

## Reflection 02

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

Philip Sheldrake, 2019

In Philip Sheldrake's 2019 article "The misleading name, metaphor defiance, and awesome potential of "personal data" he explains that the way personal data is currently framed and understood by organisations, governments and individuals limits progress and innovation and even causes unsolvable problems like wicked problems to persist. He claims that to solve the problem and harness the opportunity of 'personal data' we must first actually understand what personal data is and properly communicate about it to each other. Sheldrake first explains cultural conceptions of the self and the other to frame his argument. He then discusses language and presents his own definition of how the self should be defined, which is more of a combination of 'I' and 'we', a mixture of collectivity and individualism. Next, he explains how personal data can be more accurately defined as interpersonal data and concludes that data has no scale so the ways that people currently try to work with and understand it goes against the nature of data itself. Sheldrake wishes that by properly understanding personal data people will become empowered and there will be an emergence of collective intelligence.

To frame his argument Sheldrake discusses stereotypical cultural conceptions of the self and other. He generalizes that in the West there is a tendency to adhere to individualism and in the East there is a tendency to emphasize collectivism. Sheldrake says that personally he thinks that:

*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"*

Sheldrake admits that this idea is not always easy to understand as people have been conditioned to think in either the West or East's paradigm and are used to binary concepts. To aid in the efforts of getting away from these understanding he proposes some ways of understanding complexity by moving "Away from the reductionism of 'parts and wholes' towards the simultaneity of a thing being both a part and a whole"

and moving “Away from a focus on the agents (nodes, things, groups) towards a focus on the relationships (the edges, dynamics, liminality, interdependencies)”. Sheldrake mentions that the portmanteau ‘Wei’ can accurately describe this conception of the self and other he hopes to share with the reader.

After framing the way in which he views collectivity and individualism Sheldrake then claims that personal data is not really personal but rather, interpersonal. He uses the example of a personal bank account as there are transactions with other people and organisations listed within this data – a person does not exist alone and neither does their data.

Finally, Sheldrake explains that the way that different groups of people go about analyzing data does not take into the account that data actually doesn’t have a scale. He says when we think we are thinking about personal data on a binary scale we are actually ‘contemplating interpersonal data with no scale at every scale”. Ultimately, Sheldrake claims that one must understand what personal data is and through rethinking how we frame it through language and our own cultural biases can we get closer to understanding it and then be able to solve global problems related to it.

**Reference:**

<https://medium.com/digital-life-collective/the-misleading-name-metaphor-defiance-and-awesome-potential-of-personal-data-2a794bc54760>