THIS HAS GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH GEORGE

Andrew Oberg

Security cameras have become a ubiquitous part of everyday life in most major cities, yet each new camera seems to come with cries of foul play by defenders of privacy rights. Our long history with these cameras and CCTV networks does not seem to have alleviated our concerns with being watched, and as we feel ourselves losing privacy in other areas the worry generated by security cameras has remained. Our feelings of disquiet, however, are unnecessary as they stem from an erroneous view of the self. The following argues that this view of an autonomous and atomistic self is both detrimental and inaccurate.

I don't mind being surveilled. It's inevitable anyway; every corner store, every parking lot, every train platform, every public entrance and exit now have security cameras squarely stationed to do what those Orwellian black helicopters were imagined to accomplish, but with far more efficiency, and, one likes to think, less waste. As early as 2006 the UK had about one CCTV camera for every 14 people,[1] and that this country now has the most watched citizenry in the world has become something close to common knowledge. I imagine that even there though most don't spend a great deal of time talking about the ubiquitousness of their friendly neighborhood unblinking eyes. Still, it's not like answering 'Which country has the most security cameras?' would win you a big cash prize at your pub quiz night. It's one of those things that nearly everyone knows and no one seems to really bother about. And as similar public surveillance systems increase in countries around the world they are being met with equal

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listlessness, but why are we so blasé? Isn't this an issue we should care deeply about? Shouldn't we be feeling that our rights are being trampled upon, our inner lives invaded, our hard-won liberties unceremoniously tossed to the wind? In the following I'll argue for a viewpoint in which, if adopted, feelings of blasé may not be the best response to this trend of increased surveillance, but are nevertheless not altogether inappropriate. To my mind, the issue here boils down to one of self, and to where one sees one's self extending – it is that border that makes all the difference between those thin rectangular boxes aimed down at us requiring an act of doublethink or simply tacit acknowledgement of potential profitability.

As I write this, the US presidential candidate for the Republicans Mitt Romney is taking a lot of flak for a comment he made at a fundraiser dinner that 47% of Americans don't pay income tax, are dependent on the government, and would never vote for him.[2] Romney's statement is of course misrepresentative of actual data, but beyond being just one more footnote in the long story of the inanity of representative democracy in general – and the US's in particular – it also points to a worldview in which the individual is the sole source of consideration, and is often seen not as part of a broader society but rather as an element that must be protected from that society. What's mine is mine, what's yours is yours, and never shall there be any association between. (A point highlighted in the 9th and 10th paragraphs of the *NYT* article.)

What such a worldview comes down to is the prioritizing of oneself and one's interests not over and above those of others but rather with a complete disregard for those of others. A real-world example may suffice to demonstrate this point without overburdening our discussion. A friend of my wife's and mine recently moved into a new apartment in a nice neighborhood here in Tokyo and hosted a housewarming party this past weekend. While there, her buzzer rang and the screened intercom unit on her living room wall showed the visitor to be a member of the NHK fee

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collection service. (A digression here to explain the NHK: It is a public TV and radio service similar to the US's PBS. The service is primarily funded by the collection of standardized monthly fees, which, they say, should be paid by everyone living in Japan who owns a TV set or radio that can receive the service. These fees are gathered by people walking around door to door, though supporters do have the payment option of automatic bank account withdrawals.) Our friend naturally couldn't be bothered to leave her guests to go downstairs and deal with the man, and so she simply ignored him. I made the obvious, and probably unnecessary, remark that funding the broadcaster by just taking the fees out of our payroll taxes would really be a more efficient way of paying for the service, something that prompted a discussion that has stuck with me. Another friend rejoined that such a move would be quite unfair as he uses his computer for all of his media, never watches or listens to NHK, and therefore shouldn't have to pay for it.

This is the crux of the matter; should anyone have to pay for a service that they don't personally use but that benefits other members of the society in which they live? Mitt Romney and his backers at the dinner would probably say no. I think they'd be wrong to do so, and to demonstrate why let's first shift our example from a media outlet to a healthcare provider to make the case a little clearer and to give it a little more weight. Should I have to contribute to a healthcare system, be it a for-profit private provider or a nationalized scheme, even though I'm currently a healthy working adult? Most people, even those opposed to national healthcare, would say yes, such contributions are only natural as sooner or later you're bound to get sick and would then benefit from the system. Would my friend likewise someday benefit from NHK? The chances are very high that he will, be it in an indirect way via someone else whom has gotten important information from the service — say, regarding inclement weather or a natural disaster — or by being informed, educated, or entertained himself by one of its programs viewed or heard on a TV or radio that he

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may or may not own. Our contributions to something bigger than ourselves do tend to bring us benefits, even in the cases of charitable donations where the benefits to us personally may only be emotional and/or psychological but remain benefits nevertheless. (Even without these results, contributing is still arguably worth the effort, particularly in the case of gifts made to effective charities, for the benefits that others receive. Such a viewpoint would naturally require loosening the noose of autonomy as a cardinal virtue that is currently around our societies' necks, an issue that is discussed below.) Of course, it is conceivable that one could pay into a healthcare program, suddenly be hit by a truck and killed instantly, and never benefit from one's contributions, but the chances of such are slim, and I think that most of us would prefer to hedge our bets and make sure any medical care we may someday need is adequately covered.

There will be some who object at this point that the government has no right to force us to pay for any of its programs, and nor should it have any; it is our own responsibility to take care of ourselves and all others likewise shoulder the burden of their own care, whether or not we happen to live in the same country is entirely beside the point. The government should pave the roads, protect the borders, and that's it. None of us live in a society that is run this way, but the idea of an as-limited-as-possible government has long held an appeal for many, and so let's briefly examine this notion to see if it has any merit. The core issue here is the question of obligation, and what, if anything, it is that we owe the governments of the nations that we are born or move into. Arguments that state that we must necessarily support our governments typically fall into one of three categories: natural duty (the government has certain moral qualities and obeying it will promote social happiness and social justice), role-based (our status as citizens or residents compels our support), or indebtedness (we have received benefits that must be paid back).[3] None of these arguments are particularly convincing to me, but

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even if we grant that there is no default obligation that we are under to support and obey our governments, they still have a right to insist on payment from us for social programs that are broadly beneficial, particularly when the programs in question have already been in existence when we become members of the society that they are designed to benefit. The reason why a demand like this can reasonably be made by a government is that we retain the option of refusing to accept it. If we are the sort that will not concede that it is worthwhile contributing to the broader society in which we reside, we can always simply refuse to pay up. This will often, of course, mean refusing to pay our taxes, but if we believe strongly enough in the rightness of our viewpoint, then we should also be willing to face the consequences of our nonpayment. Conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War (or perhaps more properly, the Second Indochina War) faced prison time and other penalties for their stance, surely there are similarly brave libertarians among us.

We are not quite through this thicket yet, however, as the question of coercion has now come to the fore. In the absence of an innate obligation to support our governments, is not having to face consequences for failing to support their programs a double standard? Are we not being forced into doing something that the government has no right to demand? Yet we have already seen that these programs do benefit us, and they do contribute to the betterment of the societies in which we reside. As long as these social programs remain in place, and as long as the coercion being applied to compel our contributions is legal, having to help pay for them strikes me as being quite reasonable. After all, despite my current healthy status, I am happy to pay into the healthcare system that I do because I have seen firsthand the quality care that it offers others and will no doubt one day offer me, to say nothing of the benefits it has already brought and will keep bringing to my loved ones. I may not see the system as perfect, and I may agitate to have it changed in one way or another, but if my life is made better by it, or is likely to be made better by it,

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then it is not an unwarranted expectation on the program provider's part to insist that I pay my fair share. But perhaps I feel so strongly that I will protest and vote against this system, I will petition politicians, write emails, hand out leaflets, and rent bullhorns to make my views heard far and wide. Such actions are entirely sensible for those who hold such views, and even though we may see their position as wrong, they are well within their rights to behave so, just as the potential consequences for non-payment are while the system being protested stands.

All this has taken us a long way from our one-eyed observers perched on the ceilings of our neighborhood convenience stores, and so let's remind ourselves that we are after all being watched and had better stay on task. We have so far discussed some examples of how contributing to the broader society in which we reside results in personal betterment. Should that be the whole of our motivation to chip in? The question, put that way, maintains the definition of self as being purely individual, as indicating nothing more than the consciousness housed in the brain connected to the body that is currently reading this little piece. From that atomistic point of view the only defensible reason for acting socially would be the personal advantage such action wins or will eventually win. Is this in fact how we behave? Consider the example above of donating money to a charitable organization. There are well-established emotional benefits to such giving, as there are also demonstrated psychological ones, but is the attaining of those benefits the motivating factor behind the actions of those who donate? Perhaps in a very few rare cases it is, but by and large people give to charities out of concern for the suffering of others, and, it should be stressed, often this concern is for others whom they have never met and in all likelihood never will meet.[4] This concern stems out of a feeling of common humanity, of sympathy with those who, though possibly many thousands of kilometers away and speaking a language and enmeshed in a culture we can hardly fathom, are still considered enough like us to warrant

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sacrifices on our part to help them. This sympathy is even demonstrated towards nonhuman animals and the natural world through wildlife assistance and environmental protection groups. Not everyone gives to charities of course, but enough do to demonstrate that such a mindset does seem to be a naturally occurring part of us, and the advantages gained by encouraging and promoting such a mindset are clear.[5] We do view ourselves as part of a bigger whole, and do recognize the importance of that whole as such. Taking this into consideration, the question becomes not 'Should I help others because it helps myself?', but 'At what point does my connection with others cease?' The answer to that last question is quite simple: Nowhere.

An atomistic worldview has us looking at a security camera and wondering to ourselves whether being surveilled, and its subsequent loss of privacy, is going to be made up to us in some way, whereas a holistic worldview has us looking at a security camera and instead wondering what the results of a cost benefit analysis would be. Is the cost in installation, maintenance, training in proper use, and other ancillary investments in money and time balanced by an advantage such as a reduction in criminal activity? The jury is still out on that. A pair of articles from 2009[6] seem to suggest that the low effectiveness of the systems in crime prevention as they are currently used may not be worth the high costs entailed, but both articles do report on advantages the cameras have brought and *The Telegraph* piece in particular points out that the problem may be in a lack of proper police training on the cameras' use rather than the surveillance network itself. That report does also note though that more street lighting and more police officers on the beat could be more efficient, and much less costly, ways to reduce crime.

As appropriate as such a cost benefit analysis is, the issue we are presently considering is a step back from that; our concern here is not whether the costs of surveillance are too high for the advantages gained, but rather how we should view the decisions taken on the implementation of

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the networks themselves, that is, of being surveilled with the intention of making society safer. What are we, as the observed viewing our viewing, as it were, to make of the process itself? We have now come full circle to our original question on how we should consider public surveillance: Is it an infringement on our hard-earned rights or isn't it? We have seen how contributing to broadly beneficial social programs can and does also benefit us as individuals, and that the demand for our contributions is a reasonable one; we have moreover seen that there does appear to be an instinct for social thinking, for a sympathetically based outlook that is strong enough to promote even self-sacrificial actions in individuals. As much as modern consumer-centered societies may distract us from it, the reality is that we are all part of a much bigger organism, the multifaceted movements of which join each of us in the great web of our planetary ecosystem. Very few of us could survive solely on our own in complete isolation from all human contact, and even fewer of us would wish to. Recognizing these realities, our approach to a far-reaching system of surveillance should be acceptance of and even, perhaps, gratitude for what it could bring to the fuller self: to you and me and everyone else, connected as we all are. Yes, such a system may entail a degree of loss of personal privacy, but such a system may also offer greater public safety and the peace of mind that comes with that. If we shift our focus from an atomistic viewpoint which erroneously ends the self at our personal physical boundaries, and instead adopt the mindset that our selves include all of those with whom we are entangled in life (and even with those whom we will never have direct contact with), then the acceptance of a network of public surveillance should not be difficult to come by. Moreover, under this broader mindset our naturally occurring concern for others will be allowed to thrive and will no doubt bring with it much social profit. A specific system of CCTV-based security like that employed in the UK may not be worth the money it costs to run, but our analysis of it and other systems meant for the public good

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should not deter us from the conviction that such programs can be worth their salt. And if they aren't, we have only to adjust or abandon them, and then try again.

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Notes

[1] 'Britain is "surveillance society"', BBC News, 02 November 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6108496.stm>. Accessed 05 October 2012.

[2] A *New York Times* opinion piece on the matter here: David Brooks, 'Thurston Howell Romney', *The New York Times,* 17 September 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/18/opinion/brooks-thurston-howell-romney.html?_r=0>. Accessed 08 October 2012.

[3] An examination of each of these three categories in detail, arguments against them, and a compelling alternative view can be found here: A. John Simmons, 'Political Obligation and Authority' in *The Blackwell Guide to Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Robert L. Simon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2002), 17–37.

[4] For an account of how some super-rich philanthropists view their giving, see: Shanaz Musafer, 'What motivates philanthropists?', BBC News: Business, 15 October 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-19876134>. Accessed 17 October 2012.

[5] For more on innate morality and moral priorities, see the excellent paper by Jonathan Haidt, 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment', *Psychological Review*, vol. 108 no. 4 (2001), 814–834.

[6] Christopher Hope, '1,000 CCTV cameras to solve just one crime, Met Police admits', The Telegraph, 25 August 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/6082530/1000-CCTV-cameras-to-solve-just-one-crime-Met-Police-admits.html>; and Jennifer 8. Lee, 'Study Questions Whether Cameras Cut Crime', *The New York Times*, 03 March 2009. <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/03/study-questions-whether-cameras-cut-crime/>. Both articles accessed 20 October 2012.

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