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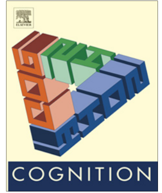

If I am free, you can't own me: Autonomy makes entities less ownable

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ABSTRACT

Although people own myriad objects, land, and even ideas, it is currently illegal to own other humans. This reluctance to view people as property raises interesting questions about our conceptions of people and about our conceptions of ownership. We suggest that one factor contributing to this reluctance is that humans are normally considered to be autonomous, and autonomy is incompatible with being owned by someone else. To investigate whether autonomy impacts judgments of ownership, participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk read vignettes where a person paid for an entity (Experiments 1 and 3) or created it (Experiment 2). Participants were less likely to judge that the entity was owned when it was described as autonomous compared with when it was described as non-autonomous, and this pattern held regardless of whether the entity was a human or an alien (Experiments 1 and 3), a robot (Experiments 2 and 3), or a human-like biological creation (Experiment 2). The effect of autonomy was specific to judgments of whether entities were owned, and it did not influence judgments of the moral acceptability of paying for and keeping entities (Experiment 3). These experiments also found that judgments of ownership were separately impacted by ontological type, with participants less likely to judge that humans are owned compared with other kinds of entities. A fourth experiment tested a further prediction of the autonomy account, and showed that participants are more likely to view a person as owned if he willingly sells himself. Together these findings show that attributions of autonomy constrain judgments of what can be owned.

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1. Introduction

In a typical urban environment, almost everything is owned. We each own hundreds of objects, both human-made artifacts like cellphones and refrigerators, and natural kinds like fossilized rocks and seashells. We own buildings, from skyscrapers to cottages, the land that the buildings are on, and the plants on the land. We even own the animals we keep in our houses, farms, and zoos. Those objects that happen to not be owned—a pinecone, a vacant lot, a stray cat—nonetheless *may* become owned, either through a financial transaction, or simply through acquiring possession of the object. We can even own immaterial things like ideas.

One interesting exception to this practice of owning everything in our environments is that we do not own other people, and we may even be reluctant to say that people can be owned. This reluctance to view people as owned is interesting for at least three reasons. First, reluctance to view people as owned may be an example of the elevated moral status accorded to people in comparison to other entities, like animals (Singer, 1975). Understanding why we are reluctant to view people as owned might thus be informative about the psychological bases of this elevated status. Second, this reluctance suggests constraints on which things people can attempt to acquire and control, and limits on people's ownership behaviors. Hence, understanding this reluctance will be informative about the psychology of ownership. Finally, this investigation might help illuminate why intuitions about the ownership of people sometimes differ. People have been viewed as potential property throughout much of human history, and human trafficking, although globally illegal, remains a widespread problem, currently affecting an estimated 30 million people worldwide (UNODC, 2012).

Many factors might contribute to a reluctance to view people as property. As mentioned, it is currently illegal to own another person in every country in the world. Likewise, most people recognize that the historic practice of slavery was extremely immoral. So awareness of the illegality and immorality of owning people could lead us to reject the idea that a person could be owned. However,

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other items, such as banned weapons, illegal narcotics, or child pornography are illegal and immoral to own, but are viewed as ownable nonetheless. This suggests that when considering the ownership of people, factors unique to human beings (or perhaps extending to other entities) may be central in our reluctance to view people as property.

One such factor may be that we consider humans to be autonomous. Having autonomy entails that people are entitled to decide what happens to themselves, and that others should not normally interfere with these decisions (Feinberg, 1982; Nussbaum, 1995). Autonomy is relevant to ownership because a central aspect of ownership is that owners can decide what happens to their property (Honoré, 1961; Kim & Kalish, 2009; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2013; Snare, 1972; Van de Vondervoort & Friedman, 2015) and this is incompatible with a piece of property having its own autonomy (Nussbaum, 1995). Hence, we might resist viewing people as owned because this view contradicts the belief that they have autonomy.

The attribution of autonomy to people is ubiquitous, early-emerging, and influences judgments across a number of domains. Adults, adolescents, and even young children maintain that people are entitled to make certain self-relevant decisions for themselves, including choosing which items they prefer, who they befriend, and what happens to their bodies, even given opposition from authority figures (e.g., Helwig, 1997; Killen & Smetana, 1999; Lagattuta, Nucci, & Bosacki, 2010; Nucci, 1981; Nucci & Weber, 1995; Ruck, Abramovitch, & Keating, 1998). Likewise, autonomy implies free will and the ability to choose, and again, even young children view people as having these capacities (Kushnir, Gopnik, Chernyak, Seiver, & Wellman, 2015). Conversely, when belief in these capacities is diminished, this has ramifications in the moral domain, increasing immoral behavior, such as lying, cheating, stealing, and aggressive behaviors (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009; Vohs & Schooler, 2008), and reducing the extent to which people hold others responsible for their immoral actions and retributively punish them (Shariff et al., 2014).

However, we know little about how attributions of autonomy affect people's ownership judgments. Although recent research has begun to investigate the factors that allow an entity to be an owner (Noles, Keil, Bloom, & Gelman, 2012), no research has yet examined the characteristics of entities that determine whether they can be property. Related research suggests that human-made artifacts are more likely to be seen as owned than are natural kinds like shells or rocks (Neary, Van de Vondervoort, & Friedman, 2012). However, this research did not investigate the ownership of animate entities, although some such entities are frequent targets of ownership (e.g., pet ownership). Thus this research represents the first investigation of whether certain characteristics of entities may enable or preclude their being perceived as property.

The current experiments test whether attributions of autonomy contribute to judgments about whether people are owned. Two major predictions follow from this proposal. First, we should be less willing to view a person as owned by someone else when we attribute autonomy to them, but more willing to view them as owned if we do not attribute autonomy to them. This prediction should extend to non-human entities—a robot or alien that lacks autonomy may be viewed as more ownable than one that has autonomy. We explore this prediction of the autonomy account in Experiments 1–3. The second prediction of this account is that if a person were to voluntarily sell himself, people should be more likely to view him as owned. In this instance, being owned would be consistent with autonomy, because in giving his consent to be owned he would be deciding what happens to himself. We explore this prediction in Experiment 4.

2. Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, participants read short vignettes in which a person purchased and possessed a living entity, and were asked whether they agreed that the person now owned the entity. To examine the effects of autonomy on ownership judgments, we manipulated whether the entity was described as autonomous or not, anticipating that participants would be more likely to say that the entity was owned when it lacked autonomy, compared with when it was autonomous.

We also manipulated two other properties of the entities in the vignettes. First, we manipulated whether they were human or not. Including non-humans was useful because it allowed us to examine the robustness of effects of autonomy—it allowed us to test whether autonomy influences ownership in a general sense, and that its effects are not just restricted to judgments about owning people.

Second, we also manipulated whether the entities were highly intelligent and had sophisticated minds. Manipulating this was important because autonomy can be viewed, at least in part, as related to an entity's mental capacities (e.g., it implies the capacity to make choices). So rather than being influenced by autonomy *specifically*, ownership judgments could instead be influenced by consideration of an entity's other mental abilities. Broadly consistent with this possibility, entities with more human-like minds have long been argued to deserve greater moral standing than entities with less human-like minds (e.g., Aristotle, 1999; Kant, 1785), and when people attribute more mind to an entity, they also confer it moral rights and responsibilities (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007; Waytz, Gray, Epley, & Wegner, 2010), and attributing less mind leads to diminished moral concern (Haslam, 2006; Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). Manipulating whether entities had sophisticated minds therefore allowed us to distinguish effects of autonomy on ownership judgments from effects of other mental capacities.

2.1. Method

Three hundred twenty-four American participants (aged 18–73, 36% female) were recruited online through Amazon Mechanical Turk, and read the following opening scenario:

> Mike is at Andy's warehouse. Andy points toward a door, and tells Mike, "If you give me 1 million dollars, you can keep what's behind that door." Mike asks Andy what is behind the door, so Andy opens it to show him.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of 8 conditions in a 2(Ontological Type: human or alien) × 2(intelligent or non-intelligent) × 2(autonomous or non-autonomous) between-subjects design. Each participant read a description of either a human being with a medical condition known as Krugonia, or an alien life form of the Krugonian species. In all conditions, the entity was described as moving extremely slowly but being incredibly strong (in order to provide plausible medical symptoms for the mentally healthy human). The entity was then described as either having or lacking the ability to solve complex problems, communicate using language, and experience a vast range of emotions. Throughout this paper, we refer to this cluster of capacities as "Intelligence" for ease of exposition, but note that this description includes a capacity for rich emotional experience, which may not be normally captured by the concept "intelligent". Each entity was then describes as autonomous or not, with autonomy operationalized as the ability to make decisions for oneself, to resist acting on one's desires, to resist following the instructions of others, and being held responsible for one's actions. See Fig. 1 for detailed scenarios.

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