

Summary of James Rachels' "Why Privacy Is Important"

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From a very early age, we seem to develop a feeling of ownership over ourselves. The way we safeguard certain personal details can easily be compared to the way that we might limit access to a prized material possession. We act as protectors of our behaviors and personality, sharing only as much as we feel is merited by each social interaction in which we participate. This protected dispersion of self, and the rights we feel we have in relation to said protection, gives rise to the notion of "privacy", explored in detail by James Rachels.

Rachels commences his paper by relating some blatant examples of privacy violations, such as the embarrassment of having one's medical records revealed to the public. His examples effectively bring the issue of privacy closer to the reader, touching concepts that are innately sensitive to all of us. However, not all privacy involves such unusual situations, many privacy issues arise from "situations in which there is nothing embarrassing or shameful or unpopular in what we are doing".

Forming his paper's central concept, Rachels speculates that our ability to form different types of social relationships resides in our ability to control access to information about us. Avoiding the potential for skepticism, Rachels effectively argues that there is "nothing dishonest or hypocritical" about this, it is a simple necessity of maintaining different levels of social interaction. For example, it is necessary for an intimate couple to share personal matters with one another, but most people would agree that it is not necessary to share such matters with one's boss.

From Rachels' stance, we see the influence that actively maintaining privacy has on shaping social relationships. The level to which we choose to develop a social relationship is a function of the information we choose to divulge. Conversely, we feel our privacy has been violated when anything "interferes with these relationships and makes it difficult or impossible for us to maintain them in the way that we want to".

Though powerful, it could be argued that Rachels' points are too one-sided; he speaks of privacy as if people can command complete control over their privacy matters simply by controlling access to information. Drawing from personal experience, most readers would likely conclude that the privacy violations most hurtful to them came from external parties, not from their own misdoings. We may become slightly agitated after unintentionally disclosing a personal matter to someone, but if details that we normally keep private are invasively discovered, we feel violated outright.

In closing, Rachels explores the question of what right we have as individuals to protect our privacy, an issue that the majority of his paper does not consider, but rather, assumes. This issue could be better explored in a separate discussion. It is sufficient to understand his accurate depiction of privacy as "our ability to control who has access ... to information about us, and our ability to create and maintain different sorts of social relationships with different people".