Privacy and Morality

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Are we giving up our privacy? Our children and grandchildren would probably have a completely different interpretation of the concept of privacy than we do; a consequence of technological advances in many fields, such as computing and satellite communications. According to some opinions, technological progress will lead us to compromise our privacy and, assuming that this trend continues, to eventually surrender it entirely. As support for this claim, one could say that "privacy" is a relatively new concept. Prior to the end of the nineteenth century, there was no specific mention of it in any philosophical or legal writings. This may indicate that in earlier times people didn't experience privacy as a concept or value, and therefore it was not an essential societal notion. One can now imagine a future society that also may not value privacy. In our presentation, we reason that giving up privacy is inevitable, and that in the future, an ethical view will be adopted to fit a society with hardly any private domain. This view is similar in many ways to the ancient Greek ethical view that focused on the moral virtue of the individual, which suits a society that keeps tight control over its members. To demonstrate this, we will show the growing emphasis on ethical research concerning personal ethics.

The arête as an ethical creed appropriate to a society that does not enable privacy

Living conditions that prevailed in ancient Greece did not enable privacy. The average person usually stayed within the borders of his polis and was subordinate to the tight supervision of his family, community, and the polish authorities. Privacy was impossible under this kind of close supervision. In these social conditions emerged the notion of the arête as a major ethical concept. In the second book of the Republic, Plato describes the Guardians as an ideal society. The members of this class are all prime members of the ideal polis; they receive the best education and physical training, their main traits are equality and lack of personal property, and they all live in a commune that does not allow any privacy. "In the first place, none of them should have any property of his own beyond what is absolutely necessary; neither should they have a private house or store closed against anyone who has a mind to enter; nor they will go to mess and live together like soldiers in a camp." [Republic 416d] Plato saw the Guardian's way of life, and its absolute supervision over its members, as utopic. After all, it is hard to imagine someone engaging in criminal activity under such governance; moreover, the lack of personal property averts any motivation to act immorally. This extreme abolishment of privacy seemed radical even to Plato's contemporaries; especially the nullification of personal property that was considered to be a prime motivation for personal and social development.

Aristotle's main ethical concern was the personal arête, in which the only way to estimate individual morality is by taking into account all relevant circumstances, such as pedigree, individual inclinations, and social context. The ethical picture is thus a composite of many points of view, its resolution is dependent on assessment of the individual's distinctive characteristics, and therefore, it sustains no privacy. Since Homer, the arête was considered an essential moral concept. The original meaning of the term was "courage," and it represented the essence of manhood. Later on, this quality transformed and was shaped according to a variety of philosophical doctrines that flourished in Greece. These doctrines could be seen as religious reforms in the sense that they aimed to amend the individual's soul by refining his moral merits, thereby improving his social and cosmological status. These doctrines, therefore, considered all aspects and characteristics of one's personal life. At the time, self-esteem was affected mainly by the awareness of shame.

The sense of shame arises through one's consciousness of public opinion and judgment, determining the individual's arête. Losing face through shameful deeds could lead to disaster, as in the case of Ajax's suicide. Ajax was lead to believe that he was fighting the Trojans and his bitter enemy Odysseus, while in actuality, he battled a herd of sheep. When he noticed his mistake, his sense of shame was so deep he took his own life. His motto "Live well or die well" was expressed through his desperate act. Shame as a social and moral foundation also arises out of Plato's Protagoras. According to the myth, man cannot establish communities without justice (dike) and shame (aidos). These examples demonstrate the prominence of shame as the foundation of a moral system in ancient Greece that was based on personal merits. This ethical world view took into account all personal factors such as age, social status, and special life circumstances. A moral evaluation such as this is possible only in a society that does not value privacy. In recent times, along with the rise of a deontological and utilitarian moral philosophy, the concept of privacy has become dominant. According to Williams, shame became the basis of an ancient moral outlook, while modern moral world views are based on a sense of guilt. Moral imperatives since the eighteenth century, a new concept of morality has evolved that has held two contradictory points of view – deontology and utilitarianism. The two are comparable in the sense that both attempts to define roles that can maximize the good of the society as a whole, and they differ in that deontology sees the individual as the basis of moral reasoning, while utilitarianism revolves around the good of society as a whole.

Beginning with Kant, deontology considered individual autonomy to be the basis of moral reasoning. According to this point of view, the fulfillment of moral autonomy depends on the recognition that moral deeds are derived from ethical imperatives that originate in the rational mind; common to all members of the moral congregation. The moral imperatives are general in nature, ignoring private circumstances or dispositions. Utilitarianism sees society's well-being as the aim of morality, and therefore, moral imperatives are judged by their capability to serve that end. The similarity between the two moral outlooks rests on their shared belief that morality is a form of rationality that sees all humans as equals, and ignores particular circumstances such as tradition, custom, or luck. These moral doctrines ignore any personal component such as character, social rank, or personal relationships. Neither utilitarianism, nor deontology, consider the individual's private life as subject to ethical consideration, and therefore allow a wide range of privacy since moral judgment is centered on obedience and not on specific circumstances. The transition from moral qualities to moral imperatives indicates a transformation of the moral character that is motivated, not by shame, but by guilt. The difference between the two, according to Williams, is based on the notion of the "internalized other," a virtual identity that functions similarly to Freud's "alter ego." This concept illustrates social supervision as an inner voice that generates a sense of shame whenever one believes he or she has been guilty of misconduct.

According to Williams, it would seem that a society that maintains tight social supervision would develop an ethical system based on merits, while the deontological moral view, based on guilt, would develop in a society that allows privacy and a sense of autonomy. I would argue that, as a result of technological progress, one's personal domain narrows, and the moral outlook based on merits becomes more dominant. An illustration of this tendency can be found in Orwell's 1984, where the loss of privacy leads the hero, Winston Smith, to adopt merits similar to the ancient Greek arête. As mentioned above, a future moral code, although not fully compatible with the ancient Greek arête, would have some similarities to its ancient predecessor, such as the emphasis on shame, as a constitutive moral emotion.

Privacy – past and future

Privacy as a juristic concept was first coined by the supreme court judge Samuel Warren in his article "The Right to Privacy," written in 1890 as a response to an uncomplimentary news item in the local press concerning a party Warren had held at his house. The judge's article is significant, since it was a landmark of the legal and ethical status of privacy. In fact, until the end of the nineteenth century there had hardly been any awareness of the term, or need to establish it as a condition of an individual's autonomy. It would seem, then, that privacy isn't a fundamental or constitutive concept. One can therefore imagine a future society in which this concept would cease to exist, and would be thought of as a mere anecdote in the progression of human moral and social development. It is most likely that the loss of privacy would have wide-ranging affects but, as opposed to the apocalyptic view held by some, it seems that future ethical perspectives would lay on similar ground, in many ways, to the ancient Greek arête. Technology develops rapidly; technological possibilities that seemed like science fiction only a decade ago are now part of our daily routine. It seems reasonable to suppose that this trend will continue, and that the most advanced achievements of today will be considered archaic tomorrow.

Any attempt to foresee the future is bound to fail, if only for the trivial reason that we cannot guess future concepts. In principal, therefore, we cannot predict or understand future technology or society. For instance, the difficulty a man from the 22nd century would encounter trying to explain to us future technology or morality can be compared to the difficulty a man from our generation would have trying to explain the internet or nuclear energy to a man from the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, despite the pretense, one can assume that since we can, to some extent, understand and empathize with the motives and feelings of people from distinct societies, we can also understand and predict, to some extent, future moral tendencies. As examples, we have the striking predictions of Aldous Huxley and Gorge Orwell.

1984 portrays a society that does not allow its members to maintain a private domain. The surveillance is so tight that the state even monitors citizens while they sleep. According to Orwell, the surveillance is excused by security reasons. Many of Orwell's predictions were proven false, but some are strikingly accurate; especially the link Orwell made between technological progress and the narrowing of the private domain. Even today, it is easy to collect personal information such as information about location, physical or financial conditions or personal talks or e mails. There is a general disregard of experts' warnings concerning the hazards of new technologies like the biometric reservoir, this indicates acceptance, since progress is inevitable. For example, we now consciously consent to give information that once was considered private, including credit card numbers, medical details and personal e mails. The minute we put these details on the internet, they can be misused by hackers or by large corporations. We have no real choice, since in order to be part of society; we must use the internet and give up our privacy. It seems we are reaching an era in which privacy has hardly any meaning, since almost everything can be monitored, including our location, who we talk to and what we say, what we buy, and our political and sexual preferences, moreover, some say that in the near future there would be the technology that would enable us to read thoughts.

Will there be any secrets in the future?

What is the threat from the loss of privacy; in other words, why would anyone be interested in this huge amount of data, concerning our private matters? In the past, governments easily penetrated the private domains of their citizens with far less sophisticated technology (the Gestapo, for instance, conducted efficient surveillance via relatively primitive means). One can claim, therefore, that although technological progress can ease detection, and very efficient surveillance is feasible, it still does not necessarily lead to a fundamental change in the relationship between the citizen and the political and financial authorities. In response to this claim, one can see that information is a means to control and manipulate people, and therefore big organizations invest a large amount of effort in gathering as much information as possible, as we can see from the recent Edward J. Snowden scandal. Moreover, the data that financial and political bodies gather is likely accessible to criminals and unauthorized individuals and organizations, which may misuse it and pose a real threat to our personal information, including credit card numbers, e mail accounts, medical and financial reports. Advanced technologies such as face recognition and "street view" jeopardize our privacy in ways we can't even imagine. The decrease of our private domain can also affect the way we perceive morality. The possibility of keeping secrets is essential to maintain self-awareness and moral reasoning, this ability of keeping secretes depends mostly on the individual's private domain in which one can act or think autonomously.

Plato's fable The Ring of Gyges demonstrates this idea. The myth describes a magical ring that enables anyone wearing it to become invisible and commit any crime without being caught. The conclusion is that morality is only a social construct; without supervision, society would collapse, on the flip side is Bentham's Panopticon, Bentham designed a prison in which all cells are completely transparent to the warden, but no prisoner can know if he is being watched or not. Under these conditions, thought Bentham, no one would commit any offence. From these examples it emerges that moral consideration and choice involve a sphere of private domain that allows us to choose between right and wrong. As technology proceeds, keeping a secret will become more complicated. As in Bentham's vision, surveillance will not necessarily be invariant, but monitoring will. Even today, large companies and organizations monitor large amounts of data according to specific key words, or by aiming at specific targets. These search strategies prove very efficient in detecting terrorists or outlaws. This use of technology raises grave ethical concerns such us, how is one allowed to gather, hold, and use data? Another concern is the effect of the narrowing personal domain on our self-awareness and on the nature of moral reasoning. According to Freud, the significance of ethics as a therapeutic science is its ability to reflect and determine the inner code of restrictions that the individual adopts for himself.

This code is the general law that directs the ethical conduct of society. A complete implication of this code isn't possible since it would deprive the members of society of freedom and happiness. "Thus the cry for freedom is directed either against particular forms or demands of culture or else against culture itself. It does not seem as if man could be brought by any sort of influence to change his nature into that of the ants. In the perfection of a utopian society, no one would be happy, since its members, blindly obeying all society's rules, would give the superego supremacy over the ego, thereby repressing the individual's character. According to Freud, there needs to be a certain amount of separation between the superego and the ego; a distinction that enables us to be happy and creative. In conclusion, following Freud, the attempt to construct an ideal society within a system of social supervision would lead to a system so tight that it would not allow anyone to disobey rules. Similar to an ant hill, it would paralyze its members' private domains and prevent them from fulfilling any of their basic antisocial instincts, thereby leading to the destruction of society. Freud's views affected and molded the worldview of many, and are reflected in many works of literature that portray future society as one that uses sophisticated technologies as a means to monitor and control all members of society. In Brave New World, Huxley criticizes capitalist society as one that sacrifices personal freedom for economic sufficiency. In Huxley's book, the government attains complete control over the citizens via scientific methods. As expressed in the words of the Director: "that is the secret of happiness and virtue liking … All conditioning aims at that: making people like their inescapable social destiny."

According to Huxley, future society would control all citizens to the degree that even reproduction would be confiscated from the citizens and would be manufactured by the state. Huxley, like Freud, thought that this dystopian society would cause a great deal of misery. A future society would constantly drug all of its members with "soma," a hallucinogen that takes users on an enjoyable, hangover-free "holiday." It is developed by the World State to provide a comfort mechanism in the face of stress or discomfort, thereby eliminating the need for religion or other personal allegiances outside or beyond the World State. Another solution to the distress caused by the loss of privacy is portrayed in Orwell's 1984. As opposed to Huxley, who described a capitalist society, Orwell's emphasis on Marxist elements stand as the basis of his dystopia. It seems that Orwell was aware of the dangers Freud had indicated, and offered a very imaginative solution. In Orwell's future society, people, in order to survive, would develop a new way of thinking and speaking. This code of thinking was named "doublethink" and was based on the new and extremely thin language "newspeak."

Doublethink

In 1984, Orwell describes the semantic and logical structure of doublethink as capable of sustaining paradoxical concepts and ideas. Adopting doublethink leads to a radical modification of the common outlook we all use. In order to give a more accurate meaning to these confusing terms it is best to see how Orwell himself characterized them:

"Newspeak incorporates doublethink, as it contains many words that create assumed associations between contradictory meanings, especially true of fundamentally important words such as good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood, and justice and injustice To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget, whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself – that was the ultimate subtlety; consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink"

From these passages one can see that in a society of the future, privacy can only be maintained by blurring the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious and by radical negation of any particular saying or opinion. Basic concepts lose any clear connotations and can be used for contradictory meanings. Assuming that such a language can actually be used for communication raises the question about the personality of the person who thinks in doublethink and speaks newspeak. It would seem that this personality would be so vague that any attempt to define it would be pointless. Certainly, the transition of the subject between the conscious and unconscious gives the illusion of privacy, but actually, such a personality would be so shallow and transparent that it would be easily controlled by the regime.

In conclusion, we can say that Huxley and Orwell both saw future societies as social organizations that would supervise its members in a manner barely able to leave space for a private domain. Both authors' predictions of how people would cope with this loss of privacy; whether through Huxley's soma, or Orwell's doublethink, would flatten the individual's personality, and would minimize free will and personal opinion. In fact, it seems that the predictions of both thinkers turned out to be wrong, even if not entirely. Although the use of antidepressant drugs is more widespread than ever, and being "politically correct" is superficial and shallow, neither cancels the speaker's personality, but on a flip, one can argue that the prose's of losing our privacy is on progress and therefore we can expect the worst, such as Huxley's soma or Orwell's doublespeak.

The future of morality

Another direction concerning the future of morality is offered by MacIntyre in his book After Virtue. MacIntyre criticizes two major social viewpoints that evolved in the twentieth century – motives, as reflected in Weber's work, and the liberal individualistic viewpoint. MacIntyre's critique of emotive focuses on the consequences of viewing the individual as a bureaucratic creature, or, in Weber's words, an individual's self-concept is dependent on his rank and his administrative capacities (the "bureaucratic ethos"), and as such, one becomes an instrument to promote the 'office' interests. The "bureaucratic person" is lacking a metaphysical basis that enables a constructive ethical discussion; this lack of basis causes fuzzy moral judgment, since it is supported by emotional manipulations. In Weber's words: "the choice of any one particular evaluative stance or commitment can be no more rational than that of any other". All faiths and all evaluations are equally non-rational; all are subjective directions given to sentiment and feeling." Macintyre sees Weber's worldview as separating between authority and morality. Bureaucratic authority is legitimate in the modern state since it is statutory, but its moral potency is without an anchor that can give an overall consistent, moral outlook. To conclude following Weber, no moral authority can base its foundations on rationality. On the other hand, the positivist worldview, according to MacIntyre, serves as a background for Weber's view, since they created the illusion that the social reality is a subject of science that could predict and control social dynamics. Another line of criticism in McIntyre's book is towards liberal individualism.

The origin of this ethical attitude can be traced to Kant's moral philosophy, which does not emphasize the need to obey the laws of social institutions, but rather stresses the individual's autonomy and freedom of choice. Liberal moral and political thought is focused on the rights of individuals, on the neutrality of the state concerning the "good life," and on fair procedures and formal equality. According to liberalism, freedom is a supreme value that consists of two elements: man's ability to determine the moral imperatives and to act according to them throughout his life. Rules are the main concept of the liberal moral worldview; therefore, the greatest ethical merit is in obeying the right set of rules. Kant demonstrates this moral outlook with regard to the individual, while Rawls expands the idea and modifies it to the political sphere. Both define a moral act as one that is arranged by reason, and consistent with a universal law. Freedom is then an outcome of autonomy and self-determination of the individual, while the formulation of the moral law ignores private circumstances since they are determined by uncontrollable factors such as luck or chance, this disregard of private circumstances

Affirms or even compel the individual's private domain.

According to McIntyre, time, language, community, and personality are constitutive elements of morality and must not be overlooked, since moral concepts are defined and relevant only within a specific community. McIntyre suggests that Aristotle's ethics , which sees the common good of community as the basis of the individual's merits, is a model for a moral system that both avoids the arbitrary moral goal of emotive, and opposes the deontological liberal view that ignores individual personality and character. As previously stated, MacIntyre proposes the arête as the main concept of moral dialogue. This ethical worldview has had a vast influence; one that can be seen through the ever-growing number of academic papers that focus on personal merits similar to the ancient Greek arête. According to the "philosopher's Index," the number of articles dealing with the concept of shame rose from 83 during 1990–2000, to 183 in 2001–2011. Another example of this trend is the concept of guilt; during the years 1990-2000, 157 articles were published, while during 2001-2011 there were 284. It is most likely that MacIntyre's moral thought and his criticism of moral liberal philosophy inspired this trend of academic research, but it seems that the technological progress that leads to fundamental changes in means of communication and in patterns of human socialization narrows the private domain and changes the emphasis of moral desiccation toward the arête. The loss of privacy leads to a different kind of interaction between the individual and society.

Enlightenment stresses the individual's rationality and autonomy, released from culture or tradition. Character is therefore not relevant from an ethical point of view, thereby enabling a wide scope of privacy. As the private domain narrows, personal virtues receive a higher emphasis, since society can monitor its members more efficiently. The arête does not solely consider obedience to the general roles, since it is constructed by three major keystones that MacIntyre mentions in his book: narrative, praxis, and ideology. MacIntyre discusses the moral function of the narrative in archaic age. He argues that the ancient epos reflected a moral paradigm that was implanted in society; honor was the primeval value, and shame – aidos – was a constitutive moral emotion. In order to save face in society, man's actions don't necessarily determine his moral status, but rather his overall personality; therefore, moral judgment doesn't rely on a single deed, but on the sequence of steps an individual takes during his life. These steps are considered, not by abstract roles, but according to the specific circumstances in which they occur. To illustrate this idea, MacIntyre compares the moral agent to a chess player:

In the game of chess, the rules and the end of the game are agreed upon by all, and every move is not judged individually, but is considered through the perspective of the overall situation and by the outcome of the game. The metaphor is not entirely complete, since there are considerable differences between the paradigm of chess and that of moral conduct. In chess there may be different reasons for playing the game, such as amusing a child, while in the ethical realm there is a discernible goal. Nevertheless, the moral agent does not act according to a general law, but under the influence of specific circumstances and in accord with his unique personality, while being judged by members of his community. From the chess example MacIntyre infers two conclusions: first, that ancient moral conduct was related to concrete circumstances, since it is impossible to draw any general law from a unique state of affairs; and second, that moral values derive their meaning only within traditions that impart to society a general ideological framework. Within this framework, values derive meaning as regulative ideas that drive and direct the individuals' moral actions, while the behavior is dependent on the skill of the moral agent. This is similar to the chess game, where playing well depends on not simply knowing the rules, but on performing the moves in the most efficient way, depending on the circumstances.

In summing up MacIntyre's view, we see that tradition, narrative, and skill are the constitutive elements of his moral outlook, based on Aristotle's ethical view. MacIntyre criticizes modern ethical philosophies and recommends adopting an outlook similar to Aristotelian ethics. In fact, MacIntyre's perspective has influenced contemporary moral discourse deeply, even though it is hard to imagine how an incarnation of Aristotelian ethics could occur, since Aristotle saw the Greek polis as a final goal for any moral act, and it seems impossible to modify Aristotle's ethics in a way that would suit the modern nation-state. Even so, it seems that the loss of privacy, with its faults, may develop a novel concept of morality that would be based on personal merits, if not Aristotelian virtues. As mentioned above, liberalism perception of individualism was based on the deontological and utilitarian philosophies which ignored cultural and communal characteristics that make up the individual's self-image, focusing instead on the conjoint; man's cognitive ability to fulfill his personal good. But since personal good can be created only within a community, it turns out that the community as a cultural background maintains moral concepts such as the arête; she does so by constantly tracing and observing each of its members.

In recent years we are witnessing technological progress that enables sovereign and economic bodies to monitor citizens in a way that negates the private domain. This narrowing of the private domain leads to the reestablishment of the ethics of merits in the framework of the multicultural society.

As a result of waves of immigration and demographical changes, many communities are living under the sovereignty of the modern nation. The debate as to the degree of autonomy to which every minority is entitled is based on the assumption that a person can actualize his idea of good only within a cultural and moral framework that validates his values. The multicultural view claims that the recognition and support of the state a plurality of values represented by different communities is the way to achieve a just society. If we reflect on the continuous loss of privacy we have described above, we can see that it, together with multiculturalism, are complementary trends. Multiculturalism manifests the morality of merits, as a posed to the liberal morality that is based on deontology or utilitarian worldviews. As said, the morality of merits is based on "shame culture" that is based on close supervision of the community over its members, this supervision is made easy by the developing technology that narrows the private domain, and may, on the long run, eliminate it entirely.