

[INTERPERSONAL DATA](#)

The misleading name, metaphor defiance, and awesome potential of "personal data"

By Philip Sheldrake · January 17, 2019

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We have a problem and an opportunity currently labelled "personal data".

The opportunity encompasses nothing less than a complete redesign of our lives and societies and our collective ability to grapple with complex adaptive systems including [super-wicked problems](#) — but this will remain elusive until we've wrestled with the "personal data" problem, including the problem of the way we frame the opportunity and problem.

While we needed the General Data Protection Regulation ([GDPR](#)) to stop some very disrespectful and frankly unethical and harmful practices relating to personal data, no regulation can require innovation. The innovation, indeed transformation, I'm talking about here is in the spirit if not the letter of the regulation. Perhaps the most prominent and simplest explanation for why it cannot be to the letter is contained in the Regulation's first definition ([Article 4](#)) by which "an identified or identifiable natural person" is thereafter known as a "data subject", which is entirely the wrong framing for the kind of innovation I envisage.

This topic is core to my work and this post serves two purposes. First, selfishly, it's a way to communicate efficiently without having to repeat the contents on a weekly basis. Second, I hope to identify more like and dislike minds in seeking the collective intelligence needed to explore the bountiful and indeed existentially-critical opportunity sooner than later.

I do have some ambition for brevity here, so don't expect a full thesis on the topic but rather an outline with some decent signposts. The brevity I did manage still better suited a series of three posts. This is the first of the three.

The early Internet and Web communities entertained some big dreams — democratized access to information, a more inclusive and just world, and so healthier and happier citizens. We were simply to slough off the old ways and resign the previous 'order' to history.

But it hasn't worked out like that. So far.

Rather, we have disinformation rebranded "fake news", deep privacy invasions by both state and industry, and a growing hegemonic concentration of digital products and services, and — most vitally — of data.

And just a few weeks ago we got [another reminder](#) that our politicians still obsess with the false dichotomy of security versus privacy, and do so with sufficient stupidity to believe the laws of their country superior to the laws of mathematics. Good luck with that.

Joking aside, their efforts undermine the very societal qualities they believe they're defending. A very different approach is required.

I research and help engineer the development and application of cryptonetworking with a focus on so-called personal data. The goal is individual empowerment and, concurrently, encouraging the emergence of collective intelligence. I'm fortunate to be doing so under the auspices of the [AKASHA Foundation](#), the [Digital Life Collective](#), and Southampton University's [School of Electronics and Computer Science](#).

The "personal data" problem

Simply speaking, the problem is this ... the I and the we are not really separable.

Stereotypically, the Weltanschauung of Western cultures emphasises individuality, perhaps most naively [personified](#) by Ayn Rand adherents. From a different perspective, Professor Luciano Floridi seeks to understand the informational nature of personal identity, exploring three levels of individuating detachment:

... selves emerge as the last step in a process of detachment from reality that begins with a corporeal membrane encapsulating an organism, proceeds through a cognitive membrane encapsulating an intelligent animal, and concludes with a consciousness membrane encapsulating a mental self or simply a mind.

... The self emerges as a break with nature, not as a super connection with it.

[Professor Luciano Floridi](#)

Equally stereotypically, some Eastern cultures are attributed with giving the collectivity primacy. I'm guessing most people who might read my stuff will be immersed in individualistic culture, so here are just three alternative perspectives.

On my interpretation, for the Confucians there are only interrelated persons, no individual selves.

... By emphasizing our sociality, the Confucians simultaneously emphasize our relationality: an abstract individual I am not, but rather ... a particular son, husband, father, grandfather, teacher, student, colleagues, neighbor, friend, and more. In all of these roles I am defined in large measure by the other(s) with whom I interact, highly specific personages related to me in one way or another; they are not abstract autonomous individuals either. Moreover, we do not "play" these roles, as we tend to speak of them, but rather live our roles, and when all of them have been specified, and their interrelationships made

manifest, then we have, for Confucius, been thoroughly individuated, but with nothing left over with which to piece together an autonomous individual self. Being thus the aggregate sum of the roles I live, it must follow that as I grow older my roles will change, and consequently I become quite literally a different person.

[Henry Rosemont, Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of ...](#)

Going even further east geographically speaking, here's a personal reflection:

I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a tofi (inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my sense of belonging.

[Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi, Head of State of Samoa 2007-2017](#)

And to mix it up a bit more, a South American:

Our original guiding stars are struggle and hope. But there is no such thing as a lone struggle, no such thing as a lone hope. In every human being are combined the most distant epochs, passivity, mistakes, sufferings, the pressing urgencies of our own time, the pace of history.

[Pablo Neruda](#)

To my mind, neither the individual nor the collectivity can *be* nor *become* without the other, in which case we need to take a look at the language here in preparing the ground for thinking about "personal data".

The establishment of [gender-neutral pronouns](#) across many languages is well underway for the simple reason that binary conceptions of gender do not represent the world, as anyone with a rudimentary grasp of complexity can appreciate. Similarly, the number-based *singular* and *plural* forms serve to reinforce a conceptualisation of the world as consisting of parts and wholes. This has practical quotidian application of course but falls short in accommodating situations demanding sense-making of and action-taking within complex adaptive systems.

It's recognising and in fact celebrating such complexity that led me to a biologically inspired term for exploring the regenerative interweave of the digital fabric — the [Internetome](#).

Comprehending complexity requires some shifts in thinking. For me, these include:

- Away from the reductionism of 'parts and wholes' towards the simultaneity of a thing being both a part and a whole (holonic philosophy), and perhaps then to an [implicate order](#) — a sort of holism beyond the scope of this post
- Away from a focus on the agents (nodes, things, groups) towards a focus on the relationships (the edges, dynamics, liminality, interdependencies), per [Actor-Network theory](#) and ultimately to [agencement](#) — the continuous flux of assembling and reassembling.

Perhaps we need a number-neutral pronoun in the context of complex systems and I sometimes invoke *Wei* — a portmanteau of *we* and *I* that I pronounce *way*. I'm not writing this, *wei* is — concurrently *I* in the context of *we* and *we* in the context of *I*; neither singular nor plural.

For every hyperlinked acknowledgement in this post there are a thousand conversations and shared insights that are being channeled right here, right now, that are simply impossible to tease apart let alone reference individually. I strongly suspect that the vast majority of "original thinking" originates in the *wei* not the *I*.

— For readability, I will revert to *I*. —

Similarly, [I have concluded](#) that the response to the current and deeply unhealthy dominance of *their* tech (think Facebook, Google, and their Chinese counterparts) is not *my* tech but *our* tech — a [self-sovereignty](#) where the "self" in question refers to various

wei not just I, and where the combining (agencement) of humans and technologies is indivisible (hence the elision of our and tech).

Our world needs neologisms, as indeed it always has. Nevertheless, you will probably agree that offering up a new pronoun to technologists and lawmakers isn't going to form the basis for the most effective communication! Fortunately, following a conversation with my colleague [Mihai Alisie](#), I think we can make a functionally-similar point in the specific context here with more readily understood language.

It turns out that there is very few data that may be described as purely *personal* data. That lunch date, that genome map, those photos, that joint bank account — all turn out to be **interpersonal data**. In fact, a personal bank account also records the relationship between two parties / persons (the bank and its customer), and lists transactions between the account owner and other parties / persons.

The prefix *inter* is familiar and requires an apparently simple shift in locus, and yet deeper down it offers a way forward to engineer the complexity needed to respond to the complexity (per the [law of requisite variety](#)).

Maintaining the word *person* just about stretches to our needs in terms of [personhood](#), encompassing legal persons (organizations recognized as having privileges and obligations under law) and quite reasonably [transhumans](#). To press the point home fully however, any organizing (assemblage, however ephemeral or enduring) would also need to be a person.

- I am a person
- Alphabet Inc. is a person, as are its subsidiaries, e.g. Google
- Her Majesty's Government is a person, as are its Departments
- A family is a person of persons
- [Molly Millions](#) is a person
- [Hawking Incorporated](#) was a person.

Now let's consider persons living — i.e. relating, interdepending, responding, learning. In other words, exchanging information, where the [information is a difference that makes a difference](#). We're now in the realm of interpersonal data.

Before progressing to the problems propagated today by the very ways we frame the problem and opportunity of personal data, one final observation here — data has no scale.

Sociologists reflect on the agent (individual) and the structure (society). Computer scientists think in terms of client (individual device) and server (including its agglomeration as "the cloud"). And yet such duality is akin to insisting a fractal be viewed at no more than two discrete scales. Nature doesn't work like this, and:

If one way be better than another, that you may be sure is
Nature's way.

Aristotle

We are then contemplating interpersonal data with no scale at every scale.



The problem of the way we frame the opportunity and problem

Our first forays in the digital world are, naturally, informed by prior experience and knowledge. We moved from mail to email, from files and folders to files and folders, from desktops to desktops, etc. Only much later does it occur to us that digital has unprecedented qualities — e.g. that search and discovery is preferable to filing, and new forms of communication may just beat email.

As noted above, language helps and constrains us. Language is metaphor, and our metaphors predate the innovation we attempt to describe and shape with our language. When it comes to personal data, this really isn't working out well for us, and in aspiring to head off the potential disastrous consequences Tony Fish [notes](#):

Data is data.

i.e. It is not like anything else. And I couldn't put it better myself. Yet here's what we're up against: data-as-property, data-as-labour, data-as-reputation, data-as-public-good, data-as-me.

In [the second post in this series of three](#), I explore the dominant conceptualization of personal data, that is as property, explaining why it is a woefully inadequate approach, and review the less well-known data-as-labour framing.

This post, the first in a series of three, has been shared on the [AKASHA dapp](#), and is also available on [my personal blog](#) and [Medium](#).

Image 1 by [Art by Lønfeldt](#). Image 2 by [Art by Lønfeldt](#).

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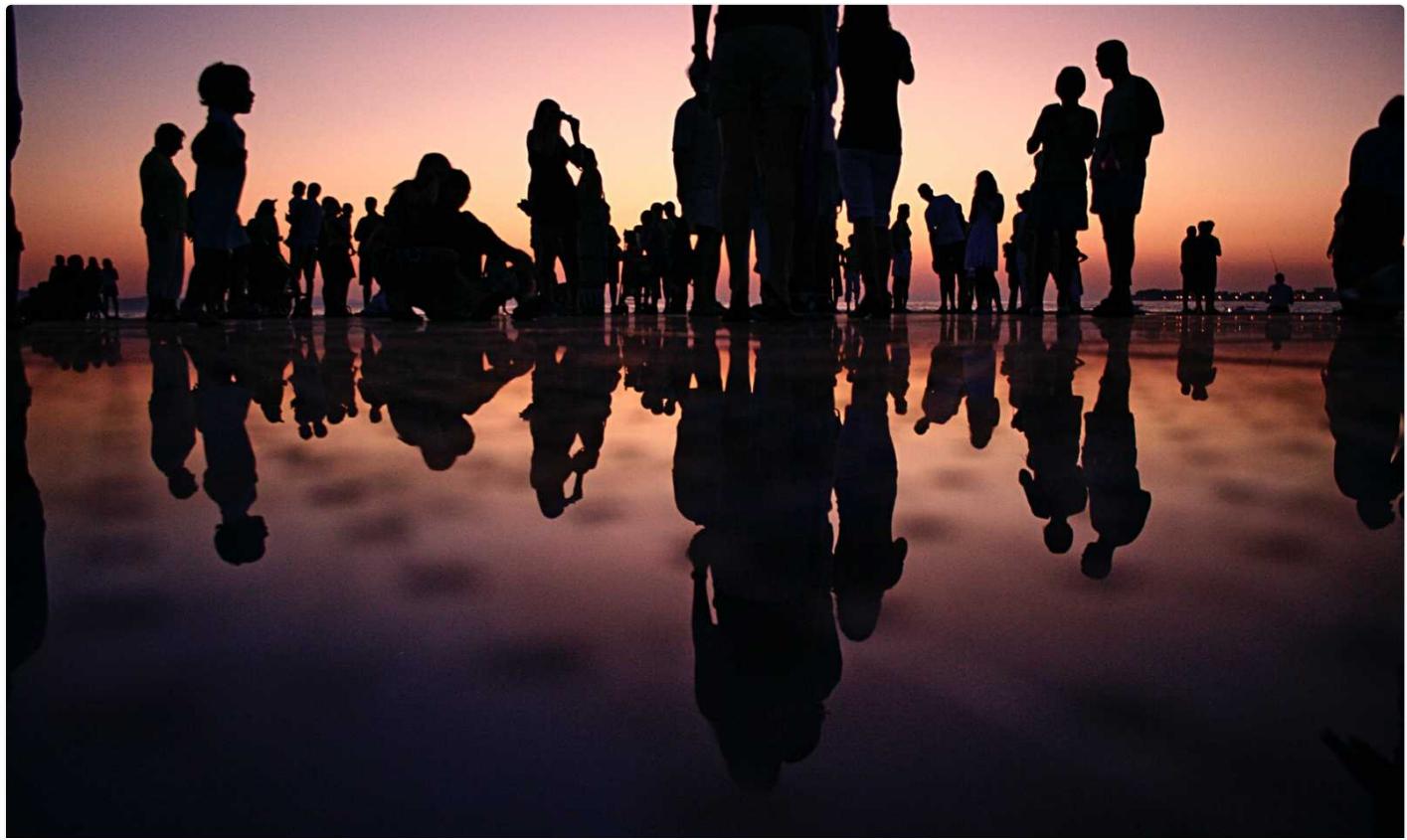
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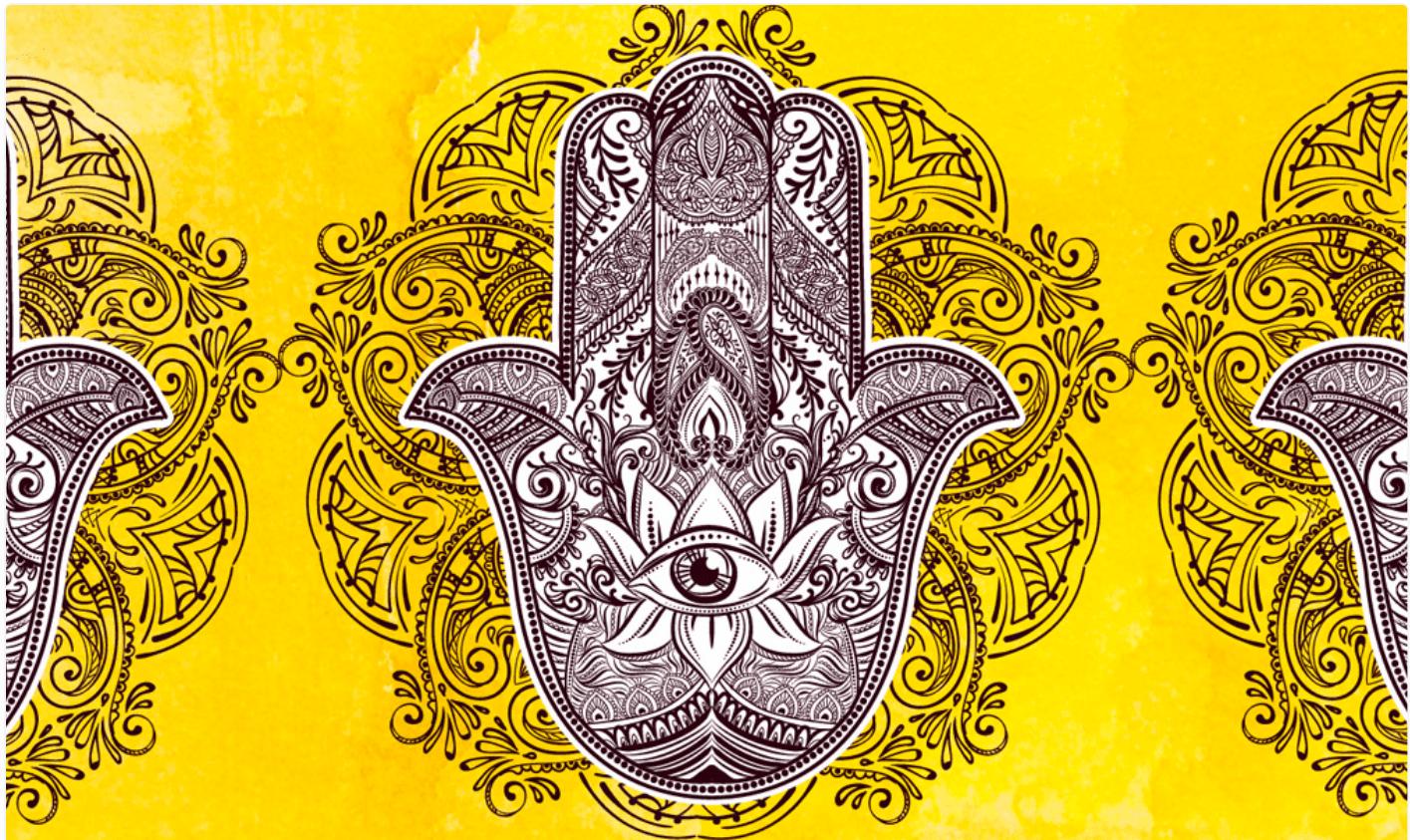
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