

Report from the Center for

# PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

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## Privacy in the Computer Age

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

### In this issue:

New computer technology has led to the growth of enormous centralized databases storing vast quantities of personal information about all of us. Does this pose a threat to privacy, and if so, what kind of a threat? What is privacy and why do we value it personally and as a society? . . . . . p. 1

A committed feminist perspective is not only compatible with fair, unbiased teaching of philosophy and public policy, but may be one of its central requirements. . . . . p. 6

The company owns the factory, but a whole community can be devastated if it shuts down. Who should have the right to make a decision that affects so many people so deeply? . . . p. 9

A member of the recent presidential commission on biomedical research explores the painful and perplexing moral issues raised by the case of Baby Jane Doe. . . . . p. 12

*The Security Gamble: Deterrence Dilemmas in the Nuclear Age* is announced. . . . . p. 15

The odds are good that some computer somewhere knows something about you that you would rather it didn't. The databases of the federal government contain 4 billion separate records about American citizens — seventeen items apiece. Recently, different government files have been electronically compared to uncover tell-tale discrepancies: personnel files of federal employees have been matched against state welfare rolls to flag welfare fraud; lists of eighteen-year-old male dependents generated from IRS records have been matched against Selective Service registrations to identify draft evaders. The FBI's National Crime Information Center is a massive computer network linking more than 57,000 federal, state, and local criminal justice agencies and offering instant access to information on stolen property, missing and wanted persons, and criminal histories. This last category is of particular interest to prospective employers, who were responsible for half of the over 200 million inquiries directed to the network last year. It's worth their while to bother checking: one in five Americans will be arrested at some time in their lives.

The federal government is joined in its computerized information gathering by behemoths in the private sector. A giant computerized credit company like TRW makes available to thousands of merchants all over the country a tidy balance sheet on any of almost 90 million Americans in a matter of three or four seconds. AT&T holds precise minute-by-minute records of the 500 million phone calls made daily from the nation's 130 million telephones, information that has been used by government investigators