

2.1.4 IN PRAISE OF BIG BROTHER

JAMES STACEY TAYLOR

In Selection 2.1.3, “Bigger Monster, Weaker Chains,” Jay Stanley and Barry Steinhardt decry the growing use of surveillance technologies that they see as a threat to privacy. Not everyone agrees, however, that increased surveillance by governments and corporations is such a bad thing. James Stacey Taylor presents a contrarian view in which he argues that what matters is *not* whether someone is watching over you but *what* he or she does with the information obtained by contemporary surveillance technologies. Rather than opposing the use of these technologies for gathering personal information, we should encourage their use as long as we observe the distinction between the surveillance itself and the question of who is permitted to access the gathered information and the ways in which that information is used. This argument is based on the principle of polypotency of technologies under which the same technology can be used for good or bad purposes. Stacey’s argument turns on our accepting the idea that, with proper legal safeguards against governmental abuse, omnipresent surveillance can actually promote important social benefits such as deterring crime and lessening the need to subpoena reluctant witnesses to testify in trials. He argues that, rather than violating rights, the morally legitimate use of surveillance technologies can actually make us safer and enhance our autonomy and privacy.



FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What is Taylor’s argument for thinking that use of surveillance technologies by the state should be morally acceptable to both rights theorists and consequentialists?
2. Under what circumstances should the state be permitted to access the personal information that it gathers through the use of constant surveillance? What limitations and safeguards does Taylor propose to minimize abuse of these powers?
3. Does it matter what kind of government employs surveillance technology to monitor personal behavior? Should U.S. citizens be wary of increased reliance on these technologies by their own government?
4. Can a person be harmed by being spied upon if he or she does not know that this is happening? Do you agree with Taylor’s view? Explain.
5. Comparing the argument in this selection with Selection 2.1.3, which do you think has the better argument? Discuss.



KEYWORDS

autonomy, Big Brother, consequentialism, power, privacy, Spyware, subpoena, surveillance,

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