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**Origins of Virtue/Homesteading the Noosphere**

In a land of unlimited resources, how does one define value? Where does one define ownership? Eric Raymond, in his essay “Homesteading the Noosphere”, attempts to answer these questions. In this essay, I will compare and contrast Raymond’s views with Ridley’s from “The Origins of Virtue”. A book published in the late 1990’s which attempts to explain human society as a culmination of our evolutionary past. Using modern mathematics, ecological, and psychological study, Ridley shows throughout the ages how man has survived - no - thrived in the earth.

The open-source society is an interesting manifestation of human creativity. Because of the primarily capitalistic society we live in, the open source community may seem like an anomaly to normal human behavior. This is not necessarily an anomaly. In fact, much of the hacker culture can be readily explained by looking beneath the intentions of these perceived “altruistic” beings called ‘hackers’. First we will examine the hacker culture. The hacker culture is defined as a gift/craftsmanship culture by Raymond. This culture makes up the values and customs of the open-source society. Ridley resonates with Raymond in this regard. Ridley cites that cultures that have immense wealth gain prestige through what they give away. Then we will examine the genetic motivations of the hacker, by digging into Ridley’s focus on the ‘selfish gene’, and possibly where Raymond might have fallen short in his analysis. Finally, the meaning of ownership and property is examined as it relates to the open-source culture, and why the hackers do not subvert their colleagues, and steal another’s work.

The hackers dwell in a hybrid gift/craftsmanship culture. In a ‘land’ where replication of a good is (somewhat) limitless (i.e. making a copy of a program or file); how does one find value?  There must be some sort of value for the hacker to contribute his abilities, and time to an open-source project. In ‘Homesteading the Noosphere’, Raymond argues that the hackers live for reputation from their peers. This reputation is gained through giving thought and talent to the project. Of course knowing that the hacker culture is a derivative of a gift culture, this makes perfect sense. By pretending to give away hours of effort. The hacker is deemed an altruistic being by her/his peers. Notice the word ‘pretending’ in that statement. Because, in fact, the hacker reaps benefits from this ‘giving away’. Raymond says that the hacker culture is not an exchange culture, which may be true. But as Ridley noted, humans are wired to expect some reciprocity, so there really is some expected return on a hacker’s investment. Though it seems most hackers would not admit the fact their ‘gifts’ are really investments. Appearing to expect some return could appear to be a padding of the ego. Even a practice the prestigious Linus Torvalds, and Larry Wall do not participate in padding of the ego. Raymond states that, “Only sublimated and disguised forms [of ego satisfaction] like ‘peer repute’, ‘self-esteem’, ‘professionalism’, or ‘pride of accomplishment’ are generally acceptable.”. Raymond readily cites the fact that hackers rarely are conscious of their own motives because their own selfish instincts are unconsciously masked by altruism.

Raymond failed to touch on the contempt that is generally felt throughout the community for closed source software. It is important to be aware, as Ridley pointed out in chapter nine, that groups are more successful when the situation is ‘Us versus Them’. Not that all hackers hate major closed-source software development firms, but there is a sense of groupishness about the open-source community. In fact, some of the projects that replicate closed source software are highly praised throughout the open-source community. Could the value of these programs stem from the primal form of groupishness? It could be a manifestation of what Ridley refers to in chapter 9. Ridley cites Hartung, “A parochial perspective characterizes most religions because most religions were developed by groups whose survival depended upon competition with other groups. Such religions, and the in-group morality they foster, tend to outlive the competition that spawned them’. I see a direct comparison here. It is possible the open source community has emerged as an alternative to closed source software rather than through purely organic thought. Regardless, we are now seeing the manifestation of the success of open-source software as many enterprise level companies now cater to the Ubuntu/Apache users of the world!

Another topic that Raymond does not touch on, as it relates to hacker culture, is the idea of the selfish gene. Raymond derives that the value of prestige and reputation was the primary motive for contributing to open-source projects. But why so temporary a reward? In order to co-inside with Ridley’s view of the selfish gene in chapter one. For most actions, there most likely is some selfish motive for the creature. Because, of course, we are a sum of selfish parts. Perhaps the real currency of the hackers is the ability to pass on their legacy through code. According to the theory of the selfish gene by Richard Dawkins, ‘individuals do not consistently do things for the good of their group, or their families, or even themselves’. What if the hackers motive is attributed to the selfish gene as well as the craftsmanship/gift culture? The programmers who contributed to the original installment of emacs will be engrained in open-source history. What better way to leave a legacy (pardon the pun) than to have your code outlive your ability to contribute? I don’t want to argue that the Raymond has missed the mark on his analysis. But, it is important to ponder Ridley’s arguments about how the human, at the cellular level, wants to survive. If the only primary motivation for contributing to a project is reputation and prestige, then the reward for the hacker’s hard work is only reaped by the hacker; leaving the genes to wither and die with no legacy. This directly conflicts with the selfish gene.

In the Noosphere, hackers can lay claim, found, or be handed ownership of a project. These principles (though hackers would shudder to think) replicate the Anglo-American common law theory of land ownership. There is no governing body that enforces these rules, in fact, they are held in place by the community as a whole. As I have iterated here, how can one lay claim in the Noosphere? What sort of visible entity can be used to give a face to the project. Where can a project find it’s ‘home’? Many project owners do this in the form of a home page for their project! As Raymond says, property is important. Even in the open source world, this property plays a role. It helps draw the line between projects in the Noosphere in order to reduce intraspecieces violence. So, by setting these bounds, we can easily decipher the regular, non-aggressive behavior from intrusive behavior. I believe this coincides quite nicely with the lobster fishermen Ridley cites in Chapter twelve. Where if you are treading in another’s territory when you should not be, your line can be cut. In other words, if you participate in taboo behavior within a project, it is not only the owner that with shun or flame you, it is the community. Even if the open source culture is a sum of selfish parts; each hacker does have a reason to act towards the greater good. It is to strengthen the community as a whole.

In conclusion, it appears that Ridley and Raymond’s analysis generally agree with one another. The open-source community is a gift/craftsmanship culture with an Anglo-American approach to project ownership. Hackers may think of themselves as altruistic, but Ridley readily states in chapter six that a truly altruistic person would never give a gift in the first place. This brings up the argument for the selfish gene. Where is the legacy in only reputation, and prestige? Surely there must be some explanation at the genetic level for the open-source model to work. If each hacker is inherently selfish, then they must have some motivation to further the open-source community as a whole. Otherwise the culture would crumble. What is their motivation? Perhaps the answer lies in the idea of strengthening the community does in fact further each hacker’s self interest. If each hacker were completely selfish, and not concerned with the open-source community, there would be a ‘tragedy of the commons’. If every hacker claimed another’s work as his own. This would dismantle the community’s trust, which in turn would threaten the legacy of each hacker. This lack of legacy, and reputation would most surely eliminate the value in which the hacker longs. So the hackers do not only have an interest in promoting the customs of the community; they MUST promote the customs of the community. Otherwise the fall of the open-source community would inevitable ensue. Leaving each hacker without the prestige, and reputation in which they have been so heavily invested.