
Perceptions of Privacy : A Reflection on Antiquity and the Contemporary Era

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Abstract

This article delves into the evolution of privacy perceptions by contrasting the viewpoints of Antiquity with those of the contemporary era. It investigates how privacy, once regarded as a deprivation of human dignity, has evolved into a fundamental right safeguarding human dignity. The analysis focuses on the societal and technological forces that have driven this transformation and considers the current challenges posed by tech giants and artificial intelligence. The study reveals that privacy is a dynamic and historical concept, continually reshaped by the interplay between individuals and external influences.

1 Privacy in Antiquity

In ancient Greece, privacy was understood literally as deprivation—the state of being deprived of something [1]. This concept signified exclusion from public affairs and certain rights, indicating a condition of lack or separation from civic participation. Therefore, a man living a private life was one excluded from the public affairs of the city, deprived of what was considered the highest human quality : participation in public life. For instance, women, slaves, children, and foreigners were not allowed to participate in public life. The etymology of the word "private", derived from the Latin *privatus* meaning "separated from" or "deprived of", underscores this notion of deprivation—deprivation of something essential to the individual.

In this context, a man deprived of participation in public life was seen as deprived of honor and dignity, not fully realizing the quality of being human. Public life in ancient Greece was intrinsically tied to human activities, with participation in the *polis* (the city) [2] being the essence of human nature. Only those who fully engaged in public affairs, namely citizens, were considered fully human, while children, slaves, and foreigners were excluded from this status. Leading a private life, in this context, meant being deprived of honor and dignity, a condition limiting the quality of being fully human. Thus, in Antiquity, a private life was viewed as an undesirable and unrewarding condition.

2 Privacy in contemporary era

In stark contrast, the contemporary understanding of privacy in the 21st century is that of a fundamental right [3] essential to human dignity. Today, a violation of privacy is seen as a serious affront to dignity. While there is no single, universal legal definition of privacy, it is enshrined in legal texts and demands protection against intrusions. Unlike in Antiquity, where privacy was synonymous with deprivation, it is now considered a precious value to be preserved. This radical

evolution illustrates that privacy is not merely an abstract right but a living reality shaped by evolving social norms. Warren and Brandeis famously defined privacy as "the right to be left alone." [4]

The contemporary definition of privacy increasingly encompasses the protection of personal data [5], a concept directly influenced by recent technological advances. In the United States, privacy is defined through four aspects: informational privacy, physical privacy, decisional privacy, and proprietary privacy. In Europe, it is approached more broadly and non-exhaustively, as indicated by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 7 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which state the right to respect for private and family life, home, and correspondence, along with the protection of personal data. In Africa, the African Youth Charter, in Article 7, stipulates that no young person shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, residence, or correspondence, nor to attacks on their honor or reputation.

3 Philosophical perspective

Interiority and privacy are not concepts that are immediately perceptible. They emerge from a reflective process where individuals contemplate their own existence and relationship to the external world, leading them to assert themselves as thinking beings. Thinkers such as Augustine, at the end of Antiquity, and Descartes, in the 17th century, highlighted the inviolable nature of personal interiority [6], [7]. This awareness does not stem from natural obviousness but from a voluntary affirmation of being, requiring reflective effort. Thus, the reflection on interiority, which forms the basis of the concept of privacy, is the result of conscious realization and not an innate given.

The concept of privacy, far from being immutable, is rooted in social realities and groups that define it themselves. It evolves through confrontations and negotiations with external forces. Historically, these forces were state authorities on one hand and religious authorities on the other. Today, it is economic entities and web giants that challenge the concept of privacy [8]. The state, once an adversary, now positions itself as a defender of privacy, acting as an intermediary between the individual and intrusive forces. Historically, individuals and social groups were direct actors in confronting entities perceived as violating their privacy. This raises questions about the effectiveness and legitimacy of current state protection.

Viewed from a historical perspective, privacy reveals an evolving and adaptive nature. It is not an immutable fundamental right but a reflection of the morals of each era. It is the product of a dynamic interaction between the individual and their social context, not a fixed and universal given. The contemporary definition, although enshrined in legal texts and international charters, is neither absolute nor eternal. It reflects the peculiarities and challenges of a specific time.

We propose a conceptual definition of privacy by emphasizing its historical nature, as we argue that privacy is primarily a historical concept. Privacy is a self-perception. The subject (the "self") becomes aware of their interiority through a confrontation with the sensory world and external forces. These two dynamics operate simultaneously, allowing for the conceptualization of privacy and its evolution throughout history. This dialectical interaction between interiority and exteriority constitutes the essence that traverses and animates the evolution of the concept of privacy. Its evolving and malleable nature makes it vulnerable, which is precisely its history : a constant redefinition in the face of external forces.

This vulnerability is both a weakness and an essential characteristic of its resilience. To sustain itself, privacy must endure moments of rupture, crises where it is confronted with antagonistic forces, such as state and religious authorities, and now economic entities reinforced by technological innovations and artificial intelligence. This confrontational nature may seem contradictory, as one might wish for privacy to be enshrined in immutable legal texts, imposed upon the world in an unalterable manner. However, the history of privacy teaches us that these confrontations are necessary for its maintenance and renewal.

4 Reflection on contemporary challenges

Privacy is fundamentally historical, adaptable, and evolving. Its current definition is not fixed but responds to changes in social, political, and technological landscapes. The evolution of privacy has always been shaped by the interaction between self-perception and external forces. Historically, privacy was seen as a form of deprivation and exclusion from public life. Thinkers like Augustine in the late Antiquity and Descartes in the Classical era elevated the concept of interiority, establishing privacy as a core value. Today, privacy continues to evolve, now challenged by web giants and technological innovations, demonstrating its dynamic and adaptable nature.

Redefining privacy in our time requires understanding the broader social contexts and the values of different groups and individuals. The privacy crisis in the digital age, intensified by artificial intelligence and its impact on economic and human-object interactions, is not a new phenomenon. History shows that privacy is continually redefined in response to crises and confrontations.

Currently, the significant challenge is that tech giants, driven by economic interests, exert unprecedented control over individual privacy, surpassing traditional authorities. This shift raises critical questions about the legitimacy of privacy choices, often dictated by unilateral terms set by these commercial entities. Privacy considerations must originate from the individual, not be imposed by companies whose interests may conflict with personal privacy needs. Historical patterns indicate that privacy evolves through ongoing confrontation and adaptation. As such, the current imbalance of power between economic entities and users represents a unique and pressing challenge.

5 In what ways is my research relevant for AI ?

Understanding privacy from a philosophical perspective is crucial in the field of artificial intelligence, especially since privacy remains a major unresolved challenge. Today, AI is often seen as a threat to privacy [9], as if the two are fundamentally incompatible. It's as if maintaining privacy is seen as a barrier to AI development, suggesting that advancing this technology inevitably requires sacrificing some level of individual privacy.

AI depends heavily on vast amounts of data to train its machine learning models. For these models to be effective and valuable, they need ongoing access to high-quality personal data [10], like location information, web browsing histories, and increasingly, biometric data such as facial recognition. This kind of data collection raises serious ethical concerns because it directly impacts people's privacy.

This tension, which currently seems to favor technological progress over privacy, underscores the need for a philosophical approach. My aim is not to offer an immediate fix to the conflicts between AI and privacy but to lay the groundwork by questioning the very concept of privacy. We need to first clarify what privacy means to us today before we can effectively apply it to emerging technologies.

In this philosophical exploration, I'm not claiming to have the final answer. My goal is to free the concept of privacy from the specific challenges it faces in the AI context, allowing for a deeper understanding and a more nuanced approach. This reflection is just the beginning—a preliminary step that opens the door to more thorough historical research.

By looking back to Antiquity, especially the Greco-Roman Empire, I explore how privacy was originally understood. What's fascinating about the Roman Empire, an heir to Greek culture, is its vast reach—from Britain to Spain, across North Africa, and into the Middle East. My initial observation is that privacy, as a historical concept, cannot be defined in a single, universal way. This is a crucial point for the AI community to consider: there is no one-size-fits-all definition of privacy. But why is this important to acknowledge ?

The realization that privacy lacks a universal definition has significant implications. Current efforts to create a single, enforceable definition that the scientific community must follow are bound to fail because they don't offer a practical solution. While existing laws are necessary to establish basic principles, they quickly become outdated or irrelevant in the face of the real-world challenges posed by technological innovation. This is why these laws often fall short, merely limiting access to personal data and creating friction with the AI community.

My contribution, which challenges the prevailing views in AI ethics, is this: Privacy should no longer be seen solely as a matter of protection, especially not just legal protection. The idea of privacy as something that needs to be protected is now outdated. Therefore, the approach we need to take shouldn't be top-down, dictated by laws, but rather local and contextual, reflecting the specific realities of each situation.

6 Practical case hypothesis in AI

What does a local approach to privacy look like? Let's consider an example involving a group of young researchers in Mozambique who are developing an app for farmers. This app aims to detect early signs of cassava leaf pests using various types of data, including geographical and meteorological information. The goal is to alert farmers about potential pest problems, allowing them to take specific, localized actions to protect their crops. This method increases efficiency and reduces the costs and effort needed for daily pest prevention, which can be challenging for farmers with limited resources.

At a certain point in the app's development, the researchers need to visit the fields to observe the cassava leaves, gather data, and speak with farmers to understand their challenges, lifestyles, and working methods. This is where privacy issues come into play—not as a matter of strict protection, but in a way that requires full transparency.

Researchers need to be clear about the types of data they want to collect. Farmers should be fully informed and then decide whether or not to participate. If they agree, a negotiation takes place, not just about allowing data access, but also about setting clear terms and ensuring guarantees regarding how the data will be used.

The details of this negotiation must be documented in the research results, ideally through a contract. This approach is not about enforcing rigid international privacy laws, such as those from the UN or other organizations. Instead, it considers both the local context and the specific nature of the project. Each AI project is the responsibility of its initiator and should develop its own data access methods in agreement with data holders and owners.

In this way, privacy shifts from being merely a matter of protection to becoming a negotiable asset. If this innovative approach succeeds in Africa, it could set an example for the rest of the world on how to handle private data. Africa, with its vast diversity of cultures, languages, customs, and practices, provides a unique range of perspectives. Each community may have different views on what is private or valuable. If this method proves effective in Africa, it could serve as a global model for addressing privacy issues.

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