his idealism or mentalism about the word-meanings existing in the intellects of the speakers, which makes the world of discourse exist only secondarily or metaphorically but not objectively or absolutely!

In spite of this idealistic excess, Bharṭṛhari believes, like most Brahminical thinkers, that tradition (especially the Vedic corpus) is the source of our most important knowledge and he explicitly says that our original insight and cognitive abilities flower only when we learn from many traditions and many teachers. The resulting knowledge is very much our own, but we owe it to these teachers and traditions and perhaps also to the fact that they disagree and make us reflect and decide on our own!

In its theory of knowledge, Buddhism does not rely on testimony. But the need for a loving teacher is recognized in that tradition too. The hubris of intellectual property rights is counteracted at a more basic level by recognizing the fictional nature of the so called owner of knowledge in the first place.

3. *Technical Definitions and Raghunātha's Plea for Possessedness as a Basic Category*

We saw earlier how Vasubandhu helps himself to a working definition of ownership in course of the imaginary dialogue with a soul-theorist: "X is owned by Y iff the employment of X is under the control of Y." Even Śākyamuni Buddha himself lived in a largely agricultural society where Vedic Dharmasāstra laws permitted private ownership of property "established by inheritance, purchase, partition, acceptance as a gift and discovery (e.g. of hidden unclaimed treasure) for everybody and by conquest for the warrior-caste and by way of wages for merchants and workers." (Dharmasutras 10.36-40) The enlightened one along with his monastic disciples depended on wealthy patrons like Anāthapindika (whose name itself suggests generosity towards the destitute). As long as the wealth was earned through initiative, strength of the arms, and sweat of the brow, and through righteous means – it was part of right livelihood to own it, consume part of it and donate it at will. (Kalupahana 1995:122) It was greed and possessiveness that was decried, not possessions themselves.

Many centuries after this period, with the advent of the precise language of the New Logic in thirteenth century India, even legal philosophers started using the logicians' defining techniques in trying to capture the concept of private property. An interesting result of this trend is found in Raghunātha Śīromaṇi's notoriously untraditional text "A Demonstration of the True Nature of Things to Which Words Refer" (*padārtha-tattva-nirūpanam*). Among other innovations suggested in this text on metaphysics and epistemology is the idea that possessedness is a category of being in its own right.

The argument for this starts by finding fault with the traditional ways of defining the difference made to something by its being owned by someone. It was realized long ago that possession is not an occurrent or active relation holding between the possessor and the article owned. Between the act of acquisition (if any) and the act of consumption, there may elapse the an entirely idle or passive period of non-use (or even not yet knowing that one owns that bit of property), of having without using when no "employment" is happening. During this period, it is quite conceivable that someone else consumes, uses, or even changes the piece of land or commodity without the consent or against the will of the person who actually and legally happens to own it. Hence by the simple definition "to be owned by X is to be employed according to the will of X", the article would fail to be owned by the real owner and could count as

being owned by a squatter or a thief. To avoid such under-coverage and over-coverage, Raghunātha first tries out the modally strengthened definition: “(Possessedness is) fitness (*yogyatva*) for use as one wishes.” (*yatheṣṭa-viniyoga-yogyatvam Raghunatha Śīromanī* 1957). It is worth noticing that the term for ‘use’ is ‘*viniyoga*’ which is what, roughly a thousand years back, Vasubandhu had used in defining ownership in the passage discussed earlier. The additional sophistication is the introduction of the possibility-term ‘fitness’ (*yogyatva*) to take care of what Kant has called “rational” as against empirical possession. Ted Turner possesses the vast ranches in Montana even when for months he neither uses it nor directs others how to use it, since the ranch still has the fitness to be used just as Ted Turner wishes. At this point Raghunātha raises an objection by way of clarifying the actual force of the “fitness” clause: If by “use” is meant consumption or eating, it is quite possible for me to eat the fruits of my neighbor’s garden, or an illegal hunter to eat the elk that belongs to Ted Turner. Such food and property has the fitness to be consumed and used by many people other than the owner. Hence the definition suffers from overcoverage. It applies to unpossessed objects as well. In answer, Raghunātha clarifies: “Such uses, without the wish or permission of the owner, though possible, are prohibited by Scriptural Law.” So the emended definition should be: “Y is possessed by X iff Y is fit for being used just as X wishes in the sense that uses of Y against X’s use are prohibited by specific scriptural injunctions.”

But Raghunātha probes the matter further by asking “What specific scriptural injunctions are these?” In trying to answer this, the defender of the traditional definition has to refer to an injunction which uses the very concept of possessedness, for instance, the rule: “Do not take what is another person’s possession.” Since such a rule uses the concept of the definiendum (other’s *sva*=possession) its inescapable introduction into the definiens renders the definition of *svatva* (possessionhood) viciously circular! Even if we take away the traditional Hindu concern for scriptural injunctions, the logical worry behind Raghunātha’s position that any reductive definition of possession would be circular can be understood in the following way. No commodity becomes or remains anyone’s property by their exclusive natural *capacity* to consume or control the consumption of that commodity. Others often have as much capability (and need) to use my property as I have. The additional exclusive right which society, state or law gives to an individual over the use of a possession is conferred upon it by an

explicit deployment of that very concept of right to *possession* which the reductive definition of possession was trying to explicate in terms of *other* notions like, fitness, employment, permission, control and wish.

The lesson that Raghunātha learns from this is that the possessedness that is produced in things when one receives those things as gifts or buys them or inherits them by the death of one’s parents, and that which is destroyed by giving those things away is a basic category not definable in terms of things and features belonging to other Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika categories (See Kroll 2007; Kroll 2007a). This sounds like giving ownedness an ontological status of its own. But actually what Raghunātha has succeeded to show is that there is no noncircular way of *deriving* the concept of ownership from other natural categories. Thus Raghunātha unwittingly undercuts Locke’s attempt to demonstrate that right to private property is as natural (or god-given) as the relation of ownership that we have to our own bodies. Locke gave the first metaphysical push to the liberal theory of private ownership by the following argument:

- i. Every man owns his own body, because it is nobody else’s body.
- ii. The labor of his body is part of the body, hence owned by him.
- iii. Whatever he has mixed his labor with (e.g. the grain produced by the mixture of his labor with the seeds and the soil) he has made his own property.
- iv. He therefore has as inalienable a right to his property as his right to his own body. (Laslett 1988: 287-288)

Of course, Locke does add the qualifier “as long as there is enough and as good left in common for others”; both his third premise and his qualifier has been the subject of endless criticism. The fundamental mistake in such attempts at a “naturalized” justification of private property is that they claim to discover possessedness as a feature of commodities, especially when they are results of some human work, and then defend the need of a social, political, religious or legal authority to protect and honor that feature of things within human practice. As Raghunātha shows, the truth is quite the reverse: it is the social or legal or religious authority that invents mine; I don’t need any scripture to tell me what is mine. But without the permissions and prohibitions of a set of other possible possessors of those very commodities, no land or tree or

gold or silver can be mine. Thus without a speech-community (viz. one capable of appealing to a set of rules: scripture or the constitution) there is no possession. As Levinas puts it:

“A thing does not resist acquisition; the other possessors – those whom one cannot possess – contest and therefore can sanction possession itself. *Thus the possession of things issues in a discourse.*” (Levinas 1961: 162)

Nyāya and other orthodox systems of Indian thought do admit a special kind of intimate relation between a person and her own body. Indeed this relation gives the Indian dualist as much trouble as pineal gland gave to Descartes. But perhaps because of a pan-Indian shared belief in the possibility of reincarnation, none of the classical Indian philosophers take embodiment as what makes one person uniquely and exclusively special. The indexicality of “I” which rubs off to the trouble-making “mine” is the root of all selfish and competitive greed and envy. It is due to this ineliminable token-reflexivity of “I” and “mine” that two children both saying “this toy is mine” are not agreeing with one another, nor saying the same thing. A shallow peacemaker’s statement “You are both right, for it belongs to both of you” does not solve either the practical or the theoretical problem of private ownership. What is in a body that makes me unique? How can I use the concept of “my body” as the individuator of a lump of matter, without first sorting out what makes Arindam’s “mine” distinct from Rahul’s “mine”?

Indeed one of the most ancient Vedic bases for ethical duties comes from the idea that it is our birth in a body that makes us dependent and indebted creatures. The very basis of all my ownerships is my body which we get from parents. What we own, therefore, is what we first have to acknowledge as owed. We depend upon natural forces (the gods) to nourish the body with rain and sunshine and air to breathe, we depend upon fellow creatures to maintain a social and economic support system and we are indebted to the long chain of teachers and wise people for bequeathing to us a language and a storehouse of skills and sciences without which we could not even begin to speak to each other or begin to learn other things on our own. Thus, what the Vedic moralist derives out of our natural embodiment is our *duty to share* whatever wealth we produce with our own toil or we acquire otherwise as a mark of our congenital indebtedness, rather than the right to exclusive control or possible consumption all by myself. This is enshrined in the doctrine of obligatory gift-making that I discuss in the next section.

The Paradox of Obligatory Giving

What kind of ownership do we find in the Vedas? We find the following paradox in the Upaniṣads and Ṛgveda:

1. It is obligatory that I give some P to X (when P is some material substance – not love, compassion or verbal reassurance – and X is any other person who has much less P than I have and can use a little more of it).
2. If I ought to give P, it must be possible and permissible for me to give P.
3. I can give P only if I own P.
4. I own P if and only if I am permitted and have the right to use P in any socially harmless way I like including keeping P for my own or my progeny's consumption.
5. If I am permitted to keep all of P for myself, then I cannot, at the same time be obliged to give P away to X, because if it is obligatory that I give a certain part of P then it cannot be permissible that I keep, that is, not give away that part of P. I cannot have the right to keep and the duty to give away the same thing at the same time.
6. Therefore, from 1 to 5, by closing our conditional proof, it follows that if it is obligatory that I give P then it is not obligatory that I give P.

This sounds like a paradox, but since P implies not-P simply boils down to not-P, all it shows is that if the liberal definition of ownership (premise 4, above) is correct then giving can never be obligatory. Since I have shown that some amount of giving, with awareness, with consent, with faith, with fear and with shame is obligatory in the Vedic scheme, that scheme must be based upon some alternative definition of ownership. Hunger has been called death. But the Vedic hymn in praise of giving (ṚgVeda: X.117) starts dramatically by remarking that hunger is not the only way to die: "Deaths catch up with the over-fed too." This line can be interpreted in two ways. First it could be the message of universal mortality being used to warn the miserly amasser of wealth. But more pointed explanation of the plural "*mṛtyavāh*" here would be that the inhospitable scrooge, however well-fed he may be, dies many deaths before his physical demise. Death here stands for loneliness and ignorance. The unhospitable eater is friendless because he cannot be a friend

himself: *na sa sakhā yo na dadāti sakhye*. He is short-sighted because had he looked at the “longer path” (*drāghāmsam anupaśyet panthām*) he would have realized that riches are like chariot wheels (up and down as well as going around from person to person) such that he might find himself at the receiving end and have to beg from the very person he is refusing today. That this second interpretation taking unsharing consumption itself to be a kind of spiritual death is more plausible is confirmed by the 6th verse (quoted above) which uses the word ‘*mogha*’. “I am telling you the truth” the verse goes, “it is death for this unknowing unsharing person. By his act of eating he nourishes neither the sun nor his friends. The lonely eater only incurs sin.” What is this allusion towards nourishing the sun?

This takes us back to the mystical/poetic/moral/metaphysical idea of the relation between sacrifice and the cosmic order. The universal Self or Brahman made or became the world by means of sacrifice. So we maintain the world by our acts of sacrifice. It is because we are ready to nurture the needy, pass on our knowledge to our posterity, preserve our environment and support our friends and above all to give before we consume that the sun rises and sheds light on our plants and the cloud-god showers rain. This may sound absurd to us because we make a sharp distinction between the causal-natural laws and the moral-spiritual laws. But for the Vedic vision, both of these are two aspects of the same *ṛtam satyam*. One who violates the moral order of eating also fails to do his share for maintaining the natural order of food-production. That is the sense in which the lonely eater “does not nourish the sun”.

In the second verse of this hymn there is a description of over-eating *in front of* the hungry which deserves special attention: “He who possessing food, hardens his heart towards the dependent poor asking for food, and *eats in front of him* can never make himself happy.” This very sense of visual oppression is used by Śāṅkara in his commentary to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* passage about the seven kinds of food: one (the first) part of this food is “common” says the mantra-text. “Of this” here means of all the eaters. How is that? That which is eaten by all living beings every day was meant for everyone’s consumption. Why is there a possibility of unavoidable sin in eating that common food? It is a mixed property of all. Because it is everyone’s share, the handful of food as it is being thrown into the mouth is seen as tormenting others. Since every creature’s yearning is fixed on that food in the form of the desire “That morsel could have been mine”, it is not possible to even swallow without causing pain to others. The text after this goes on to prescribe obligatory

offerings to insects, birds and dogs etc. as a daily duty of the householder so that he is rescued from this sin. The same idea is expressed by the early Christian Saints Basil and Ambrose. The former comments:

The bread you are hoarding belongs to the hungry, the clothes you keep in your wardrobe belongs to the naked, the shoes you hide away belong to the poor. In other words, you are committing as many injustices as there are things you could give away. (Aquinas 1947: 1769-1771).

Ambrose almost echoes the Upaniṣads by his remark "Let no one say that what is common is his own." We must remember that Śaṅkara's interpretation of "*kasya svid dhanam*" (Iśopaniṣad 2005) that it is a rhetorical question challenging the idea of individual ownership of wealth: Whose, after all, is wealth? Nobody's! Marcel Mauss does discuss Classical Hindu Ethics of donation, the endless discourses on the act of gift-making which start from the Ṛgveda and run into those one hundred and sixty six chapters of the 13th part of the *Mahābhārata* called "Dānadharmaparva". Yet even after quoting the most eloquent passages about the categorical imperative of hospitality, charity and sharing of wealth and the vice of hoarding from the ancient Indian sources, strangely enough, he calls this the Brahminical interplay of *exchange*. But if giving or sharing is morally obligatory, how can it be supposed to be done with the expectation of reciprocation, in the spirit of barter? Barter seems to be inherently hypothetical in character: if you want to get riches from the fire-god give him some ritual offering first (literally butter Him up!). If you want merit in heaven or the after-life then give alms to the monk or donations to the church. But one kind of *dāna* I think is not like this. It is not a utilitarian or benefit-motivated, optional or super-arrogatory, *kāmyakarma*, but a bounden duty, a *nityakarma* of a householder. Whoever owns property has a duty to give a portion of it. Whoever eats must share her food. Such giving brings no merit, no moral gain. *Not-giving* brings moral loss. A *nityakarma* is defined as that of which the omission is sinful but the commission is not beneficial to the doer. There is no merit in paying back your debts, though there is demerit in failing to give back what one owes. Dana should be thankless also because it is always inadequate compared to how much one owes. Hence shame in the giver is a fine but rare virtue. I have tried to expose some logical and ethical difficulties in the very concept of obligatory giving from which a new concept of ownership or possession follows.

This is the conception of owning while owing, possession as based

on a series of congenital debts. Without abolishing private property, this conception can keep our moral struggle against greed and avarice alive by constantly urging us to reflect that money and meaning are possible because there are others who co-create them with us. If we forget our duties towards our class-others, gender-others, cultural-others, species-others and even temporal-others – past and future generations – then our possessions swallow us up. We become the food of our own food.

5. Concluding ideas I shall owe to whoever will read this essay, for my idea becomes mine only when someone else “listens” to them as “authored” by me:

One of the first words that my two-year-old daughter learned to lisp, proudly on occasions but plaintively more often, was “*mine*”. I can almost remember the resolute pursing together and then expansive opening up of her tiny pair of lips as they would vocalize the “m” and the “ā” sound that she mastered much earlier in saying “Mā”. “That is māi mother”, “This tricycle is māyine”, “That Barbie doll is mmāyine!!”. This was neither a remarkable linguistic achievement nor an embarrassing character flaw in her. All children her age, long before they can pronounce “tricycle”, pick up that momentous word “mine”, or its equivalent in whichever language they are born in. Usually it coincides with the first experience of playing with other kids and having to stake a claim of proprietorship. Just as triangulation (a la Donald Davidson in (Thompson 2011)¹ starts to make an objective world of objects appear with myself and another person looking at the same common object, a triangulation between self, other and an object in the world is required for the possessive “mine” to gain meaning, for besides the owner and the owned, it requires the actual or potential “other”-claimant. This partitioned triangulation is like a bisected triangle, which underscores the left-out third corner as the non-owner. Right there, the other conscious body of a little person very similar to oneself, is ushered into the child’s play-room only to be thwarted: “Come, look at these objects I possess, you can admire them, even play with them a little, giving me company, but you cannot have them or take them away”. I claim a commodity as freely accessible by myself for my use, but viewed by another as belonging to me but not to her, such that the other needs my permission for access to it. This sort of interrupted triangulation starts with learning a possession-relation which has primarily an exclusionary purpose. “Mine” means, “not yours”. The pride expressed by that expression, I would like to

imagine, starts off more as warmth of feeling and protective fondness for the object and less, at least at that early stage, as a competitive glory and showing off. But the envy-generating conspicuousness of consumption, the fear and complain, the aggressive avarice soon come tumbling after, when juvenile social pressure requires taking turns on the tricycle or letting other girls play with that Barbie doll. So, my daughter's strong feeling of entitlement to snatch an object away from the hands of a covetous or even curious little colleague would come out almost like an interjection "Its mine". It would have been unfair and pointless to ask her, then, "But what do you mean by "mine"? What is most frustrating is that it seems equally unfair and pointless to ask her even now as she is a college graduate or even to ask her if she becomes the proprietor or CEO of a large company or remains relatively poor owning very few things: "What do you mean by "mine"? It is entirely possible that Justin Timberlake who owned "MySpace" had a precise legal definition at his disposal to support his claims of which businesses are his own, but those who really acted as if that electronic social networking site deliberately misleadingly called "MySpace" was really their private space, would not bother to think what it is that make a space or a home or even a gadget his or her own.

As I think back, I realize that as a parent, it was "my" implicit expectation that my child learns, as she learns to talk, at least two uses of that possessive word, even before she could speak full sentences using that word. One is the use we made when I or her mother would say "You are *my* baby". In some sense she was mine, but surely not either in the sense in which my back or leg was mine, or in the sense in which my shirt or watch was mine. Apart from the fact that my watch was replaceable but my daughter was not, one big difference between my owning my watch and my owning my daughter was that I could not belong to my watch, but I belonged to my daughter. I was hers, so she could say "my father" when referring to me. This is the second use of "my" I wanted her to learn. But of course that must have been confusing. The first sense, I expected, will show her why she must obey me and not necessarily any other man. But the second sense, did not carry the implication that I should obey her because I was hers. Surely possession cannot be a reversible relation. If the little chair belongs to me, I cannot belong to the little chair. Yet, human inter-personal belongings often aspire to be mutual. Could my child ever understand that we could both point at each other and say "mine"? Does that make sense? One could try to demystify it by saying, as a child and young adult,

she was ours, because we were responsible for her life and wellbeing. In her adulthood, especially when we grow too old to take care of ourselves we belong to her, because we become her responsibility. But that kind of taking turns in one-sided ownership is not what this mutual belonging is all about.

Eventually my child should know me as her father and in that sense I was hers. The other is the use of “mine” for her body or body parts. I would not just teach “that is a hand” this is a foot” those are eyes, but would also teach the distinction between “my hand” and Your hand, or mother’s face and my face.

So, actually four kind’s of private ownerships came under that little genitive (possessive) predicate: the symmetric relation between father and daughter, the asymmetric relation between a person and his or her body parts, the asymmetric relation between a person and her material possessions, and finally the asymmetric relation between a author/thinker/artist and her own original ideas or writings or artistic creations. Each of these relations, at different levels, could be constitutive of who my daughter took herself to be. It seems, then, that she could not first figure out what “I” meant and then, learning the general function of deriving “Belongs to X” from “X”, derived ‘mine’ from it. It was the other way around. Mine was primary, and I was derived from it. There would be no I without my possessions. No ‘*aham*’, without ‘*mama*’. Indeed, there is a clue to this left in the Sanskrit word “*sva*” which means two things: oneself, and wealth or possessions. To illustrate, self-awareness is called “*sva-samvedana*”, self-rule is called “*sva-rAḥ*”. But one who does not have any wealth, any possession is called “*nih-sva*”, other’s property is called “*para-sva*”. In a mysterious verse (XIV, *Asvamedhika Parvan*, 13.3, we have referred to in the very opening essay), the *Mahabharata* tells us that two syllables spell death, They are actually one and the same syllable “*ma*” repeated twice. “*mama*” (not “*Mama*” as the English word for mother is pronounced with two long aa-s), in Sanskrit, means *mine*. This hardly makes sense to us in these ego-centric times. Life, the opposite of death, seems to require a sense of mine.. of ownership—possessing something I can call my own, at least a body I have some right and control over. *Mama* should be the spelling of life, we feel like protesting, not of death.

But we do not have to blindly take it from scripture or a religious epic like the *Mahabharata* that the word “mine” signifies death. We can investigate within our own reason and intuition what exactly is deadly about death? Why are we afraid of our own death? Because it is utterly and logically unknown. It is not just unknown like a

country one has never visited, but could visit and come back to tell us reliably about. Death is something I see happening to other people but cannot imagine myself quite succumbing to such complete wipe-off, an existence-deletion as it were. So, conceptually "my death" is a whirlpool of errors and contradictions. There is no one in that imagined scenario who can claim it to be happening to "me" because it is precisely the elimination of that claimant, Yet, that does not mean that it is just any old death who cares whose. My death, however mind-boggling (and body-boggling), is the ultimate concern of mine.

So, to call something "death" is primarily to identify it as a dark abyss of impossible errors, errors that do not loosen their grip on us even when they are exposed intellectually to be errors.

Now, very simply put, my deeply troubling hunch is this. "Mine" is a mine of such errors, errors which give us endless grief, but which we cannot help committing as long as we live. It is like a sickness we secretly love because we have become so used to it that it is unimaginable how we can live without it. Perhaps all other existential plights and blights are quarried out of this horrid hollow of "mine". Why? Because it is a product of two notions: the notion "I" which stands for the ego, or as it is called in Sanskrit "ahamkāra", and the notion ownership. We have seen earlier in this essay how from different points of view—the Buddhist perspective or the Vedic perspective —this Mind-Body complex which we call the first person is an error-breeding error. At every level, I regard myself as standing outside, beyond comparison with all other individuals who are objects of my thought, whereas I am the thinker. I stay just outside my visual field as the viewer. Yet, I also put myself inside the field as one of the items or players on the field. Even as, "knower of the field", I make that self-exemption, that "I-am-special"-claim, I also happily objectify myself because I recognize that I am no different than every other self, and I am one among many. I am one of those self-exempting uniqueness-claimants. I AM a You because I am YOU to you, but I can never be YOU because you are a second person whereas I remain the first person. This subject object confusion is the root of the notion of Individual ego. Ahamkara is this "cit-jadra granthi" (knot of physicality and consciousness). So the ego is a clot of confluences. But why is ownership, independently, an error? "X owns Y" is also, at bottom, an inconsistent notion, especially when it means private ownership, which, like "subjective justification" claims to be, at the same time, subject to yet free from public rule-following strictures. So the possessive case is another clot of confusions. Now

putting these two sets of incurable errors of the “I”-usage and property-possession we obtain the notion MINE. Hence it is an abyss of errors: not just a “*tāmisra*” darkness, but “*andha-tāmisra*”, blinding darkness. And this is one meaning we can attach to the claim that “mine”-saying is dying.

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NOTES

1. I would have liked to include two more sections on Immanuel Kant's discussion of Private Property and Proudhon's 10 arguments against the cogency of the very idea of private property. But time did not permit to actually include them in this paper with proper referencing. Some of the Kant references, and critical work on him will be available from the internet, in (Buck 1987)