

NAVIGATING THE UNKNOWN: TOWARDS A POSITIVE CONCEPTION OF ANONYMITY

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ABSTRACT: Talk of anonymity floats freely and, in many contexts, rampantly in everyday, nonphilosophical discourse. But despite a surge of interest in anonymity—in anonymity protections, on the one hand, and anonymity harms and abuses, on the other—it is not at all clear what anonymity is. Is it simply a matter of being unknown? Or is anonymity something more, or less, than this? Unfortunately, existing analyses frame anonymity very generally as a phenomenon of unknowability and/or concealment. Consequently, they fail to capture what distinguishes anonymity and anonymity relations from, for example, privacy and privacy relations. In this paper, I explore a more precise way of articulating anonymity, developing what I call the “central anonymity paradigm,” which frames anonymity as the result of a specific exercise of control in which true pieces of information about a person are concealed from others with an effect of dissociability. I use this paradigm to show how anonymity is characteristically interpersonal and network-relative, and deeply connected to issues of personal identity.

Have more than thou showest
Speak less than thou knowest, . . .
And thou shalt have more
Than two tens to a score.

—Shakespeare, *King Lear*

1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS ANONYMITY?

When Odysseus finds himself trapped in the Cyclops’ cave in the ninth book of the *Odyssey*, he divulges his name to Polyphemus as “*Utiis*”—“No-man” or

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“No-body”—just before blinding him. When Polyphemus calls on his comrades for help, crying “Nobody is killing me,” he is met with indifference (if nobody is tormenting him, he must be insane), and Odysseus is able to escape.¹ Odysseus’ use of tactical disguise to his advantage was arguably the first documented use of anonymity. Today, there is a historically unprecedented surge of interest in anonymity that extends well beyond literature. We are told that anonymity is valuable, and sometimes indispensable, for securing personal information,² enhancing liberty and autonomy,³ and protecting rights to privacy and free speech.⁴ In specific contexts, anonymity is thought to be particularly useful to:

- (1) procure information that would not be forthcoming without it (as with whistleblowers, witnesses, and those giving testimony);
- (2) express unpopular opinions without fear of reprisal or retaliation,
- (3) protect those who are at a strategic disadvantage (as when women apply for jobs in still male-dominated fields);
- (4) encourage the reporting of socially stigmatizing conditions (e.g., alcoholism, HIV, and sexual abuse) and to provide a safe haven for recovery (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous);
- (5) encourage the donation of money and scarce resources, including gametes and organs;
- (6) ensure fairness and impartiality (as with the blind review of scholarly articles);
- (7) provide protection from persecution in climates of oppression; and
- (8) enable individuals to in any way live covertly or reclusively in the social sphere.

But, valuable though it may be to achieve positive goals, anonymity can also be employed to attain more ignoble ends. It can promote the promulgation of hate speech, allow identity thieves to get close to their victims, and enable cyber bullies, trolls, and griefers to behave irresponsibly on the internet.

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fayles (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 404–69.

² Helen Nissenbaum, “The Meaning of Anonymity in an Information age,” *The Information Society* 15 (1999): 141–44, 142.

³ Kathleen Wallace, “Anonymity,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 1 (1999): 23–35, 33.

⁴ Wallace, “Anonymity,” 23. See also *Watchtower Society v. Village of Stratton*, 536 U.S. 150 (2002) and *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, 514 U.S. 334 (1995).

Anonymity can even result in the de-individualization and homogenization of peoples. Because anonymity can alleviate accountability and even provide complete impunity, it is especially appealing for criminals and evil-doers, and can even seduce the average person to act as the morally worst version of herself. Plato's "Ring of Gyges" showed us that, by removing fear of censure and reprisal, anonymity can create a special sort of license to perform moral transgressions we might otherwise resist.⁵ Whether real or illusory, anonymity has a unique ability to create shame-free zones⁶ in which unrestrained, impulsive, and self-interested behavior can fly under the radar of social constraint.

Despite the panoply of harms and benefits associated with anonymity, it is not at all clear what anonymity is, whether it is the same across all contexts, or how it is able to function to both good *and* bad ends. Is anonymity simply a matter of being unknown? If so, unknown how and to what degree? And, how is the unknowability involved with anonymity standardly accomplished? Though talk of anonymity is ubiquitous in ordinary language, and even in political and legal discussions, its use in the nonphilosophical literature has far outrun a proper analysis of the phenomenon. There are a few exceptions, the most notable of which is Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore's *The Offensive Internet* (2011), which explores the role of anonymity in creating what they call the "dark side" of the internet. Earlier work includes Frederick Ellison's "Anonymity and Whistleblowing" (1982), and Helen Nissenbaum's "The Meaning of Anonymity in an Information Age" (1999) but, almost without exception, these analyses are particularized and focus primarily on

⁵ Plato's *Republic* 359a–360c. See also *Birds* 785ff. where Aristophanes describes being winged as enabling actions (e.g., adulterous relations) that would otherwise be impossible or more difficult. There are also more contemporary examples, especially in film, which play on this relation between invisibility and harm. In *Hollow Man*, the first thing Kevin Bacon's character (Dr. Sebastian Caine) does once he realizes he is fully invisible is to rape and murder a girl he has been spying on for some time. In *The Invisible Man*, Griffin (the story's antagonist) steals, commits arson, and threatens murder while invisible and, in the end, plans to use his invisibility to terrorize the nation.

⁶ While I think that anonymity is often motivated by the desire to avoid shame where it is standardly or rightly felt, it has been suggested to me that the creation of shame-free zones is just one species of anonymity acts since anonymous persons sometimes cannot, or should not, avoid feelings of shame. If I am stripped naked in front of a crowd at the Super Bowl, it is unlikely that anyone will know me (thus ensuring anonymity in the usual sense) but I would still feel shame. This would also be true if someone falsely shouts "Thief! Murderer!" as I walk by on a crowded street. In the first example, if the nakedness was voluntary (perhaps I decided to run naked across the field), then perhaps I ought to feel shame. Also, I suspect that sometimes the anonymous person's goal is not to avoid shame, *per se*, which is a moral emotion, but rather the accountability that would normally lead a person to feel ashamed. In these cases, perhaps what the anonymous person primarily wishes to avoid is the state of being found out ("no one can bust me because no one knows who I am") rather than feeling ashamed for what is found out about her.

adjudicating the value of anonymity in information systems. As such, there remains a dearth of analyses dedicated solely to the concept of anonymity itself. As John Mullan says, anonymity is “a phenomenon that has never been plotted or explained.”⁷

Despite the lack of a consistent and coherent understanding of the term, two notable themes emerge from this body of literature. One is that anonymity is a matter of being unknown: to be anonymous is to be unknown to others in some particular respect. Another is that anonymity is a phenomenon of concealment, specifically the concealment of personal information. Taken together, anonymity is generally, if not formally, understood to be the concealment of some information about a person from others who might know it. Though I am sympathetic to strategies that align anonymity with unknowability and concealment, I think they gloss over the distinctiveness of anonymity by aiming to make the concept capture too much. As such, they fail to show what distinguishes anonymity from other ways of being unknown or concealed, and hence fail as a generalized concept of anonymity. In this paper, I want to explore a more precise way of articulating the unique contributions of anonymity. To do this, I present what I call the “central anonymity paradigm,” which frames anonymity as the result of a specific exercise of control, in which true pieces of information about a person are concealed from others with an effect of dissociability. Methodologically, I expect that more than one concept of anonymity floats in everyday, nonphilosophical thinking. My aim is not to capture them all nor do I think that is likely possible. It may turn out that some conversational uses of “anonymity,” for example, are simply incoherent or inconsistent and, as such, will not withstand philosophical scrutiny. Others may be better expressed as some other concept such as privacy or secrecy. We should be careful, therefore, not to seek more precision in our understanding of anonymity than the subject matter allows.⁸ That said, because my project is motivated by a set of real-world phenomena for which we lack adequate explanations, I aim to clarify the language and to articulate a concept of anonymity that captures ordinary ways of speaking about anonymity and the salient features of

⁷ John Mullan, *Anonymity: A Secret History of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁸ I am particularly concerned to avoid the kinds of objections faced by linguistic philosophers of the 1950s–70s who were charged with trying to squeeze the nuances out of ordinary language to the point that the English they arrived at was unrecognizable even to themselves. I am confident that we can clarify anonymity language to a degree but that, in the end, peripheral, atypical, or otherwise imprecise uses of anonymity may fall away from a focal concept, or that we will find that more than one concept have been collapsed into the concept “anonymity.” My analysis allows for the possibility that some uses of “anonymity” will not reduce to a focal sense of the term.

existent anonymizing practices—why anonymity is actually sought or resisted, for example—to the degree that is possible. My argument proceeds in three stages: First, I identify the precise scope of anonymity, showing that its element of unknowability is better expressed as nonidentification, a phenomenon that is accomplished by disassociability. Second, I use this analysis to articulate what I take to be the central anonymity paradigm, which is interpersonal and network-relative in two distinct senses. Third, I consider some of the epistemological and metaphysical implications of this paradigm, focusing on the relationship between anonymity and personal identity.

2. THE SCOPE OF ANONYMITY

2.1 *Anonymity, Knowledge, and Nonidentification*

Perhaps the most common way of conceptualizing anonymity is to describe it, as Homer did, as a phenomenon of unknowability. Kathleen Wallace, for example, understands anonymity as a kind of “unknownness”⁹ and Helen Nissenbaum’s explanation for why people who stroll through a foreign city are anonymous is because “no-one knows who they are.”¹⁰ Nussbaum and Levmore similarly describe anonymous persons as “unknown persons” and what is unknown about them as the “unknown unknowns.”¹¹ The common dictionary definition of anonymity¹² as the quality or state of being unknown also undergirds colloquial understandings of anonymity. Anonymous gamete donors, for example, are considered to be unknowable in the sense that their identity “cannot be recovered.” Those who use PINs to conduct banking transactions or who agree to speak only on condition of anonymity prevent their true identities from being known. But it is unclear what is the precise scope of anonymity with respect to knowledge. Is anonymity simply a matter of unknowability or is it something more precise than this? If anonymity involves unknowability, does it require complete unknowability or must anonymous persons be unknown only in some particular respect(s)? Below I consider three different general ways a person can be unknown so as to determine the kind of unknowability particular to anonymity.

⁹ Wallace, “Anonymity,” 31.

¹⁰ Nissenbaum, “The Meaning of Anonymity in an Information Age,” 141.

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore, *The Offensive Internet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 52, 77, 230, 109.

¹² The Oxford English Dictionary defines “anonymous” as “a person whose name is not given, or is unknown” and “of a person: generally unknown, unrecognized, or uncelebrated.” 2nd ed., <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/8061> (accessed August 5, 2011).

Taking a cue from the strict etymology of the word, one sense of anonymity is mere “namelessness.”¹³ Going nameless accomplishes anonymity in a great many cases, as when it helps authors to publish at times when they would otherwise be unable or when it protects individuals from ethnic or gender persecution in climates of oppression.¹⁴ The practice of using only first (or last) names also afforded anonymity to both providers and clients in houses of ill repute. Presumably, namelessness constitutes anonymity in so many, if not the majority of, cases because names are either unique identifiers (e.g., there is only one “First King of France”) or apply to such a small group that anonymity is not easily preserved once one’s name is known. Also, since names usually involve a connection to a particular biological or social lineage, for which individuals may be oppressed or persecuted, namelessness can be an especially effective way to protect oneself from marginalizing practices.

Unfortunately, I think the anonymity-as-namelessness conception fails to capture the broad scope of anonymity phenomena. Consider the following example that shows the significance of a broader sense of anonymity. Imagine, for example, that Jane knows a variety of things about her neighbor Sam—he has lived next door for five years, has a red hatchback and a yellow dog, is kind to the neighborhood children. Now suppose Jane mistakenly believes that Sam’s name is ‘Fred’. Is Sam anonymous to Jane? In some respect he is, since there is something about Sam that Jane fails to know, but I do not think Sam is anonymous in the sense that is philosophically interesting or morally troubling. Imagine, instead, that what Jane fails to know is that Sam intends to rob her while she is away at work one day. Not knowing this about Sam makes him a greater threat to Jane and, I contend, anonymous in a more morally significant sense than not knowing his name.¹⁵ The problem with limiting anonymity to namelessness stems from the fact that it fails to recognize what is significant about names in the first place: their ability to identify. As Wittgenstein told us, names have their reference by virtue of being associated with a description, or cluster of descriptions, that an object

¹³ “Anonymous,” derives from the Greek *anonimos*, which means “without a name” (from *an-* [“without”] and *onoma* [“name”]). “Anonymous,” however, dates only from the sixteenth century, when it was used to refer to literary texts (“as if,” as John Mullan says, “it took print to make the absence of an author’s name an important fact”). See Mullan, *Anonymity: A Secret History of English Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Charlotte Brontë, for example, published *Jane Eyre* under the *nom du plume* “Currer Bell” at a time when an authoress might not otherwise be published.

¹⁵ To be clear, the moral wrongness involved in Sam’s robbing Jane is not essential to its anonymizing properties. Its being morally wrong does not, in other words, make Sam more anonymous to Jane than when Jane does not know Sam’s name. My point is only that a person can be anonymous in virtue of the concealment of properties *besides* her name.

uniquely satisfies.¹⁶ If lacking a name is philosophically significant for anonymity, it will be because it fails to identify a *specific* individual. But there are a number of ways a person can fail to be identified (for example, if we lack a person's passport or driver's license number, her SSN, and, in the future, maybe even her genetic code), and so a number of means by which a person can become anonymous. So as to be more inclusive of anonymity phenomena, we need to broaden our understanding of anonymity to include forms of nonidentification besides namelessness.¹⁷

A third possible sense of anonymity—complete “characterlessness”—is a matter of having no distinctive character or recognition factor at all. The paradigmatic case would be the perfect stranger or the unknown face in the crowd (think here of René Magritte's “The Son of Man,” 1964).¹⁸ Persons who are anonymous in this sense face the world with no identity at all, rather than an incomplete or ambiguous identity, and include even those no one knows exist (such as recluses, hermits, and future persons). But this would seem simultaneously to overstate the significance of unknowability and understate the significance of anonymity since complete unknowability would make it impossible ever to “know” an anonymous person (if she was truly anonymous in this sense, she would not be known to exist). It would also require me to say that most of the roughly 6.8 billion people in the world are anonymous to me, and would thereby dissolve any philosophically interesting distinction between strangers and anonymous persons. Hence, I contend that there is no anonymity relation between strangers since there is no epistemic significance to the ways in which most strangers are unknown to each another. As Kathleen Wallace says, “anonymity is never complete unknowability,”¹⁹ but is a matter of not knowing some property(ies) of a person who is otherwise known. To summarize, the extreme states of namelessness and complete characterlessness both fail to capture the precision of anonymity relations: namelessness construes anonymity too narrowly since it fails to include a number of cases to which our intuitions tell us anonymity properly applies; complete characterlessness is too broad since it fails to distinguish between cases of anonymity and the state of being wholly unknown. Furthermore, since what is unknown about an anonymous person

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 79.

¹⁷ In her “Anonymity,” Kathleen Wallace persuasively argues that we need to detach anonymity from namelessness if we are to capture all anonymity phenomena.

¹⁸ Magritte's painting depicts a man in a business suit and bowler hat whose face is hidden by a hovering green apple.

¹⁹ Wallace, “Anonymity,” 23–24. Another reason why anonymity cannot include complete unknowability is because there is no meaning to “anonymous S is wholly unknown” since there is no referent or subject to whom to attribute the unknown property(ies).

prevents their full identification, framing anonymity as nonidentification, rather than unknowability more generally, will allow for greater precision in understanding the sense in which an anonymous person is unknown.

2.2 *Anonymity and Concealment*

The second theme to emerge from the literature is that anonymity is a matter of concealment. Since anonymity is a phenomenon of nonidentifiability, and nonidentification requires concealment, I take it that anonymity will have much to do with the concealment and nondisclosure of identifying information. But it is not clear what kind or degree of concealment constitutes anonymity *per se*, distinguishing it from other subspecies of concealment including secrecy, hiddenness, and deception. I am particularly worried about the latter since, if anonymity essentially involves deception, which is morally wrong, then the value-neutral concept of anonymity I am seeking will be impossible. Hence, my aim in this section is to determine whether anonymity always or necessarily involves deception.

Certainly, many cases of anonymity involve, or even hinge on, deception. The various policies of nonanonymous gamete donation created by legislatures over the last two decades are largely a response to worries about children being deceived about who their parents are.²⁰ And most worries about the hazards of anonymity on the internet center on concerns about the ease with which anonymous persons (e.g., trolls, griefers, and identity thieves) manipulate the images of themselves they present to others.²¹ But not all cases of anonymity involve deception. My students are not deceiving me when I

²⁰ Though most countries still endorse anonymous gamete donation (including France, the UK, and the U.S.), there are notable exceptions. In 1984, Sweden was the first country to remove the anonymity of gamete donors (The Swedish Insemination Act, Law No. 1140). Australia's Medically Assisted Procreation Act (Law No. 275, 1992), and Switzerland's incorporation of Article 24 *novies* (1992) both entitle children to receive identifying information about his/her donor. ("Conception by donor: access to identifying information in the use of donated sperm, eggs and embryos in reproductive technology in South Australia," Discussion paper of the South Australian Council on Reproductive Technology, April 2000, 6.) Two points of clarification are needed concerning the deception that can be involved in anonymous gamete donation. First, though deception is often involved, I take it that deception is not essential to the process. Children could be told that their biological parents are not their nonbiological parents while not being told the identities of their biological parents. Second, the deception involved in anonymous gamete donation is not generally created by the anonymous donor herself, but rather by the parents of the donor offspring, so that children are misled into believing that their nonbiological parents are their biological parents. (This might also involve a kind of institutional deception if, for example, the IVF lab is involved in supporting the child's false belief.)

²¹ As Judith S. Donath claims, "Trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players" ("Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community" in Marc Smith and Peter Kollock, *Communities in Cyberspace* [New York: Routledge 1999], 29–59, 45).

allow them to remain anonymous on the first day of class or when I blind the names of the authors of the papers I am grading. The anonymity that is properly involved in research, in hiring contexts, and in journal refereeing does not necessarily involve deception (and, if it does, something fraudulent is likely at work). To capture both deceptive and nondeceptive forms, I think it is better to understand anonymity as involving concealment, which I take to be value-neutral, rather than the more pernicious deception (though I recognize that concealment can manifest itself as, for instance, deception or secrecy in various contexts). Sometimes the concealment involved with anonymity is active, as when informants agree to speak only on condition of anonymity or students aim to go unnoticed by sitting in the back of the class, strategically slouching behind posts. Sometimes it is passive; when I do not go through the roster on the first day of class, I am simply opting not to find out what I could know. Sometimes this concealment is personal in the sense that it is accomplished by the anonymous person herself (as when I prepared this paper for blind review by removing all references to myself in the manuscript), and sometimes it is created by a third party (as when researchers blind participant names to offset investigator bias). The concealment may also be declared (as with journal review policies) or undeclared (in the case of those who use aliases or *noms de plume*).²² Though acts of anonymity often proceed from decisions somehow to live clandestinely or covertly in the social sphere, I do not assume that anonymity will always be the result of decisions to conceal or that persons are always anonymized *for reasons*. In fact, I suspect many forms of anonymity are spontaneous, unintentional, or even unavoidable. Unidentified persons (“John Does”) and the victims of mass genocide, for examples, all fade into collective oblivion through the unintentional erosion of personal information over time. As a particular example, consider Friedrich Nietzsche’s tendency to treat all Europeans as anonymous in virtue of the rampant miscegenation and social leveling that made them homogeneous and interchangeable raw materials.²³ Though the concealment involved with

²² Though it is not my main focus, here, I anticipate certain troubling ethical challenges of even declared anonymity. (There are some fairly obvious respects in which undeclared anonymity can be ethically troubling, for example in cases where people are somehow duped by the anonymity, such as in the case of identity thieves and online stalkers.) While all relevant parties are “in on” the concealment in cases of declared anonymity, and so deception is not a primary concern, the identities of anonymous persons might be able to “shine through” even the most careful anonymizing practices, raising concerns about fairness and impartiality. There are some research contexts in which ethnography, for example, is particularly salient because subjects cannot be adequately described without giving what would be sufficient details for their identification.

²³ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, *Nietzsche: Godfather of Fascism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 179.

anonymity can take a variety of forms, it is importantly distinct from absence or emptiness: since concealment implies the obscuring or abscondence of a reality that exists (as when Muslim women conceal their faces or a person is said to conceal her anger well), anonymous persons are not those who have partial or weak identities, or who lack identities altogether, but whose real identities are in some way hidden from others.

One advantage to framing anonymity in terms of concealment rather than deception is that it circumvents the latter's unavoidably negative moral connotations. Whereas deception is always *prima facie* morally wrong and has a negative presumption against it from the outset, many of the cases previously discussed involve morally permissible, or even morally required, uses of anonymity. When I put on my winter coat, I conceal much of my body, but this is not *prima facie* wrong. It involves a lack of openness but openness can be either good or bad depending on the motives, circumstances, and expectations in question. Likewise, the concealment involved in anonymity relations can be beneficial or destructive, justified or not, depending on the reasons for which it is sought and whether it outweighs the loss of other values.

2.3 *Anonymity, Dissociability, and Networks*

So far, I have made two separate claims about anonymity. One is that anonymity is a measure of nonidentification on a continuum between the absolute states of being wholly known (or fully onymous) and wholly unknown. The other is that anonymity involves concealment and not deception, on the one hand, or emptiness, on the other. Anonymity, therefore, is a phenomenon of genuine, but partial, identity concealment.²⁴ But, since other phenomena such as secrecy, privacy, and mystery can reasonably be expressed as identity concealment, we need to isolate the specific kind of concealment that is unique to anonymity.

Most accounts of concealment, such as those common to theories of privacy, take it for granted that what it means for personal information to be concealed is for it to be undocumented or kept out of the public sphere.²⁵ When people conceal their criminal pasts, for example, they keep their sordid histories from

²⁴ I recognize that identity concealment does not always amount to anonymity. Consider a case in which a security camera records a robbery by a person whose identity is concealed (e.g., with a mask) or is simply unknown (perhaps he has not yet been identified). "Anonymous" might not be the first word we would use to describe the person on the video. That said, even if there are cases of nonanonymizing identity concealment, I think cases of anonymity will always involve at least partial identity concealment. My later discussion of dissociability explains how anonymity differs from other kinds of identity concealment.

²⁵ W. Parent, for example, understands privacy as a function of "not having undocumented personal information about ourselves widely known." See "Privacy, Morality, and the Law," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (1983): 269–88.

getting out in the open. But I think this broad sense of concealment is neither necessary to accomplish anonymity nor common to most cases of it. Consider a case in which someone (John) comes to know particular things about me—my age, where I live, etc.—but he does not know my medical record; it has been kept out of the public sphere. Now imagine a slightly different case in which John possesses my full medical record but he happens not to know that it belongs to me since he lacks the information he would need to attribute, or link, my medical record to me.²⁶ I take it that the first example involves a straightforward privacy relation: John is aware of me but some of my personal information is hidden from him. The relation in the second case, however, is better expressed as anonymity than privacy. In that example, though my medical record is documented (and hence not private), John does not know that the documented information he possesses is *about* me. What distinguishes anonymity relations from privacy relations, therefore, is a difference in *the way* information about a person fails to be known. Whereas privacy is a function of which pieces of personal information are known *simpliciter*, anonymity relies on the extent to which that information is known *about*, or attributed to, a particular person. The following example helps to show how anonymity is specifically focused on intentional content in this sense.

Leo, a resident of Tacoma WA, has a neighbor he knows nothing about. Gradually, Leo comes to know his neighbor. First, he learns obvious things (his neighbor is male, tall, African American) and then, eventually, less obvious things (he is a twice-divorced father and Louisiana native who attended the Million Man March). One day, Leo learns that his neighbor was born ‘John Allen Williams’ but later changed his name to ‘John Allen Muhammed’. This, of course, holds no special significance for Leo until one day he learns that ‘John Allen Muhammed’ (JAM) is the name of the man referred to as ‘The Washington Sniper’ who was terrorizing civilians in the Washington D.C. area in October 2002.²⁷

If the view I defended above is right, then the relation that holds between Leo and JAM is an anonymity relation rather than a privacy relation. Notice that the final loss of anonymity in this case was made by a precise type of increase in knowledge facilitated by a shift in associability, or linkability.²⁸

²⁶ It is important to clarify what, precisely, it is that John does (and does not) know. There is a sense in which John does know my medical history, since he knows the facts of the medical history that belongs to me; he simply does not know that he knows it, because he does not know that the medical history he possesses is mine.

²⁷ Leo Dudley was John Allen Muhammed’s real longtime Tacoma, WA neighbor.

²⁸ It might be objected that Leo’s identification of ‘JAM’ with ‘The Washington Sniper’ *would* count as a gain in knowledge on the grounds that there is a difference in the cognitive significance, for Leo, between (1) ‘JAM is JAM’ and (2) ‘JAM is the Washington Sniper’, and

Prior to the final discovery, Leo could not link ‘The Washington Sniper’ as a property within the particular network of properties that constituted JAM and so he had no reason to associate JAM, rather than someone else, with ‘The Washington Sniper’. But, once Leo knew that his neighbor’s full name was JAM and that JAM was the Washington Sniper, the transitive sense of identity allowed only “The Washington Sniper is JAM” to be true. Since anonymity is a matter of being unable to associate particular pieces of information with specific persons, “dissociability,”²⁹ rather than concealment, better captures what is unique about anonymity relations. With this in mind, an anonymity-rich world as compared with a privacy-rich world is not one in which less personal information is out in the public sphere; it is one in which the personal information in the public sphere cannot be linked to particular persons who occupy it.

If anonymity essentially involves the apparent dissociation of a person from her properties, then it will always involve some confusion, from the perspective of others, about which properties belong to whom. And, because we generally have some idea about which properties belong to which persons (e.g., not just *anyone* could have authored *Jane Eyre*), anonymity will always be relative to the particular set or group of persons with whom the anonymous person can reasonably be confused. Anonymity set theory helps to give specific dimension to this idea. On this view, anonymity is not just what is unknown or unidentified but marks reference to an arbitrary element that is not well-defined within a well-defined set.³⁰ In the worst case, the anonymity set size is one (here there is no anonymity); in the best case, it is the size of the network.

From this very technical concept of anonymity, we can abstract the general idea that anonymity is intimately tied to the notion of membership within a network in two notable respects. First, anonymity is a function of there being a multiplicity of persons with whom the anonymous person may be confused. Where the anonymity relation holds, there is (i) a property x that could belong to A, and (ii) a plurality of subjects to whom x could also belong such that B

hence a shift in cognitive value once he comes to know (2). Prior to learning the true identity of his neighbor, Leo affirms (1) and denies (2). In the Fregean sense, ‘JAM’ and ‘The Washington Sniper’ only have the same sense for Leo once he came to know (2). Anonymity, I contend, does not require complete unknowability but only the sort of dissociation that lead Leo to deny (2) while affirming (1).

²⁹ I describe anonymity as a phenomenon of dissociability rather than disintegration to reflect the fact that an anonymous person is only apparently, but not actually, fractured. I return to the significance of this distinction later in the paper.

³⁰ A. Pfitzmann and M. Hansen, for example, understand anonymity as “the state of being not identifiable within a set of subjects, the anonymity set.” See “Anonymity, Unobservability, and Pseudonymity: A Proposal for Terminology,” in *Designing Privacy Enhancing Technologies*, ed. H. Federrath (New York: Springer LNCS, 2009), 1–9.

is unable to link, or associate, x with A.³¹ The author of *Jane Eyre*, for example, is anonymous to me only insofar as I believe that there are persons in addition to Charlotte Brontë who could reasonably have been its author. Research subjects are anonymous from researchers only insofar as the latter believe there are multiple subjects to whom some particular piece of data could belong. This, presumably, is why anonymous persons are often described as having “ambiguous identities”; because their dissociation from their own personal traits allows that they could be someone, or even anyone, else and hence interchangeable with any number of people about whom that information might be true. Second, a person does not just belong to a network (of other persons) but *is*, herself, a network constituted by her own unique set of properties. What allowed Charlotte Brontë to be confused with other possible authors (Sir Walter Scott, or Emily Brontë, perhaps) is that one of the properties that naturally belonged to her—the authorship of *Jane Eyre*—was dissociated from her; it could not be identified as belonging to *her* particular network of properties.³²

3. THE CENTRAL ANONYMITY PARADIGM

I take it that the general notion of identity concealment that underlies most accounts of anonymity can be expressed as something like the following:

- (A1) Some property p of subject A is concealed from B (the potential knower) such that B fails to know p about A .

Though (A1) captures the concealment aspect of anonymity that prevents B from knowing S , now that we have a better sense of the scope of anonymity

³¹ I am grateful to Nathan Brett who suggested this relation to me in a series of very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper at the annual meeting of the Canadian Section of the International Association of Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy (May 29, 2012, Montréal, Québec).

³² Notice that it is possible to use the network-relative aspect of anonymity to see that anonymity will always be proportional to the size of the relevant network to which the anonymous person belongs, a point that is enforced by a standard example from the mathematics of anonymity. Suppose that Alice, Bob, and Carol all have the PIN to Mr. Smith’s bank account and that, one day, the contents of that account go missing. Without any additional information, no one knows who used the PIN to access the funds. Since Alice, Bob, and Carol each have a $1/3$ chance of being the perpetrator, we can reasonably say that the perpetrator remains anonymous. If we discover that Alice has an ironclad alibi, however, we can deduce that the perpetrator must be either Bob or Carol. Since it is now more likely than before that the perpetrator is either Bob or Carol, the perpetrator has become less anonymous. In this case, the anonymity the perpetrator enjoys is fairly minimal since all it takes to reveal her identity to one other person in the network is the knowledge that the remaining network member is not the perpetrator. Greater degrees of anonymity than this will be afforded by larger networks and by the ease with which we can be confused with others in it.

relations, we can see that this general conception is too imprecise to distinguish anonymity *per se* from other phenomena that also involve concealment. When I cover my arms with sleeves, for example, I conceal some property of myself, which prevents others from knowing it, but doing so does not clearly amount to anonymization.³³ Also, privacy, deception, secrecy, and the non-disclosure of information might reasonably be expressed as (A1).³⁴ To disambiguate anonymity from other phenomena that involve concealment, we need to better capture the dissociability that is unique to anonymity relations.

Implicit in my analysis so far are two characteristics of anonymity in its focal sense. First, anonymity is a matter of nonidentifiability, which is accomplished by dissociability. Second, anonymity is relative to particular networks of properties, on the one hand, and networks of persons, on the other hand, which allows for the substitutability of the anonymous person with others with whom she could be confused. I propose that, to better capture these two characteristics, we should understand anonymity to involve the following type of relation:

- (A2) Some property p of S is concealed from B (the potential knower) such that B fails to associate p with S as a well-defined set (in this case, a person).

(A2) successfully disambiguates anonymity from privacy since it does not cover all instances of undocumented personal information.³⁵ It also captures the fact that anonymity is characteristically interpersonal and depends on partial, but not complete, unknowability. As such, it can be thought of as involving the same sort of three-place predicate recommended by Annette Baier and Russell Hardin for trusting relations: *A entrusts B with valued [good]*

³³ I do not mean to suggest that covering parts of one's body is always trivial or irrelevant to anonymizing the self but, rather, that it is trivial in the standard case where there is nothing more intentional involved. There are, to be sure, cases where covering one's arms, for example, is very relevant to anonymity. Consider the relevancy of a criminal wearing sleeves to conceal an identifying mark (a wound, birthmark, or distinctive tattoo) that, if known, would reveal her identity. (Concealing this feature would be especially important for preserving anonymity if the criminal's face was hidden by, for example, a mask.) Covering one's arm might also be relevant to anonymization for religious reasons (think of the importance of *purdah* to Muslim women who aim to conceal their bodies from men) or for the nonidentification of one's personal history (if, for example, it hides an Auschwitz serial number that could be stigmatizing in certain contexts).

³⁴ Ruth Gavison, for example, understands privacy as related to concerns over accessibility to others, that is, what others know about us, the extent to which they have physical access to us, and the extent to which we are the subject of the attention of others. "Privacy and the Limits of the Law," *The Yale Law Journal* 89 (1980): 421–71.

³⁵ Gavison, for example, would not endorse limiting privacy to cases of dissociability. She claims, for example, that a person can seek privacy in her own home even if others know where she lives and what she is doing.

C.³⁶ Just as we rarely, if ever, trust people completely but always in some particular respect, persons are anonymous in virtue of being unidentified with respect to some particular trait or property: *A is anonymous to B in some particular respect x*, that is, the respect in virtue of which A is made anonymous. As such, anonymity is a state that could not exist apart from epistemic relations among persons or in an epistemic vacuum. The readers of *Middlemarch*, for example, knew a great deal about its author's work—about its views on religion and hypocrisy, and its deep psychological insights into the characters of provincial England—but not that its author's name was really Marian Evans ('George Eliot' was Miss Evans' pen name). Since knowing is a relation that exists between persons and particular things those persons can know, there can be no anonymity in social isolation or between perfect strangers (loners, islanders, hermits, and recluses no one knows exists, for examples, will not be anonymous).³⁷

I take (A2) to be expressive of the focal conception of anonymity, and, for that reason, I call it the central anonymity paradigm. The central paradigm frames anonymity as the result of a specific exercise of control in which some feature of an otherwise known person fails to be associated with the network of properties that constitute that person. As such, I take it that paradigmatic cases of anonymity will involve decisions to conceal. This does not preclude other anonymity structures in which, for example, persons become anonymous over time through the unintentional erosion of identifying information (such as John Does, unknown soldiers, or holocaust and genocide survivors). The paradigm can also easily be tailored to fit cases in which (1) an individual is anonymous in virtue of being dissociated from multiple personal properties (e.g., name, medical history, and bank account number), and (2) a group of persons (such as the members of Alcoholics Anonymous) is anonymous from an individual.³⁸ Furthermore, though decisions to conceal are often the anonymous person's own, they need not be. What we might call "third-party anonymity" (anonymity that is created for a person by someone else) is likely the most common institutional form of anonymity (think of the anonymity

³⁶ In her influential essay, "Trust and Anti-Trust," Annette Baier proposes that we represent "trust" as a three-place predicate, formulated schematically as *A entrusts B with valued [good] C*. (*Ethics* 96 [1994]: 231–60).

³⁷ I am not sure if anonymity *always* requires a distinction between the anonymous person and another person from whom she is anonymous. For example, I do not rule out the possibility of intrapersonal anonymity to refer to cases in which a person is anonymous from herself, though I suspect that kind of anonymity will be peripheral to the focal conception.

³⁸ Since anonymity is a phenomenon of perceivers, and groups are collections of perceivers, I take it that individuals or groups cannot be anonymous from groups except insofar as they are anonymous from the individuals that compose those groups.

that is created as a matter of course to, for example, ensure fairness in refereeing contexts).

3.1 *Two Questions about the Central Paradigm*

The view of anonymity that I offer raises two questions about its application. The first concerns the fact that the central paradigm assumes that gains and losses of anonymity hinge on concealments and revelations of information about a person that is true (e.g., I lose anonymity when someone finds out what my banking PIN *really* is) so that a loss of one person's anonymity always constitutes a gain in another person's knowledge (and not just a shift in belief). But what if the information revealed "about" a person is false? Celebrities often complain that they have lost anonymity when even false information is attributed to them, as in cases of slander or defamation of character. Did Kate Middleton, for example, suffer a genuine loss of anonymity when, a few months before her wedding, tabloids claimed that she was pregnant with Prince William's child? Undoubtedly, more attention was focused on the couple and they may have felt as though their privacy was invaded. But, according to the central paradigm, the couple's anonymity was lost only if others came to discover true information about them, since only that facilitates identification. That is not the case here. Just as we can be comforted by illusory anonymity (as when we wear sunglasses in public³⁹), feelings of anonymity loss can occur in the absence of any accompanying genuine loss of anonymity. Ascriptions of false information, while perhaps detrimental to the person who has become a greater focus of attention, do not constitute genuine losses of anonymity.

The second, related, question is whether a genuine loss of anonymity occurs when some piece of true, but indeterminate, information is attributed to a person. This could be because the belief is not easily verifiable (e.g., "S's ancestor was a Viking") or because it is so imprecise that it is difficult to say whether it is true (e.g., "S has an interesting history" or "S is a reliable friend"). In these cases, things are muddled by the imprecision of subjective evaluations and by a lack of clarity over the meaning of terms. (Which ancestor? What is meant exactly by 'interesting' and 'history'?) My response to this question is on par with the first. Since de-anonymization depends on

³⁹ I take it that the symbolic use of sunglasses is quite a bit more complex than I let on here and is not always correlated with an enhancement of anonymity. In some cases, sunglasses are worn not to conceal the self but in order to make an explicit statement about who one is (think of Jacqueline Kennedy, Paris Hilton, Bono), and hence can actually serve to identify. Also, it is presumably significant (in the case of anonymization and identification) that what sunglasses conceal are the eyes, since we often think they give us special clues about who a person is, including whether they are trustworthy, honest, cruel, etc.

others gaining knowledge about the person whose anonymity is lost, statements that do not easily admit of truth value, and hence that do not lead to knowledge, will not constitute genuine losses of anonymity.

4. THE METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF ANONYMITY

4.1 *Anonymity Measures (Epistemology)*

We saw earlier that the anonymity one enjoys is at least in part a function of the amount of personal information concealed. But anonymity will presumably also depend on the ease with which that information can be linked to a particular person (since a person might enjoy much anonymity who has strategically concealed very little about themselves) and that will depend on not just the quantity, but also the kind, of information concealed. To talk about information kinds in this context is to imply that it is possible to individuate not just pieces of information, but information types that fall into one of the following three general classes: (1) Nonidentifying information, (2) Minimally identifying information, and (3) Uniquely Identifying information.

I use ‘nonidentifying’ to refer to information that is so imprecise that it could never, by itself, be linked with a particular individual. Information about a person’s ethnicity, height, and eye color is generally nonidentifying because the class of persons to which the information could apply is so large that any attempt at linkage would simply be speculative. Information can, of course, vary in its degree of precision. What I will call “minimally identifying information” affords more anonymity than nonidentifying information if concealed since there are fewer persons to whom it could belong. Information about a person’s address or alma mater is more identity revealing than one’s height or eye color because there are far fewer people to which it applies. That said, nonidentifying information can become minimally identifying depending on context and place. If you are a 6’4” man living in the U.S. (where nearly 95% of men are between 5’3” and 6’2”), you are the same height as only 0.6% of the population, and therefore quite conspicuous. However, if you were to move to the Netherlands, you would be just slightly taller than the average man (6’1”). (Living among the Massai, the tallest people in the world, would allow you to be even more anonymous, at least in terms of height.)⁴⁰ The degree to which information is identifying, therefore, seems to depend largely on the number of persons it could accurately

⁴⁰ Similarly, women who are 5’6” will be more able to remain anonymous even if that information about them were to be revealed than will women who are 6’5” (since there are fewer women in the second group).

describe, which means that finding out some piece of minimally identifying information is more likely to dissolve their anonymity than finding out some piece of nonidentifying information. And, though minimally identifying information could never, by itself, uniquely identify an individual, when different pieces of minimally identifying information are put together, they may become uniquely identifying. Knowing that one of the women who plays on the University of Connecticut women's basketball team is 5'6" will narrow the set to one, if there is only one 5'6" women who currently plays on that team. On the other hand, it is possible for someone to possess a great deal of minimally identifying information about a person—her home city, height, blood type, hair color, and so on—but still be very far from identifying her because this set of information applies to a sufficiently large number of people: there are presumably many AB blood type, blonde New Yorkers.

At the extreme end of the spectrum is fully, or uniquely, identifying information, information that, if it were to be known by another, would fix its referent immediately. For its capacity to pinpoint a particular individual, we can call pieces of uniquely identifying information "definite descriptions." Examples include "the first American to orbit the earth," "John Deifenbaker's mother," "My sister Sally's first grade teacher," and even numeric pseudonyms such as SSNs and drivers license numbers.⁴¹ Even those with very common legal names ("James Smith," "Mary MacDonald") are potentially uniquely identifiable if their definite description is sufficiently full, for instance, "Mary MacDonald from the Annapolis Valley, born in 1946 to Bertha and Ronald."⁴² Since uniquely identifying information is perfectly individuating and the singular act of its revelation will dissolve anonymity, preserving anonymity will depend primarily on whether this kind of information is concealed from others.

Since anonymity operates along a continuum according to both the amount and kind of information that is concealed about a person, we can develop a language for describing anonymity in degrees that range between its strongest and weakest forms. I propose a distinction between "robust

⁴¹ Notice that definite descriptions are perfectly identifying even if they do not actually identify a subject for a particular perceiver. For example, "the fastest man in the world" will, at a given time, apply to a unique individual even if I, given my lack of sports knowledge, happen not to know who he is.

⁴² According to the U.S. Census Bureau ("Frequently Occurring Surnames from the 1990 Census." <http://www.census.gov/genalogy/www/freqnames.html>), "Smith" is the most common last name, and James is the most common first name for men. This, of course, does not imply that "James Smith" is the most common name for men in the U.S. In Nova Scotia, the most common full female name is "Mary MacDonald." (Communications Nova Scotia. "Changing Times, Changing Names." <http://www.gov.ns.ca/cmns/msrv/nr-1996/nr96-06/96060406.htm>)

anonymity” and “bare anonymity.” A person enjoys robust anonymity when it would be especially difficult to link her unique properties to her, either because of the concealment of one piece of uniquely identifying information or a sufficient amount of minimally identifying information. Bare anonymity is weaker and more tenuous than this because it is easily linked to either a definite description or a sufficient amount of minimally identifying information. (Notice that the language of ‘robust’ and ‘bare’ reflects the ease with which information can be linked to the anonymous person and not necessarily how much minimally or fully identifying information is concealed.)

Now that we have a language for speaking about different degrees of anonymity, we can think about what types of information concealment create its most robust forms. In particular, we can evaluate whether the much privileged “anonymity guarantees” and “promises of anonymity” are possible. (Think, for example, of The American Philosophical Association’s promise of “guaranteed anonymity” to those who appeal offers to interview in nonsuite hotel rooms). The strong language of an anonymity *guarantee*, for example, suggests that it would be impossible for a person ever to lose the anonymity they are guaranteed (presumably, far fewer whistleblowers would agree to speak on condition of anonymity if they thought there was a less than perfect chance of remaining anonymous). But is this true? Perfect anonymity is possible only if it could be guaranteed that no other (minimally or uniquely) identifying information could be revealed about a person that would allow for linking. For example, Mark Felt (or “Deep Throat”) had an anonymity guarantee only as long as he could be assured that “Deep Throat” could not be linked to information to which “Mark Felt” was also linked. If it became known that “Deep Throat” was FBI Deputy Director at the time, and it was known that the Deputy Director was Mark Felt, his identity would be revealed. Since it is virtually impossible to guarantee that a person’s name will never be linked with the vast amount of other information about her, I suspect that most promises of perfect anonymity, enticing though they may be, are at most useful fictions that confer robust, but never perfect, anonymity.

4.2 *Anonymity and Identity (Metaphysics)*

Now that we have a sense of how anonymity depends on kinds and quantities of information concealment, we can begin to think about the significance of the relationship between personal information and the person it describes in anonymity relations. As most accounts of personhood tell us, the properties an individual possesses are not just loosely associated but

rather form a tightly woven, interconnected network that constitutes a person's identity.⁴³ It is from that integrated network that an anonymous person's properties are dissociated, which is what makes her anonymous to others. The fact that anonymity depends on the type of personal information that is concealed, and given that personal information is about the features or properties of persons, it is worth thinking about how anonymity is related to issues of personal identity, specifically to the relationship between a person's individual properties and her identity, considered as a whole.

Presumably, some properties play a more pivotal role than others in the network that constitutes a person's identity when it comes to anonymity. Consider, for example, how the definite descriptions "Third President of the United States," "Architect of Monticello," and "Father of Sally Hemings' children" all act as keys to (1) uniquely identify Thomas Jefferson, and (2) unlock other pieces of information about him. (As soon as someone knew that they were in the presence of the third President of the United States, for example, they had the potential to know that they were also in the presence of the man who drafted the Declaration of Independence.)⁴⁴ Furthermore, a person's ability to preserve anonymity will have to do with how the properties of her own network are associated in more and less close ways with those of others. Consider the following well known anecdote that shows how information about a person, when related in the right ways to the networks of others, can fully dissolve a person's anonymity. A priest who was asked at a party whether he heard any exceptional stories during confessionals, replied: "In fact my first confessor is a good example, since he confessed to a murder." A few minutes later, an elegant man joined the group, saw the priest, and greeted him warmly. When asked how he knew the priest, the man replied: "Why, I had the honor of being his first confessor."⁴⁵ While the priest revealed what he believed to be confidential information about an anonymous person,

⁴³ On the self-integration view of integrity (most notably defended by Harry Frankfurt and Gabriele Taylor), for example, integrity is a matter of how a person's properties (her values, beliefs, goals, memories, etc.) are organized or unified. See Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–20; Gabriele Taylor, "Integrity," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 55 (1981): 143–59.

⁴⁴ Different kinds of information have different "unlocking" abilities and will, presumably, depend largely on what others happen to know about persons at particular times. Prior to the widespread publication of the claim that Jefferson fathered Hemings' children, people would have been more likely to know Jefferson as the architect of Monticello than as the father of Hemings' children.

⁴⁵ This particular version of the story is drawn from Ruth Gavison, "Privacy and the Limits of the Law," *The Yale Law Journal* 89 (1980): 421–71, esp. 430–31. A real-life example of this phenomenon is suggested by John Mullan in reference to Charles Dodgson who he claims went to extreme lengths to conceal his identity as Lewis Carroll for fear that, if readers knew the

that information became linkable to a particular individual through the combination of the priest's and the confessor's shared history.⁴⁶

It is perhaps unsurprising that anonymity should be so closely tied to identity since anonymity controversies often develop into discussions of identity. One of the reasons people seek anonymity online is because they do not want things they say there to be connected to their offline identities. And one of the main defenses of anonymous speech is that the value of what is said does not (or should not) depend on the identity of the speaker.⁴⁷ Dissolving or downplaying individual identities can be valuable when it protects persons while performing actions (such as reporting one's attacker) they would otherwise hesitate to do in public. But, anonymity's power to de-individualize can also be morally troubling. In the following passage, Christopher Hitchens writes about one woman's anonymizing loss of personal identity:

I once spoke to someone who had survived the genocide in Rwanda, and she said to me that there was now nobody left on the face of the earth, either friend or relative, *who knew who she was*. No one who remembered her girlhood and her early mischief and family lore; no sibling or boon companion who could tease her about that first romance; no lover or pal with whom to reminisce. All her birthdays, exam results, illnesses, friendships, kinships—gone. She went on living, but with a *tabula rasa* as her diary and calendar and notebook.⁴⁸

In losing all those who knew her, the world lost all record of the woman Hitchens describes. Gaining anonymity meant losing any sense others had of who she was and is. The same phenomenon, presented in a slightly different way, is salient in Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting," where she describes

author of *Through the Looking Glass* was an Oxford professor, they would quickly discover the originals of Tweedledum and Tweedledee (George Frideric Handel and Giovanni Battista Bononcini).

⁴⁶ The process involved in identifying a person is, I suspect, relevantly similar to that of identifying a nonhuman object. If I go to my friend's house and see something hanging over the mantle that is completely foreign to me (maybe it is a weapon? a utensil? an art object?), I will need her to fill me in on the details if it is to have any meaning to me. Some details will be more useful than others. She might, for example, tell me that she acquired the object ten years ago, it is a family heirloom and is made of wood, but I will not be able fully to identify the object until she tells me what it is. The process of coming to discover the identity of a person is, it seems, much like this.

⁴⁷ The judge in *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, 514 U.S. 334 (1995) ruled against an Ohio statute that prohibits anonymous political or campaign literature on the grounds that the "inherent worth of the speech in terms of its capacity for informing the public does not depend upon the identity of its source, whether corporation, association, union, or individual," (777). Other decisions have rejected anonymity protections on the ground that "the identity of the speaker is an important component of many attempts to persuade," for example, *City of Ladue v. Gilleo*, 512 U.S. 43 (1994).

⁴⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *Hitch-22: Some Confessions and Contradictions* (New York: Twelve, 2010), 365.

how those who move into cities experience a “removal of individuality for anonymity,” a phenomenon with which many of us are likely quite familiar.⁴⁹ Anonymity’s power to de-individualize creates anonymous entities that are indistinguishable from others of their kind; they are unexceptional, bland, generic, or nondescript.⁵⁰ Anonymity’s de-individualizing power is especially prominent in collectives where it can strip persons of compassion and prevent them from seeing themselves as individuals with the full agential powers that can harm others. It is also likely what underlies the process Nietzsche described that made Europeans homogeneous, and hence interchangeable with one another.⁵¹

Though anonymity often de-individualizes, paradoxically, it can also be a highly hyper-individualizing experience. By downplaying our membership in the community of others, anonymity can make us forget the natural human bonds that undergird important social and political relationships. Think, for example, of the hyper-individualizing effects that caused the women in the Milgram experiment who wore white coats and hoods to press the shock button for *twice* as long as the participants who were not masked and who wore clearly visible nametags.⁵² Other studies have shown that the psychological trauma for a pilot who drops a bomb on a city is far less than for a ground soldier who shoots a person at close range, suggesting a parallel relationship between identification, accountability, and compassion.⁵³ Any time we overemphasize our own individuality, we deemphasize our sense of membership in a community, which can create a sense of isolation that makes otherwise insidious actions (including abusive speech, harassment, and

⁴⁹ Rachel Bowlby, “Walking, Women and Writing” in *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays in Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 191–219, 210.

⁵⁰ This is the sense of anonymity described by William Faulkner in *Sound & Fury* where he describes “A maroon velvet cape with a border of mangy and anonymous fur” or T. C. Boyle’s account of “[s]ome anonymous diner in a town I’ve already forgotten.” (T. C. Boyle, *Inner Circle*).

⁵¹ Though a discussion of the moral hazards of anonymity is beyond the scope of this project, we should at least be aware that the de-individualizing powers of anonymity are likely to have worrisome consequences for autonomy and personal freedom. Since autonomy is often understood as an *individual’s* capacity for self-determination and self-governance, it is difficult to see how we could attribute anonymity to, let alone make sense of, an autonomous nonindividual. Interestingly, the connection between individuality and autonomy owes primarily to Kant’s account of moral autonomy, which highlighted the importance of developing one’s own unique self. John Stuart Mill also emphasized the importance of individuality, writing that “A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture. . . . One whose desires and impulses are not his own has no character, no more than a steam engine has a character,” (*On Liberty* [London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1978], 35).

⁵² Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁵³ David J. Lieberman, *Executive Power* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 21.

violence) seem less offensive. When we perceive ourselves to be anonymous, we feel free to say things or act in ways that we would hesitate to say or do when our identities are fully known. Philip Zimbardo hypothesizes that people need other people to create a system of social support that is able to resist the kind of social isolation that is both the cause and consequence of a variety of pathologies. He writes, “in order to thrive people need to be part of a society that reasonably and equitably trades off self-interests, rights, and privileges with social obligations that foster the common good.”⁵⁴ When we become anonymous, and more importantly see ourselves as anonymous, it is simply easier to detach ourselves from prevailing social bonds.

We might now ask, how is anonymity able *both* to de-individualize and hyper-individualize? One explanation is that, because anonymity is a phenomenon that dissociates a person from her properties, it essentially involves the creation of a segregated or schizophrenic self-image. That is, the anonymous person appears *to others* to be dissociated from her personal properties. Anonymity, therefore, is primarily a social phenomenon. It is a way of packaging our whole selves piecemeal for the world, of pulling our real identities back from the social sphere, allowing us to attain a level of agency otherwise not possible. When anonymity is the result of a decision to anonymize, there is a gesture to others not to see us as we really are. But it is important not to confuse the sense in which an anonymous person appears segregated to others with the sense in which she actually is so. While anonymous persons present segregated identities to the world, in reality they are integrated wholes who have the executive power of a fully integrated person. It is not as if the woman Hitchens describes does not know who she is; she was simply worried that no one else knew her. Yet, knowing that others see us as segregated can threaten the integrity of a person’s own self-conception. This may be morally unproblematic, as it likely is in cases of institutional anonymity where it is sought to obviate conditions of unfairness, but it can, in other contexts, enable harms that would be impossible, or more difficult, to perpetrate without it. Because anonymization can create a false self-image, it is unsurprising that it can also create a spurious sense of our own importance in relation to others (whether we think we are more or less important than we really are). Though a full analysis of the morality of anonymity—of its justification, harms, benefits—is beyond the scope of this project, it is clear that an adequate conception of anonymity will need to take account of the ways in

⁵⁴ Philip Zimbardo, “Mind Control in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: Fictional Concepts Become Operational Realities in Jim Jones’s Jungle Experiment,” in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future*, eds. Abbott Gleason, Jack Goldsmith, and Martha Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 127–54, 131.

which anonymization dissociates what is naturally integrated. An account of the full moral and political significance of anonymity will require understanding not just the ways anonymous persons are seen by others but also the ways anonymous persons see themselves in relation others.

5. CONCLUSION: A THIN VEIL OF IGNORANCE

If a concept of anonymity is to be helpful in thinking about situations in which anonymity relations hold, it must be robust in the following two senses. First, the concept must capture the distinctiveness of anonymity. That is, it must be sufficiently precise so as to (1) identify what is unique about anonymity (and anonymity relations), distinguishing it from more general forms of concealment and unknowability, and (2) enable us to identify when gains and losses of anonymity *per se* have occurred rather than gains and losses of privacy, attention, and liberty, for example. Second, the concept must be sufficiently value-neutral so as to explain how anonymity can work to both good and bad ends, and therefore capture the salient features of both justifiable and unjustifiable anonymity relations. Our concept must make anonymity intelligible as a value, for claims to anonymity are compelling only if anonymity protections are justifiably desirable and anonymity losses are justifiably undesirable, and only if these gains and losses are potentially weighable against the value (and disvalue) of competing gains and losses, such as rights to information. I have aimed to articulate a concept that satisfies these criteria. According to the central paradigm, anonymity is the result of a specific exercise of control, in which true pieces of information about a person are concealed from others with an effect of dissociability. Genuine gains and losses of anonymity, on this view, occur when a second party links, or fails to link, personal information with the person to whom it belongs. Understood in this way, anonymity is interpersonal and relative to particular networks or contexts of knowing (i.e., there is no anonymity *simpliciter*), and therefore should be understood derivatively in relation to the ways we standardly come to know other persons.

It is hardly a novel observation to claim that anonymity is a form of identity concealment. Indeed, many authors, such as Wallace, Nissenbaum, and Ellison, have defined anonymity primarily in these terms. Furthermore, most anonymity rubrics rely on establishing anonymity by securing the amount of information that is known about a user, and many of the most lively anonymity issues—concerning anonymization practices in newspapers and other publications, banking and journal refereeing systems, and on the internet—focus on the values and hazards of information concealment. But what is novel about anonymity on my view is that it depends not on whether personal information is documented or publicly available, but on whether others can

attribute pieces of information to the anonymous person, and this will depend not just on the amount of information concealed but also on the *kinds* of information that is concealed. On my view, the strength of the anonymity one enjoys depends primarily on the ease with which personal information can be linked with the person to whom it belongs. This is noteworthy because anonymity is often framed as an absolute state of concealment that creates a thick veil of ignorance, which cannot easily be penetrated by others. My analysis shows that the ignorance-creating veil of anonymity is often much thinner than we tend to think since it requires only that we veil the connection between ourselves and our personal properties. For this reason, what anonymity concerns should focus on is not how much information about ourselves we let escape into the public domain but on how we manage that information once it is in that domain. And, because, as we have seen, anonymity can have deleterious de- and hyper-individualizing effects, we need to be especially attendant to the potential threats to our own senses of identity as we navigate the social sphere as anonymous persons.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ I am grateful for, and have tried to do justice to, very helpful critical comments from two anonymous reviewers. I am also indebted to Nathan Brett, who commented on an earlier draft of the paper, and to Angela White, who was instrumental in helping me to work through some of the ideas that became foundational to the paper.