Annabelle Lever


Many issues involving privacy are interesting from a philosophical perspective. Do we, for example, have a moral right to privacy that makes it the case that when we venture into the public sphere, we have a right not to be surveyed and recorded on camera? Given that a voter, taking part in a democratic election of the standard sort, can harm other people with her vote, is it morally acceptable that such a voter has a right to cast her vote in private and thereby making it impossible for other people to gain information about how she voted?

Annabelle Lever has written a wonderful, short book that introduces the reader to issues like those mentioned above together with a whole host of other issues that are of interest to a philosophical discussion of the phenomenon of privacy. The book contains an introduction and a conclusion. In between, there are four chapters that respectively deal with privacy in relation to (1) democracy, (2) equality and freedom of expression, (3) the family, sex and reproduction and (4) property and solidarity. Lever’s book is part of a relatively new series from Routledge entitled ‘Thinking in Action’. The overall objective of the series is, in the words of the publisher, to become an indispensable starting point for anyone who wants to think seriously about major issues confronting us today. The writing style of the volumes comprising the series is supposed to be punchy, short and stimulating. At the outset, it is worth mentioning that Lever’s book very neatly satisfies the requirements of the series with respect to both writing style and overall objective. The writing is crisp, clear and to the point. There is no unnecessary technical jargon and endnotes are being kept to a minimum.

In the introduction, Lever does some useful conceptual analysis (p. 5). She says that ‘privacy’ is a vague term that seems to denote a bundle of rather different things that typically have to with either the control of some sort of personal space (e.g. a private garden), the control of some sort of personal information (e.g. a diary or medical records) or the sort of intimate interaction one might have with a relatively narrow group of people (e.g. one’s family, a close friend or a lover). As a prelude to her more substantial discussions of the value and costs of privacy, Lever goes over the various meanings that the term ‘privacy’ can have, and she offers an explanation as to why it is not easy to give a definition of the term. Specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for correct use of the term is difficult, Lever says, because the term is conceptually linked to allied terms such as ‘liberty’, ‘equality’ and ‘rights’. These terms are themselves relatively fuzzy, and this means that the exact boundaries of the
concept of privacy are hard to fix. For the purpose of the book, Lever, however, suggests that we should think of the term ‘privacy’ as a term that refers to some combination of seclusion and solitude, anonymity and confidentiality, intimacy and domesticity (p. 4).

In the four chapters that constitute the core of the book, Lever guides the reader through a rich landscape of ideas by typically introducing an issue of contention in the current debate on privacy and then outlining opposing views on the issue. This way of proceeding is pedagogically very helpful, and though the discussions are rather brief (anything else would be impossible and contrary to the aim of the book), they give a good indication of what the distinctively philosophical beef is in many discussions of privacy. Issues of contention that Lever discusses include the questions of whether privacy is valuable for intrinsic or instrumental reasons, whether a right to privacy can be reduced to a right to property and whether it is wrong for person y to make public personal information about person x (without x’s consent) if such information is conducive to a cause to which y knows that x is firmly committed.

Sometimes, Lever leaves behind the role as a philosophical tour guide and offers a glimpse of what she herself is committed on the issues she discusses. On these occasions, there is much that will generate controversy and discussion. In the reminder of this review, I will restrict my comments to one issue where Lever takes a substantial stance: namely that of the moral merit of the secret ballot.

Lever is of the opinion that the secret ballot is morally justified. She cites the standard justification for the moral illegitimacy of the open vote (p. 24). With the open vote in place, voters are likely to be exposed to efforts to bribe, coerce or intimidate them into voting one way rather than another (ex post, voters may also be punished for their voting behavior). Such efforts seem to go against, and obstruct, an important and worthwhile democratic ideal of fair elections. Since the secret ballot radically diminishes the likelihood of success of efforts to bribe, coerce or intimidate, this type of ballot is morally justified.

One may hold that it follows from this justification of the secret ballot, that if we somehow knew that the above mentioned efforts to influence the voting behavior of the electorate would be not–existent, then there would be no moral roadblocks to the introduction of open voting. Lever rejects this inference. She thinks that there is a separate and more important justification for the secret ballot. This justification is perhaps best summarized by Lever herself:

But the most serious problems with open voting lie elsewhere, and highlight the importance of privacy to democratic citizenship. Democratic