IS ALWAYS ON, ALWAYS GOOD?

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A few weeks ago I took some friends from the U.S. to see Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin, Ireland. The sight-seeing tour of the jail became surprisingly emotional for me as we passed row upon row of cold, dark cells. Many had once held men and women who gave their lives to win the freedoms we enjoy today.

Entering the newer East Wing was a welcome contrast, with its bright and spacious oval chamber. Opened in 1864 by prison reformers, the three stories of cells, iron catwalks, and a large central staircase have made this a popular backdrop for film makers (e.g. *The Italian Job*, *In the Name of the Father*). We could see into many cells at once and were told the design allowed a few officers to monitor many prisoners.

Out of curiosity, I researched the jail further and was surprised to learn that its design was influenced by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Better known for his theory of utilitarianism, Bentham was also a social reformer with a particular interest in prisons. He developed a design called the Panopticon. Though he never persuaded the British government to build one, elements of his design were incorporated into some prisons, including Kilmainham.

A Panopticon is a circular building with numerous cells around the perimeter opening into a central chamber. In the middle is an "inspection house," from which a guard observes the prisoners, but the prisoners cannot see him. Bentham's design included "speaking tubes" to allow the guards to listen to everything going on in each cell. These, he claimed, would be particularly useful when the design was applied to factories, schools, and hospitals. Staff could monitor patients to ensure they complied with instructions, while patients' complaints would be heard instantly and receive immediate attention. Bentham would surely be impressed by the constant monitoring available today with CCTV, sensors, smart-homes, and other wireless capabilities.

Soon afterwards, I encountered Bentham's panopticism again in a different context. A friend pointed me to a 14-minute science fiction short movie *Plurality*[1] mentioned in the October 10, 2012 *Le Monde*, one of France's two leading newspapers. Set in New York in 2023, the "Bentham Grid" is keeping an eye on everyone. The grid is described as a "technological marvel." It takes everything unique to you (your social security number, passport number, bank account numbers) and links it to your DNA in a central computer system. Scanners are placed everywhere, such that a touch of your finger leaves enough DNA to identify you. Keys, ID cards, money, and crime are all relics of the past. The narrator calls the Bentham Grid "the ultimate social network."

We are at a relatively early stage in developing digital social networks. With Facebook, smart phones, and GPS, we can find what we are looking for and track our friends with comparative ease. Interconnectivity is developing to the point at which, when we are sent electronic communications, algorithms identify what we might like on the basis of the included content. Satellite and CCTV offer some degree of surveillance, but not to the extent provided by the Bentham Grid. The narrator tells us that in 2023 "you can't do anything in New York City without the Grid knowing who you are and where you are." Merely science fiction? Read on.

On one level, Facebook and its many clones are technological means of connecting and communicating. But underlying them is a philosophy that requires careful analysis and critique. Bentham's Panopticon was not just architecture, but design infused with a philosophy about surveillance and human behavior. A key dimension of his design was that the inmates were unable either to communicate with one another or to know whether they were being observed. Bentham thought this would leave them feeling uncertain and insecure. The result would be "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example."[2] Bentham's theory was that knowing someone might be watching you would lead you to behave properly.

The digital architecture of social networking is built on a similar philosophy to Bentham's of surveillance and privacy. Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, declared in 2010 that privacy is a "social norm" whose time has come and gone.[3] He is not alone. A. J. Keen has documented a notion of "the death of privacy" among the major players behind Google, Sun Microsystems, LinkedIn, and other social networking sites: "Individual privacy is a relic, they say. It has a past, but

no future. For many of these supposed visionaries, the death of privacy is no different, in principle, from the retirement of the horse and cart or the disappearance of gaslights from city streets."[4]

"Zuckerberg's Law" states that each year people will share twice as much private information as they did the previous year. Scott McNealy, co-founder of Sun Microsystems, was reported as saying, "you have zero privacy anyway—get over it."[5] Constant surveillance, as Bentham likewise thought, will make the world a better place. When Eric Schmidt was Google's CEO, he said that those concerned about online privacy were the unethical ones. "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place."[6] But is privacy just about keeping things from others? Is there something fundamentally important about privacy, something about human dignity that might be lost without it?

Returing to *Plurality* in 2023, a reporter puts that question to the fictional Mayor of New York: "Is the right to privacy effectively dead in New York City?" The Mayor replies, as many today might, "I think anyone, including my fellow law-abiding New Yorkers, would happily sacrifice a little bit of privacy for that kind of personal safety." Today, many people are willing to give up their privacy for much less—sometimes as little as convenient shopping. Google's Schmidt said in 2010, "We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about."[7]

1984 comes to mind, as it does in *Plurality*. In front of a poster declaring "Beware Big Brother Bentham," the action in *Plurality* starts when an agent is told a "plurality" has been spotted. A plurality is a person who comes back from the future to warn people about where surveillance is leading society. The Grid finds the plurality; when the agent, Inspector Foucault, identifies her, she declares, "You've replaced freedom with the illusion of safety. But we're not safe, Foucault; neither are you."

Michel Foucault, here the French philosopher, would agree. He claimed that Bentham's panopticism received little attention because it was seen as "not much more than a bizarre little utopia, a perverse dream."[8] Foucault believed it had more

profound import. As individual rights and freedoms spread with the Enlightenment, the elite needed to maintain control. The heavy hand of violent power would no longer work, so instead the Panopticon was conceived as "a subtle, calculated technology of subjection."[9] To ensure good behavior, whether in jails, schools, or hospitals, panopticism separates people even while they are together. The individual "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject of communication."[10] The result is "a power that insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied."[11]

The dehumanizing effect of constant surveillance and loss
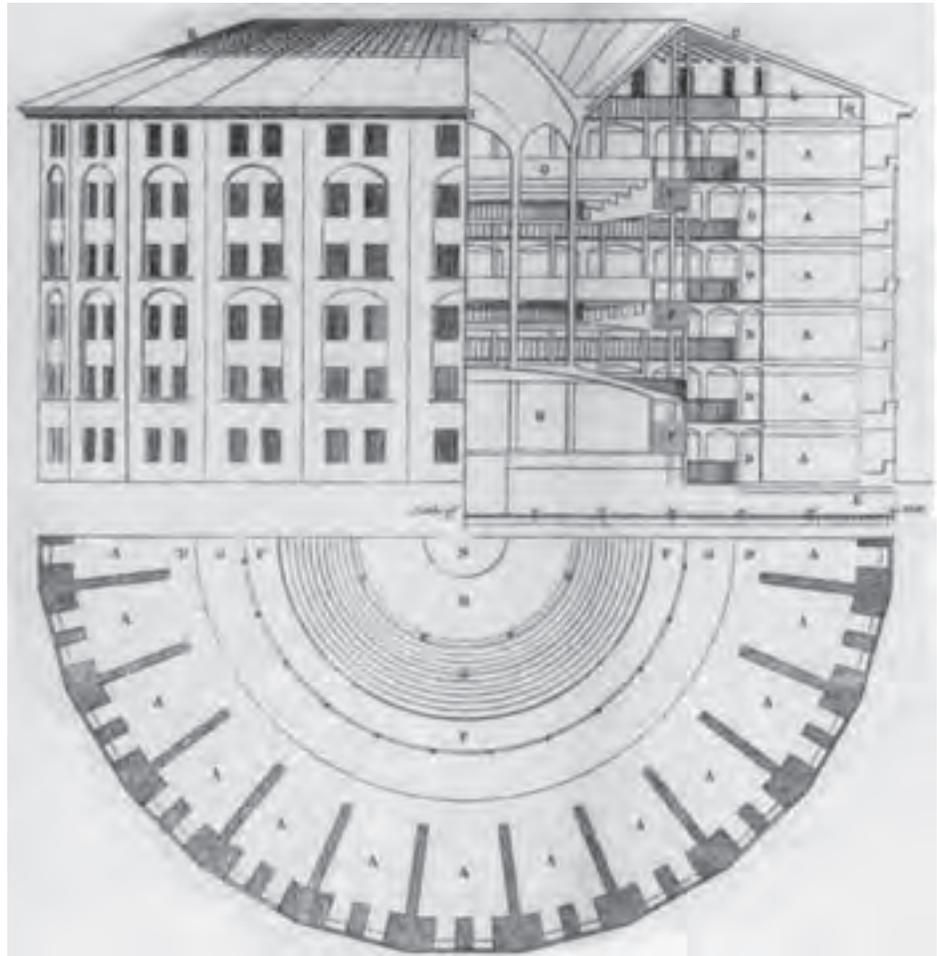
Plan of the Panopticon, 1843 (originally 1791), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham* vol. IV, 172-3. This image is used courtesy of wikipedia.

of privacy in *1984* was cearly visible because of its totalitarian enforcement. Today's loss of privacy is more subtle, being gradually accepted in the name of security, comfort, or convenience. But how much of this is an illusion? As more people disclose more of their privacy, what else is being given up? As homes and communities become 'smarter,' with sensors and cameras monitoring everything, are we compromising our dignity?

One concern is the link between privacy and intimacy and

its impact on relationships. In declaring Zuckerberg as 2010 Person of the Year, *Time* magazine noted his plan to eliminate loneliness. "You'll be working and living inside a network of people, and you'll never have to be alone again. The Internet, and the whole world, will feel more like a family, or a college dorm, or an office where your co-workers are also your best friends."[12]

Research is showing this to be an illusion. Sherry Turkle, a social scientist at MIT, raises concerns about the social impact of social networking. Her research finds that "we have sacrificed conversation for mere connection."[13] Her latest book, *Alone Together*, documents diminished relationships as we constantly connect online. Social networking is based on a limited view of human nature, one that neglects our embodiedness, the importance of time spent with people, and our spiritual nature.

Another concern is that incessant tweeting and blogging is diminishing the rigor of our communication. Bentham wanted control without communication. Foucault observed that panopticism provided information without communication. Turkle's research notes a trend towards simpler thinking that avoids probing questions that require deeper reflection. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spotted this 35 years ago. In his analysis of Western culture, which he wrote after being exiled to the West, he notes that "Hastiness and superficiality . . . are the psychic diseases of the twentieth century. . . . In-depth analysis of a problem is anathema to the press."[14] Now we have technology to do this all the time. In place of careful thinking, we have 'always on' chit-chat and sharing of everything. Solzhenitsyn lamented the way privacy was shamelessly intruded upon under the slogan "Everyone is entitled to know everything." Instead, he upheld the "right of people not to know, not to have their divine souls stuffed with gossip, nonsense, vain talk." And that was before the Internet!

As we lose privacy, along with the ability to unplug, we lose appreciation for solitude. Why would an always-on system of faceless friends and twittering sound-bytes seem more attractive than walking in the woods or staring at the stars? We have to learn to be alone, to quiet our minds so we can think and reflect. If we cannot be content when alone, we will struggle to connect with God. We need privacy to deepen our relationship with God, to pray, and to wrestle through things with him. If we need to be constantly plugged in, we will be distracted to the point of superficiality. Seeing this trend, Keen wants to defend "the mystery and secrecy of individual existence." He is searching to understand "why, as human beings, privacy and solitude makes us happy."[15] Knowing we are made in the image of God, who does not make public all his thoughts (1 Corinthians 2:11), we need to engage with such deep, searching questions. The answers have a very practical bearing on how we treat others.

Bentham promoted his Panopticon as economical. Foucault

believed constant surveillance allows "the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost (economically, by the low expenditure it involves; politically, by its discretion, its low exteriorization, its relative invisibility, the little resistance it arouses)."[16] Bentham wanted his design to be used in hospitals, and we indeed see increased surveillance in healthcare today. For now, it is CCTV, sensors, and smart-homes. Soon it will be robots as companions, such as envisioned by the Robot Companions for Citizens project.[17] Turkle has studied the impact of robots on humans and believes that whether robots are viewed as acceptable companions for others is one of the biggest questions facing us about our humanity. If virtual friendship is good enough, are robots good enough for people in residential homes? Is it enough that we just think there might be someone in there watching us? Or is this another illusion? Will that give us even more reasons to neglect human contact and conversation?

Friendship is being redefined by Facebook, knowledge by Google, and privacy by corporations. These changes have dramatic implications for what we think about human dignity. Those concerned about Christian bioethics need to engage with these issues. There are no easy answers, but careful critical consideration is vital.

1   "Plurality," YouTube video, 14:15, posted by "Dennis Liu," October 1, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzryBRPwsog.

2   Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995), 29-95, http://cartome.org/panopticon2.htm.

3   Bobbie Johnson, "Privacy No Longer a Social Norm, Says Facebook Founder," *The Guardian*, January 10, 2010, http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/jan/11/facebook-privacy.

4   A. J. Keen, *Digital Vertigo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 57.

5   Ibid., 58.

6   Rob Pegoraro, "Google's Eric Schmidt Steps Down, Depriving Web of Future Quotes," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/20/AR2011012006128.html.

7   Ibid.

8   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977), 224-5.

9   Ibid., 221.

10 Ibid., 200.

11 Ibid., 220.

12 Lev Grossman, "Person of the Year 2010: Mark Zuckerberg" Time, December 15, 2010, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2036683_2037183_2037185-1,00.html.

13 Sherry Turkle, "The Flight from Conversation," *New York Times*, April 21, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html.

14 Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, "Commencement Address Delivered At Harvard University" *A World Split Apart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), http://www.forerunner.com/forerunner/X0113_Solzhenitsyns_Harvar.html.

15 Keen, *Digital Vertigo*, 18.

16 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 218.

17 http://www.robotcompanions.eu/.