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Chapter X

Responsibility for Information Assurance and Privacy: A Problem of Individual Ethics?

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ABSTRACT

Decisions regarding information assurance and IT security can affect individuals' rights and obligations and thereby acquire a moral quality. The same can be said for questions of privacy. This chapter starts by showing how and why information assurance and privacy can become problems worthy of ethical consideration. It demonstrates that there is no simple and linear relationship between ethics and information assurance or between ethics and privacy. Many decisions in the area of IT, however, affect not only one, but both of these subjects. The ethical evaluation of decisions and actions in the area of privacy and security, therefore, is highly complex. This chapter explores the question whether individual responsibility is a useful construct to address ethical issues of this complexity. After introducing a theory of responsibility, this chapter discusses the conditions that a subject of responsibility typically is assumed to fulfill. This chapter will argue that individual human beings lack some of the

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essential preconditions necessary to be ascribed responsibility. Individuals have neither the power, the knowledge, nor the intellectual capacities to deal successfully with the ethical challenges in the tension of privacy and information assurance. This chapter ends by suggesting that the concept of responsibility, nevertheless, may be useful in this setting, but it would have to be expanded to allow collective entities as subjects.

INTRODUCTION

Proponents of information assurance aim at meeting the security testing, evaluation, and assessment needs of IT consumers and producers. They are mostly interested in eliminating security threats and, in the long run, want to increase the levels of trust that users and consumers have in IT and networks. While most users support these goals of information assurance, they also have other objectives when using IT; among them is the preservation of privacy. To a certain degree, these two objectives are contradictory. In order to facilitate security, it would be helpful to eliminate privacy, because this would allow an easier detection and elimination of security risks. Privacy, on the other hand, requires security, because the protection of private data relies on the assumption that no unauthorized access is possible. Privacy and information assurance thus also can be complementary.

Further complicating this relationship, both terms also have an ethical side to them. Trust, as the ultimate aim of information assurance, is at least partly a moral notion. Security is necessary to facilitate a free and equal exchange of ideas. At the same time, an excess of security can stifle the exchange of ideas and the greater good. Privacy generally is recognized as a moral good, but it is debatable how this good can be justified and where its limits are. The individual user, who must make decisions concerning the weighting of privacy and information assurance, therefore finds himself in a situation where, despite an ethical quality of the choices, it is less than clear how decisions are to be made.

This is where the concept of responsibility enters the picture. This chapter will describe a theory of responsibility and put a special emphasis on the question of who can be the subject of responsibility. This theory of responsibility then will be applied to the complex problem of privacy and information assurance. The theory and conditions of responsibility will be used to demonstrate that while individual responsibility can play an important role in such ethical decisions, it also runs into severe problems. It will be argued that due to the lack of fulfillment of the basic conditions of responsibility, the individual end user is not able to shoulder the burdens required in order to make an ethical decision. As a consequence, questions of privacy and information assurance require a wider context and frame in which they can be answered. Only in such a frame does individual responsibility make sense and can it achieve its objectives.

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