

# Véliz's The Ethics of Privacy and Surveillance

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## Book Review

Review of Véliz, Carissa. 2024. *The Ethics of Privacy and Surveillance*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

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Carissa Véliz's *The Ethics of Privacy and Surveillance* (2024) contributes significantly to the existing scholarship on the debates involving the philosophical foundation of privacy, questions about surveillance ethics, and problems arising in the data ecosystem. It complements and joins the ranks of similarly impactful works, such as Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) and Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2017). While these prior works analyze issues of surveillance from an economic and political lens, Véliz's work takes a more astute approach to the ethical analysis of privacy and surveillance. As an Associate Professor at the Institute for Ethics in AI and a Tutorial Fellow at Hertford College of Oxford University, Carissa Véliz successfully brings her expertise to intensely evaluate deliberations around privacy and surveillance amidst rapid digital transformations.

Véliz's work can be helpful for anyone interested in understanding ethical dilemmas involving privacy, privacy rights, and the erosion of privacy in a data-driven society. She observes, "As I write it, data protection laws are being proposed in numerous countries.... The choices we make about privacy today and in the coming years will shape the history of humanity for decades to come" (2). The book has added significance in light of recent developments in digital privacy laws, such as India's enactment of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023. Véliz's comprehensive analysis of privacy provides the reader with a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the intricate landscape of data governance.

The book conceptualizes privacy not only as a means of controlling personal information but also as a fundamental human right important for embracing individual autonomy, dignity, and protection from abuses of power. Véliz formulates a well-structured line of reasoning that spans five parts in her book, covering the inception, definition, significance, protective measures, and the current state of privacy.

At the beginning of the book, Véliz establishes a strong groundwork for philosophical inquiry by offering extensive accounts of the correlation between ethics and privacy. She examines the ethical consequences of privacy breaches, condemning deceitful privacy practices and spying as ethically unjustifiable behaviors. She holds the view that "Privacy is as old as humanity, universal, deeply entrenched in social norms, and vital to our wellbeing" (216). Further, Véliz analyzes the role of cultural and social norms in safeguarding privacy ideals and highlights the need for collective responsibility in preserving the right to privacy. Véliz

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explores the profound psychological and bodily impacts of privacy violations on people and explores the ethical dilemmas associated with the data-driven economy. Véliz's skillful handling of the broad concept of privacy with remarkable conceptual precision stood out in this section. The meticulously developed chapters with robust arguments demonstrate her conceptual rigor.

In the book's latter half, Véliz provides a balanced surveillance assessment. She conducts a critical evaluation of the pervasive surveillance practices. She notes, "The act of surveillance is not neutral—it pressures the surveilled into conformity. It is an act of domination" (216). From instances of stolen information to overly broad observation and biased algorithms, her nuanced analysis casts the complex debate over security and privacy in a thoughtful new light. Véliz ensures that her narrative is both compelling and accessible by employing a logical progression of ideas. She skillfully moves from discussing the theoretical foundations to exploring the actual implications of surveillance advancements, providing an exhaustive understanding of the privacy discourse.

A prominent strength of Véliz's work is her ability to advocate for a future prioritizing privacy. Véliz supports the implementation of more stringent legal frameworks and ethical principles around the use of information while also calling for more accountability from those in positions of authority. Véliz believes in taking a proactive approach to protecting privacy. This passage underscores Véliz's argument: "Human beings are not meant to live in fishbowls. We are not products to be perpetually put on display in shop windows. Let us not surrender the ability to write a diary, read an incendiary book, research a sensitive topic, talk in confidence, make fools of ourselves, break taboos, or enjoy intimacy with another person with the peace of mind that comes from knowing that no one is watching" (217). The book explores concepts of privacy and surveillance clearly and engagingly, making it suitable for a wide range of readers. Véliz's compelling writing style ensures that the work is approachable for those interested in ethics, law, philosophy, and technology, as well as for policymakers and legal experts.

While *The Ethics of Privacy and Surveillance* offers a comprehensive exploration of privacy ethics and surveillance issues, its analysis could have been further enriched by a more profound engagement with the concept of intersectionality. The book's emphasis on Western contexts limits its analysis of how these issues manifest in diverse cultural and geopolitical settings. It could have specifically delved deeper into how categories like gender, caste, and class intersect and overlap, creating unique privacy vulnerabilities. This would have enhanced the book's relevance to contemporary equity and social justice debates. Further, spotlighting the efforts of marginalized communities and whistleblowers in pushing back against invasive surveillance would have highlighted the agency of individuals in shaping the discourse around privacy and surveillance. Although the book takes a focused approach, it is crucial to recognize the utility of its theoretical framework. The groundwork serves as an initial step to equip readers with the foundation necessary to further explore the previously mentioned areas.

Véliz's work is a significant addition to the canon of privacy scholarship. *The Ethics of Privacy and Surveillance* is a thoughtful and well-researched examination of the ethical dimensions of privacy and surveillance, offering a compelling call to action to safeguard this fundamental human right in an increasingly digitized world.

## References

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