

TWO FACES OF PRIVACY

F. EMERY

4 November 1976

We find ourselves confronted with a situation where it is technically possible to amass and collate great amounts of data on great numbers of people and to surreptitiously collect information on areas of their life that they might wish to conceal from others. Filing cards and telescopes gave Monsieur Joseph Fouche some help in building up a secret police for Napoleon. Computers and electronic detection gear have vastly expanded this capability for any modern enforcement agency. The existence of such capabilities is itself some inducement for some people to use it for some such purposes. However, the car offered the thrill of travelling at high speed and, to a large degree people have managed to bring that under control. Now that we have become conscious of the potential danger to privacy of mass data bases for computer systems and electronic bugging I am hopeful that effective protective legislation will emerge.

It seems to me that our biggest problem lies with the other face of privacy – the voluntary withdrawal into privacy. I think that our social life is becoming so taxing for the individual that many, perhaps the majority, are bit-by-bit withdrawing into living private lives. I think, further, that this movement is fostered by the design, production and marketing of products to enable an individual to enjoy in private what once would require some public or even cooperative effort to realize. To cap this, I think with every incremental withdrawal by a mass of the citizens the public authorities have to greatly multiply their resources and their efforts to maintain what they have customarily regarded as proper levels of social law and order. In other words, under certain circumstances withdrawal into privacy, pursuit of seclusion, not only invites invasion of that privacy but demands it for the so-called greater good. The particular circumstance I have in mind is when the withdrawal is a very widespread phenomena. The complete ‘dropping-out’ of very small minorities does not necessitate social action. When a majority start doing anything as little as beating the lights at traffic intersections there is a powerful incentive to strengthen the technologies and social instruments for surveillance and enforcement.

I find this second face of privacy to be the biggest problem because I do not see how even increased awareness and rational public debate can lead to legislation that might restore the situation. If we cannot restore the situation I can foresee a time when we will achieved greater privacy at the expense of self-determination.

The situation I have defined it, is not hopeless because there is no assumption that legislation is the only way in which people can order their affairs. It does, however,

suggest that we have to look to somewhere other than our legislatures, and our judicial and law enforcement agencies.

Having given a resume of what I think is implied by a mass withdrawal into privacy let me now spell out my reasons for adducing this and inferring its consequences.

My reason for stating that life is becoming more taxing for the individual is because I think that our society is becoming more turbulent. This is not a poetic way of saying that the rat races depicted in Hollywood films are now more prevalent. The descriptive term turbulence was not even adopted till years after this level of environmental disturbance was identified. What was identified in the first instance was that some social environments had evolved to such a level of interdependence that a novel action by any part could set off processes in the whole social field that grossly amplify, or suppress, the effects of that action. It was no longer a social field in which events could be judged in terms of action and reaction. That is, no social planning could be done on the assumption that if X did this Y, and maybe Z, would do that; nor that the influence of X's action on other parts of the social field would be roughly proportional to the force that X put into its action and the distance from X of the parts of the field. I was prepared to accept my colleague's request that there should be a name to this state of the environment, and not just to term it a type of environment. That was more than a decade ago and it appears to have been a mistake. I was talking about a measurable property of the environments that individuals and organizations live in and not just the feeling of living in turbulent times. The critical measure proposed was the degree of relevant uncertainty under which they lived. Quite simply, with what certainty could they establish that the actions they could take would lead to survival. You could call it cost-benefit analysis, if you had some measuring stick for determining what the costs and benefits were.

I happen to think that in these terms most of our citizens are confronted by a turbulent environment. An environment in which they could not just muscle their way through, even if they had the muscle – an environment in which extra force would be as helpful as thrusting harder on a rotating door. Nor could they expect their elected governments to do better. I do not for one moment think that withdrawal into privacy is the only response to this turn of events. The individual could reduce the impact of this development in the social field upon himself by drifting off into superficiality, the syndrome of declaring that nothing is worth anymore than the pleasure it immediately gives you. We have seen plenty of that type of mindless hedonism. Alternatively, an individual could radically reduce his exposure to 'relevant uncertainty' by declaring and acting as though the only relevant uncertainty was that which affected the fate of his kind of people. There us a third logical alternative. Logical because together they exclusively define the ways out for individuals when their social system appears. To be breaking down. This third way out is dissociation - the opposite to association.

In the sixties I could harbour some doubts as to whether dissociation was the major trend. In the seventies I harbour no such doubts. As a society we care less about superficial differences and we are less prepared to tolerate exploitation of differences according to 'kind'. We have, however, continued to favour the move toward privacy as if it were a virtue. The reason for this is, I think, because dissociation brings to the individual a quick and obvious relief from the complexities and worries of daily choice: the less he is concerned about the less he has to worry about. He dissociates himself by denying the relevance or utility of others for the achievement of the things he desires. He is probably well aware that some loss is involved in this but avoids the greater in the affairs of others. The argument runs somewhat as follows; 'You do not know what other things the other person is involved in, and, even if you did you do not know how they might change overnight, things being as unstable as they are'. This is a tactic of great universality. It reduces the relevant uncertainty in one's life whether one ignores the need of fellow motorists in heavy traffic; drives past the scene of an accident even though there is no sign of anyone else playing Good Samaritan; studiously avoids contacts with neighbours; religiously keeps out of local school, religious, sporting, service and governing bodies; 'tolerantly' keeps out of the lives of other members of one's family; sees nothing, hears nothing and knows nothing when a misdemeanor is committed in his presence; claims to have been doing only what he was told when an accomplice to a misdeed; and, at work, disclaims any responsibility or obligation to go of his way to help his workmates or his boss.

Dissociation does not take place at just the behavioural level. At another level it fosters the attitude of 'I don't want to know'. This more or less blocks off efforts by others to remind a person of his obligations. In one respect this is reassuring. This attitude at least admits that there is an underlying web of social responsibilities: if the person had to know more then he might well feel obligated to do something about it. Dissociation is not the wholesale production of individual psychopaths. Nevertheless, whilst we can cope with a handful of psychopaths and still get on with a normal social life, it is not at all sure that we can manage with even minor reductions in responsibility by a large number of people when we are confronted with a turbulent society.

Now let us pause for a moment. The argument I am developing is little more than an exercise in science fiction unless this society is experiencing a significant increase in relevant uncertainty i.e. uncertainty about its significant affairs, and unless there is evidence that dissociation is emerging as the predominant immediate response, not superficiality or segmentation.

Quite apart from the hard facts of the energy crisis and our own political convolutions we have had a rash of public reports on rural industry, manufacturing industry, the cities, the Federal public service, the national estate etc. Together they seem to me to be describing a significant degree of turbulence in our society. '

I find it harder to document my belief that that dissociation has become the dominant form of short-term solution to this emerging social turbulence. It would not be hard to measure the sort of indicators I mentioned earlier, it is just that we have not as a nation been concerned to do so. (It is a frightening reflection on where we have been in the past seven decades that T.A. Coghlan as Statistician to NSW before Federation, was closer to providing this data than now are). Pawley, in his book, *The Private Future*, has summarised the trends in a discursive manner. His evidence, although derived from the U.K. and the U.S.A., seems very relevant to our scene. We have seen an equal push into private transport rather than public transport; we have had the push toward the private housing box with the negligible development of neighbourhood relations; we have had the same rush into converting our leisure hours into the private viewing of television. The parallel could be multiplied. I think Pawley has made his point, namely that the drive toward privacy is general in western societies. I think that it is also true that the more persons are exposed to mass society, in work, travel, leisure or what you will, the more they will strive to dissociate: the more they are provided with the technological means of achieving their own ends on their own, the more they will elect to possess those means. Our mad rush into the purchase and hire of colour television sets, despite the economic recession, only serves to highlight this last point.

At this stage of my argument you might well ask, “so what? People need their privacy as a protection and they need their private worlds in order to develop their individuality. What is wrong with what is just human nature?”

I have made the point that if privacy is sought by rejecting one’s obligations to others, and if this is repeated hundreds of thousands of times by other people, then the fabric of self-regulation in the society will surely be eroded and torn. The little bit of temporary protection that each person gains by this tactic is illusory. The impersonal regulatory mechanisms of the state and criminal elements would certainly expand their activities to patch up or exploit any gaps that appear in the fabric. The black ghettos of the U.S. cities vividly display this process at work, and we are not without our own examples.

On the issue of privacy and the development of individuality, my views are entirely in accord with those expressed by Professor Lawrence in the preceding paper. I would like to repeat a crucial statement of his:

“A private environment is not just found by being alone or by oneself as much as it entails the things over which one has control, or the places in which autonomy is allowed and guaranteed”.

Personal autonomy and privacy are identical. Autonomy is certainly a necessary condition for the development of individuality but it is not all certain that privacy is so necessary. Thus, for example, a person does not gain in individuality by not taking a spouse or by not having children. He may grow in individuality *despite* the fact that

he has neither spouse or children. I would even venture to suggest that the child whose baby-sitter is a television set will be impaired in its development compared with a child who is baby-sat by human beings. If we look further at this problem of privacy and individuality I think we might have reason to doubt whether the suburban housewife is developing well under the conditions of privacy and seclusion to which she is committed. We might also wonder whether the spouses are doing much better when their daily work life is so organized that it is in their best interest not to offer help to their work-mates, nor to accept help from them. Whilst their parents are thus engaged in learning the art of dissociation, their children are learning that mutual support is socially defined as copying and cheating.

I have put my case as bluntly as possible. But I have tried not to say or imply two things. First, I have not denied that in any human relation, even one as close as that between husband and wife, there is a need for some area that one can call one's own, vis-à-vis the other partner. This same area, however, does not need to be private with respect to everyone else in order to provide the individual with autonomy and a sense of adequate elbow room. It could be a stamp collection that is eagerly discussed with other philatelists but emotionally defended against any wifely interference.

Second, I have not implied that dissociation can never be other than harmful, in the long run, to the individual. I think dissociation is a very dangerous way for people to cope with 'relevant uncertainty'. This does not rule out situations in which it is an entirely appropriate response. Thus, if a person finds himself drawn into a relation which marked by a lack of mutual respect and support of him, to other as well as himself, to remain in a relation where he runs the risk of being seduced, conned or otherwise manipulated to his own harm or to the harm of those who believe him to be acting as his own self.

This brings to a problem that Professor Lawrence has just defined:

“A central problem is understanding privacy therefore involved the forms and conditions of reciprocity in social interaction, and privacy is most easily invaded when there is a lack of reciprocity”.

I think we will better understand the price of society pays for dissociation if we consider the forms and conditions of reciprocity of which Professor Lawrence talks. I think we will find that in the normal process of developing a relation with another person, a diminution of privacy is not a loss of personal autonomy. Let us represent people as many layered beings with the layers ranging from the most private inner being to the outer layer of superficial appearances, opinions, mannerisms. When two such people come together for the first time they allow each other to take stock of their outer layers, whilst being careful not to be obvious about it. If they continue to meet and sense some mutual interest, one or the other will tentatively reveal something a bit more personal. At this point the other will either be unresponsive indicating that he or she feels that the relationship has developed as far as they are

interested in, or the other will respond by revealing a little more of themselves. (See Lawrence's reference to the work of Jourard). In this the normal process, reciprocity is basically maintained. At any one time the advantages to one side are minimal; no more of oneself is revealed than is warranted by one's interest in the relationship and this interest is founded on manifest reciprocity. In these conditions one's autonomy is not felt to be threatened and in fact one experiences, correctly, an enlargement of one's personal world.

The arts of the seducer, the confidence trickster and peaceful interrogator are all based on the manipulation of this normal process. At each level of mutual revelation they seek to maintain the appearance of being as frank and honest as the other. At each move toward a deeper level of mutual revelation they must appear to be as naturally reluctant as the other and yet sufficiently interested to take some small risk of further self-revelation. They seek to avoid the error of 'dropping the catch' by overlapping the reticence bit or 'scaring off the catch' by moving too fast. In any case, in a society where dissociation is prevalent it is an easy step from rejecting obligations to cooperate with others, to rejecting the obligations entailed in building up ordinary human relations. In such a society we can expect many to play these roles and many in fact to draw comfort testing out the defences of their privacy by destroying that of others.

The normal guarantees, that sharing of private worlds will enhance not reduce autonomy are also broken in another way than that of the seducer and the con man. This is simply where there is a marked asymmetry in power and either party wishes to turn this into a relation of dominance or dependence. It is this that makes it so difficult to preserve humanity at the interference of the bureaucracies and the citizen, particularly if the citizen is a recipient of welfare. As Lawrence has succinctly put it:

"The powerless have always had their privacy violated."

The widespread interest in establishing ombudsmen can be taken as concern for the prevalence of this problem. Worthwhile as such a measure is, it does not go to the heart of the problem.

I think I can now sum up why I think dissociation is a short term solution to turbulence, and maladaptive. If people will not interface with their peers in seeking a better quality of life in their neighbourhoods, their workplaces, schools, etc. they will find themselves interfacing with bureaucracies and trying to protect their private world in communities where they cannot expect the common decencies to be extended to them.

Is the situation hopeless? Pawley certainly thinks so and concludes that:

"The process of privatization is irreversible in the present circumstances of the Western world, and the allegiance of its people to the dreams so

indiscriminately displayed within it will survive any effort at reversal short of total destruction". (p. 203).

I believe, with Herbert Fingarette that "responsibility emerges where the individual accepts as a matter of personal concern *something which society offers to his concern*". (p. 6, my emphasis). We have failed in what we have offered for individual concern. In the work place we have typically said to the individual 'your concern is what is written in your job specification, it is no concern of yours to help the others or to seek their help as that is the concern of your boss'. In schools and universities we call that sort of thing 'cribbing' or cheating and make a sin of it. In our neighbourhoods we call it meddling. Both the Coombs Report on the Federal bureaucracies and the Jackson Report on manufacturing industry report widespread dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. Both report widespread demand for a wider range of concerns. We know how these concerns can be met in learning as well as in work and we do know that people become more responsible when offered something more to be concerned about. Unlike Pawley, I think people are aware of the foolishness of dissociation. They are not fools and they will move off this course as they find practical ways to do so. Admittedly we have much more to learn about remarking our neighbourhoods, families, voluntary associations and our ways of governance. I am convinced we will quickly accomplish that learning because I see so many in our society who are dedicated to the task.
