

# Virtue, Privacy and Self-Determination: A Plotinian Approach to the Problem of Information Privacy

*Giannis Stamatellos, University of Copenhagen, Denmark*

---

## ABSTRACT

*The ethical problem of privacy lies at the core of computer ethics and cyber ethics discussions. The extensive use of personal data in digital networks poses a serious threat to the user's right of privacy not only at the level of a user's data integrity and security but also at the level of a user's identity and freedom. In normative ethical theory the need for an informational self-deterministic approach of privacy is stressed with greater emphasis on the control over personal data. However, scant attention has been paid on a virtue ethics approach of information privacy. Plotinus' discussion of self-determination is related to ethical virtue, human freedom and intellectual autonomy. The Plotinian virtue ethics approach of self-determination is not primarily related to the sphere of moral action, but to the quality of the self prior to moral practice. In this paper, it is argued that the problem of information privacy should be reconsidered in the light of Plotinus' virtue ethics and his notion of self-determination.*

*Keywords:* Ethics, Information Privacy, Plotinus, Self-Determination, Virtue

---

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of advanced telecommunication technology, digital and social networking leads to a philosophical reconsideration of our social life and ethical values. The question of privacy as ethical and social value has at length received the attention of scientists, legislators and philosophers (DeCew, 2006). As Alan Westin (1967) observes in his influential book *Privacy and Freedom*: "few values so fundamental to society have been left so undefined

in social theory or have been the subject of such vague and confused writing by social scientists" (p. 7). In particular, the problem of information privacy has been closely related to informational self-determination and the claim or the ability of individuals and groups to determine for themselves when, how, and what kind of information about themselves is shared with or communicated to others (Westin, 1967). The normative approach of informational self-determination focuses on the action of moral agency and the evaluation of ethical decision. However, a self-directed virtue ethics approach of self-determination has not been acknowl-

DOI: 10.4018/ijcee.2011100104

edged in modern discussions. Plotinus' notion of self-determination is related to intellectual freedom and autonomy: to be self-determined means to take steps towards our inner-self and to discover our own principles of thought that govern our intellectual freedom and autonomy (Stamatellos, 2011). Plotinus' notion of ethical virtue moves the emphasis of moral decision from the sphere of moral action to the intellectual quality of the self prior to moral activity (Stamatellos, in press). In this paper, I shall argue that Plotinus' virtue ethics approach of self-determination could be enlightening in modern philosophical discussions of information privacy.

## The Right of Privacy

In modern studies, divergent views have been expressed about the moral and legal right of privacy. The most important of these views have been presented and summarized by DeCew (1997, 2006). On the one hand, critics of the privacy right have questioned its importance. As Thomson (1975) states, "it is a useful heuristic device in the case of any purported violation of the right to privacy to ask whether or not the act is a violation of any other right, and if not whether the act really violates the right at all" (pp. 313-314). Moreover, excessive forms of privacy such as anonymity may protect the guilty, cover deception and fraud and so may appear dangerous to personal life and social stability. An example of this is the feminist critique of the use of privacy to cover up abuse and control of women (MacKinnon, 1989).

On the other hand, supporters of the privacy right accept its significance as a moral value that paves the way to human freedom and social stability. It has been argued that privacy should be defended on the grounds of control over our personal information (Parent, 1983). In addition, privacy has been regarded as essential for human dignity (Bloustein, 1964), intimacy (Innes, 1992; Gerstein, 1984), human freedom and independence (DeCew, 2006). Privacy is also considered as a social value with moral significance, fundamental to individual

integrity and personal autonomy (Bloustein, 1964), as well as to the self-development of the individual in interpersonal relationships such as love, friendship and trust (Fried, 1970; Gerstein, 1978). Privacy is further analyzed as an *intrinsic* value (i.e., privacy desired for its own sake) and an *instrumental* value (i.e., privacy desired as a means to other ends) (Tavani, 2007). Whereas privacy has been considered as an instrumental value that serves the intercultural core value of security (Moor, 2001), it has also been regarded as an intrinsic value necessary to achieve important human ends such as trust and friendship (Fried, 1997); an intrinsic value that promotes democracy and social goods (Regan, 1995).

Alan Westin (1967) considers privacy as a human value related to four human rights: *solitude* (i.e., the right to be alone), *anonymity* (i.e., the right to have no public identity), *intimacy* (i.e., the right to act in private) and *reserve* (i.e., the right to control your personal information). Herman Tavani (2007) offers three definitions of privacy: *accessibility privacy* (i.e., freedom from unwarranted intrusion into one's physical space), *decisional privacy* (i.e., freedom from interference in one's personal affairs, choices and decisions) and *information privacy* (i.e., control over the flow of personal information). Privacy could be generally related to different forms of personal protection and identification such as *territorial privacy* (i.e., protects domestic, professional, civil and recreational environments); *location privacy* (i.e., privacy of an individual's location); *bodily privacy* (i.e., respect of an individual's body); *personal privacy* (i.e., protects an individual's personal identity); *communication privacy* (i.e., protects an individual's personal communication); *information privacy* (i.e., determination of an individual's use and dissemination of personal data) (Stamatellos, 2007).

Information privacy is predominantly related to the rise of modern technology and it is noteworthy that this issue has been emphasized since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Warren and Brandeis (1890) observed a moral problem in the rise of new media technologies that cause not only a threat to the private life of the individual but

5 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: [www.igi-global.com/article/virtue-privacy-self-determination/62637](http://www.igi-global.com/article/virtue-privacy-self-determination/62637)

## Related Content

---

### Paradigm Shift for the Future

(2021). *Real-Time and Retrospective Analyses of Cyber Security* (pp. 173-201).  
[www.irma-international.org/chapter/paradigm-shift-for-the-future/260535](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/paradigm-shift-for-the-future/260535)

### Adolescent Problematic Gaming and Domain-Specific Perceptions of Self

Devin J. Mills, Jessica Mettler, Michael J. Sornberger and Nancy L. Heath (2016).  
*International Journal of Cyber Behavior, Psychology and Learning* (pp. 44-56).  
[www.irma-international.org/article/adolescent-problematic-gaming-and-domain-specific-perceptions-of-self/173742](http://www.irma-international.org/article/adolescent-problematic-gaming-and-domain-specific-perceptions-of-self/173742)

### Adolescent Co-Researchers Design Media Literacy Lessons to Address Cyberbullying Through Design Thinking: Encouraging Passive Bystanders to Protect Cyber-Victims

Aileen Chai Siew Cheng (2022). *Research Anthology on Combating Cyber-Aggression and Online Negativity* (pp. 285-311).  
[www.irma-international.org/chapter/adolescent-co-researchers-design-media-literacy-lessons-to-address-cyberbullying-through-design-thinking/301640](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/adolescent-co-researchers-design-media-literacy-lessons-to-address-cyberbullying-through-design-thinking/301640)

### Technologized Sexism: Controlling (Re)presentation of Women's Bodies Through Selfies

Pratham Prakash Parekh (2023). *Cyberfeminism and Gender Violence in Social Media* (pp. 304-320).  
[www.irma-international.org/chapter/technologized-sexism/331914](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/technologized-sexism/331914)

### Collaboration as Co-Constructed Discourse: Developing a Coding Guide for the Analysis of Peer Talk During Educational Information Seeking

Jonathan Foster (2010). *Collaborative Information Behavior: User Engagement and Communication Sharing* (pp. 219-246).  
[www.irma-international.org/chapter/collaboration-constructed-discourse/44490](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/collaboration-constructed-discourse/44490)