Government Surveillance of Citizens from a Metaphysical Perspective: Weighing the Justifications of Those Who Leaked Classified Documents

By Mark F. Fischer

In 2013, we learned that the U.S. government collects records on our phone calls and emails. We discovered this when classified government documents were leaked by Edward Snowden and publicized by Glenn Greenwald and others. They justified their actions with traditional metaphysical arguments, such as appeals to freedom and equality. But a close examination of their justifications shows that either they did not understand metaphysics or they cast doubt on traditional metaphysical principles. Did they do something right for the wrong reasons? Or did their anti-government actions undercut the metaphysical principles they professed? That is our question.

In June of 2013 Edward Snowden – a 31-year-old former CIA official who once worked as an intelligence contractor for the Dell Corporation – came to the world's attention after releasing to the media thousands of classified documents that he took while working as a contractor for the National Security Agency.

The documents leaked by Snowden revealed the existence of numerous global surveillance programs. The documents show that the National Security Agency of the USA and its English-speaking allies (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom), along with the cooperation of European governments and telecommunication companies, gather massive amounts of data about the countries' own citizens. They track the location of electronic devices, record information about where, when, and to whom cell phone calls are made, monitor social media networks and private webcam images, and at one point even recorded the content of all cell phone calls made in the Bahamas.

Snowden was in Hong Kong when he gave the documents – estimated to number in the tens of thousands – to journalists Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras. Greenwald started publishing articles based on the documents in *The Guardian* on June 5, 2013, and he and Poitras published an interview with him on June 9. Snowden told them that he wanted "to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them." As a result of Snowden's disclosures, people around the world have debated whether governments should engage in mass surveillance of their own citizens and citizens of other countries. Courts in the U.S. have not reached a conclusion about the legality of the NSA's bulk collection of telephone metadata.[1]

On June 14, 2013, while Snowden was still in Hong Kong, the U.S. Department of Justice charged him with violating the Espionage Act and with theft of government property, crimes that may be punished by up to 30 years in prison. Eight days later, on June 22, the U.S. Department of State revoked his passport. While in Hong Kong, Snowden had met with Russian diplomats. On June 23 he flew to Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport. He did not have a Russian visa and remained in Moscow's airport transit zone for 39 days. Snowden applied for asylum in 21 countries.

[1] Ellen Nakashima, "Judge: NSA's collecting of phone records is probably unconstitutional," *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2013. http://www.washingtonpost.com/, accessed July 14, 2014.

Russian authorities granted him a one-year temporary asylum visa on August 1, 2013. He has applied to renew it.

Many people have hailed Snowden as a whistle-blower and a hero. His actions showed the extent to which the U.S. government and public companies acquire and store information about us, even though government officials have denied that this is the case. Others have accused him of treason, theft, and spying. They say that he used his position in government agencies to steal sensitive documents and release them, compromising the safety of U.S. citizens.

Moral Reasoning about Snowden

Christian moral reasoning offers a basic framework for judging the case of Edward Snowden. We could say, for example, that the eighth commandment forbids us from bearing false witness. The Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, broke this commandment on March 12, 2013. When asked by Senator Ron Wyden whether the NSA collects data millions of Americans, Clapper said no. The documents released by Snowden show that the government was indeed collecting phone records. Snowden was alerting us to government falsehoods and revealing the harm being done to us in the government's name. That is one way of judging the Snowden case. He is an honest man, and exposed the government in the name of truth.

But that is not the only way to judge the case. We could also say, for example, that Snowden broke the fourth and seventh commandments. The command to "honor your father and your mother" extends to all legitimate authority. Snowden ignored the duty that every citizen owes the government. He broke his word as a government employee. He failed in his duty to his country. Apart from this failure of trust, he broke the commandment against stealing. He willfully collected government documents and turned them over to journalists. He took what was not his and used it for his own ends.

Thus from the standpoint of traditional moral reasoning, we could judge Snowden as an honest man or as a traitor. Seeing things in black-and-white terms is a good starting point. Was he a kind of Paul Revere, alerting patriots of the wrongdoing of the government and calling for citizens to demand the truth? Or was he dishonest, taking what was not his and pretending that his theft of documents was justified by the government's abuse of power? We will see that the issue is more complicated than that.

I do not pretend to be an expert on the Edward Snowden case. To be honest, I am not sure whether he is a traitor or a patriot. I can certainly see why the government has charged him with violating the espionage act and with theft of official property. Snowden publicly acknowledged what he did. I also appreciate the fact that government officials have concealed from us Americans that they are secretly recording information about our cell phone calls and monitoring our presence in social media networks. Snowden has revealed to us something that the government wanted to keep secret.

Metaphysical Thought and Moral Reasoning

My aim is not to try to try the Snowden case. It is rather to focus on the topic of moral reasoning. Catholic Christians and most people of good will believe that it is possible to rightly reason about moral questions. We are able to discover the facts of a case, to weigh the issues at stake, and to apply general principles. We believe that it is possible to render a just verdict. To be sure, we know that our judgment is provisional and fallible. Only God, we believe, can plumb the depths of the human heart. But we have faith in our capacity for moral reasoning. It is the basis for our system of justice. Moral reasoning, we believe, is a fundamental human faculty. It is the faculty for thinking through a matter, applying the principles of justice, and rendering a verdict.

This moral reasoning may rightly be called metaphysical. Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that has to do with our very being as thoughtful persons. Aristotle began his treatise on metaphysics by stating that people, in their very nature, have a desire to know. They are able to reason about things, and to distinguish between the coolness of reason and the hot-blooded passion that can distort our judgment. Human beings use language to express their thoughts in a way that other people can weigh and judge. As thinking persons, we can discover our limitations. We recognize that our history and experience limit our knowledge. And yet, even within these limits, we have a capacity for reflecting on our experience and our actions. This capacity is "metaphysical." It is a knowledge that is "beyond the physical," beyond those things that we can see and touch. It belongs to our very nature as reasoning creatures.

In ancient and medieval times, thinkers revered the capacity for metaphysical thought and linked it to theology. Before the incarnation of Christ, for example, Aristotle reasoned that there was an "unmoved mover," an ultimate cause of the universe. St. Augustine was able to prove the existence of God by metaphysical means. He persuaded his friend to admit that, greater than any particular truth is the existence of truth itself, which is divine. And even St. Thomas Aquinas offered five rational proofs for the existence of God. His proofs that show the correspondence between metaphysical thinking and theology. The correspondence was so strong that medieval thinkers debated whether metaphysics was even a separate subject from theology.

But the link between theology and metaphysics was severed during the modern period in philosophy and during the Age of Enlightenment. Although Thomas Jefferson could invoke "Nature and Nature's God," nevertheless the Amendments to the U.S. Constitution erected a wall of separation between Church and state. And today, most of us affirm the importance of that separation. In our courts and in our legislatures, we ask for justice, plain and simple, not Christian justice, Muslim justice, or Buddhist justice. In our secular age, we do not usually speak of theology and metaphysics together. We do speak of the metaphysical capacity for moral reasoning, however, and that is relevant to the Snowden case.

Snowden and the journalists with whom he worked justify their actions in terms of freedom, equality, privacy, and transparency (or honesty). They apply these terms to their behavior. They do not speak of them as ideas in the traditional metaphysical sense.

They do not attribute to freedom, equality, privacy, and honesty, for example, a reality that makes things genuinely free, equal, private, or honest. In this sense, Snowden and his collaborators can be called "postmetaphysical" thinkers.[2] They acknowledge that their experience shapes their worldview. They focus on pragmatic behavior rather than on intention. They are skeptical about theories. They deny that anyone has a privileged access to the truth. Snowden and his journalistic collaborators either do not engage in metaphysics or they express doubt about the human capacity to tell the truth. But moral reasoning is inherently metaphysical. Let us try to understand their justifications in terms of moral reasoning guided by metaphysical thought.

Snowden on Freedom and Equality

We begin by examining Snowden's explanation of his actions. In the winter of 2012, he contacted journalists Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras. In June of 2013, he gave secret documents from the National Security Agency to these two journalists, who published a series of articles about them in the online edition of *The Guardian*. In 2014, Greenwald described Snowden at length in a book entitled *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA and the U.S. Surveillance State*. The book quoted extensively from Greenwald's correspondence with Snowden.

Snowden is not a philosopher. In fact, he did not even finish high school. But he is highly intelligent and rose quickly in the world of U.S. cybersecurity. After he decided to leak the documents, he explained his actions in terms of moral outrage, legal insight, and patriotic heroism. As a contractor working for the CIA and the NSA, he had a bird's-eye view of the security apparatus developed by the U.S. government in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. He worried that surveillance reduces the freedom of the internet. He had grown up with the internet, and felt that its unfettered nature was to be preserved at all costs. "The Internet allowed me to experience freedom and explore my full capacity as a human being," wrote Snowden. "I do not want to live in a world where we have no privacy and no freedom."[3] He released documents, he implied, because the government threatened his world.

In addition to the argument from freedom, Snowden also made an argument based on equality and honesty. He justified the release of secret documents by arguing that the internet should be "equal." Powerful governments and wealthy corporations should not enjoy special privileges. Snowden hoped that his revelations "will provide the support needed to build a more equal internet," one that would be free of "unreasonable search through universal laws." By universal laws he meant that everyone would enjoy privacy, not merely the wealthy and powerful. The way to defeat special interests, he said, was to ensure openness and honesty, which he called "transparency." Snowden even referred to this openness and transparency as the "laws of nature." He said:

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[2] Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. by William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 6-7.

[3] Snowden, quoted in Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State* (New York: Metropolitan Books – Henry Holt, 2014), pp. 46-47.

> In the end, we must enforce a principle whereby the only way the powerful may enjoy privacy is when it is the same kind shared by the ordinary: one enforced by the laws of nature, rather than the policies of man.[4]

Snowden does not want a two-tier internet, in which the rich and well-connected are free from surveillance, while the privacy of others is invaded. He wants an equal internet with "equal protection against unreasonable search." The "policies of man" refers to the present state of affairs. In this state, the government pays lip service to the Fourth Amendment's protection against unreasonable search, but violates that protection with widespread surveillance.

Snowden used the phrase "laws of nature" as an alternative to "policies of man." It is doubtful that Snowden was referring to the traditional doctrine of natural law. The natural law is a way of talking about the conscience. It refers to the traditional belief that God has planted an instinct for the good within the human heart. Natural law allows us to distinguish between good and evil, so that we can translate the "laws of nature" into positive human laws. But Snowden is skeptical of the legal system, which he believes favors the wealthy and the powerful. He distinguishes between laws of nature and policies of man. The phrase "policies of man" refers to the legal system, which (in Snowden's mind) wrongly serves special interests. The laws of nature, Snowden implies, are the benefits of openness and transparency. When openness and transparency are "natural," when they define the internet, then everyone will enjoy a measure of privacy. The laws of nature (i.e., citizen oversight of a transparent government) will ensure a level playing field. In short Snowden has both a concern for law and (as his actions showed) a willingness to skirt it.

Snowden's Self-Understanding

Snowden wished that the Fourth Amendment's rejection of unlawful search and seizure did in fact protect people from government surveillance. But he was convinced that it did not, and so took matters into his own hands. He wrote, "While I pray that public awareness and debate will lead to reform, bear in mind that . . . even the Constitution is subverted when the appetites of power demand it."[5] U.S. officials that were supposed to guard the Constitution had abused it. Snowden prayed that his distribution of secret documents would provoke a debate and restore the rule of law.

Snowden, in short, justified his distribution of government documents by pointing to values such as freedom, equality, and honest transparency. The government justifies surveillance by saying that it protects citizens. The NSA collects phone records and monitors social networks for the ostensible purpose of thwarting the enemies of the USA. Snowden did not want to harm anyone. For that reason, he said, he refrained from revealing any CIA documents. "When you leak the CIA's secrets, you can harm people," he said. "But when you leak the NSA's secrets, you only harm abusive systems."[6] In

[4] Snowden, email text to Laura Poitras, quoted in Greenwald, p. 13.
[5] Snowden, letter to Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, quoted in Greenwald, p. 24.
[6] Snowden, quoted in Greenwald, p. 43.

early 2013, he took a pay cut to transfer from the Dell Corporation (where he was a CIA contractor) to Booz Allen Hamilton (a defense contractor with the NSA) so that he could download secret NSA files.[7] He was not working against the USA, he reasoned, but rather against government abuses.

When journalist Glenn Greenwald first met Snowden, he commented that Snowden's justifications for his actions "felt either too superficial, too abstract, or too devoid of passion and conviction."[8] He questioned the young man, seeking a deeper justification. Eventually Greenwald discovered that Snowden saw himself as a kind of romantic hero, the kind of hero that Snowden had encountered in video games. In such games, said Snowden, "The protagonist is often an ordinary person, who finds himself faced with grave injustices from powerful forces and has the choice to flee in fear or fight for his beliefs."[9] Snowden saw himself as an isolated individual with a moral conscience:

> I understand that I will be made to suffer for my actions. . . . I will be satisfied if the federation of secret law, unequal pardon, and irresistible executive powers that rule the world that I love are revealed for even an instant.[10]

He depicted himself as a lone patriot with "a duty to first police one's own government" (31). He was willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good, and invited like-minded people – the so-called "open source community" – to join his efforts to keep the internet free. But it is worth noting that a genuine act of self-sacrifice does not usually involve flight to avoid prosecution.

Snowden's justifications for his actions reflect his belief in the moral individual who stands up against an unjust system. In the name of metaphysical values – the values of freedom, equality, and honesty – he acquired secret documents and distributed them to journalists. He did so because, in his mind, there is no better defense against unjust secrecy than exposing secrets to the light.

Greenwald's Assumptions about Journalism

Having looked at the self-explanations of Edward Snowden, let us turn to Glenn Greenwald. He is one of the journalists to whom Snowden leaked the NSA documents and the author of a book about Snowden, *No Place to Hide*. Trained in law, the 47-year-old Greenwald has earned numerous awards for investigative reporting. In the year since his 2013 publication of articles on the Snowden documents, he cofounded a media outlet, "The Intercept." It continues to publish articles about government surveillance based on the thousands of Snowden documents that Greenwald possesses.

Greenwald explains this publication as the exercise of journalistic rights and as a defense of privacy. Using a phrase from 1787, Greenwald says that journalists form a

[7] Greenwald, p 48.
[8] Snowden, quoted in Greenwald, p. 44.
[9] Ibid., pp. 45-46.
[10] Ibid., p. 32.

"fourth estate" (the other "estates" being religion, civic authorities, and ordinary people). In keeping with the intention of the Founding Fathers, says Greenwald, journalists oversee the government:

> Those who exercise the greatest power need to be challenged by adversarial pushback and an insistence on transparency; the job of the press is to disprove the falsehoods that power invariably disseminates to protect itself (230).

In other words, Greenwald understands the press as the adversary of the government. It tries to protect itself. The journalist's job is to expose its lies.

Needless to say, the government is more than the adversary of journalists. Its duty is to protect them, as well as other citizens. So newspapers have developed ways of working with the government to ensure that the papers do not endanger people. Greenwald had gone to Snowden as a representative of *The Guardian*, the British national daily newspaper. The *Guardian's* editors insisted, before publishing Greenwald's articles, that they advise the National Security Agency about what they intended to publish.

Greenwald said that he "loathed and had long condemned" this process (p. 63). It repressed journalists by instilling fear of government reprisal. The *Guardian's* lawyers were aware, said Greenwald, that "publishing classified information can be depicted (albeit dubiously) as a crime by the US government, a violation of the Espionage Act, even for newspapers" (59). The government uses the threat of criminal activity (he says) to limit the freedom of the press. Greenwald wrote that the policy to advise the NSA before publication would "allow the government to control disclosures and minimize, even neuter, their impact" (55). Yet he went along with it.

In the case of the first Greenwald article, the *Guardian* informed the National Security Agency in advance. It said that it was going to publish a story about how the government had secretly ordered the telephone company Verizon to turn over to the NSA the "detail records" for telephone calls within the USA, including local calls. The story was based on one of the documents leaked by Snowden. The government officials said that they wanted to meet the *Guardian* editor, but they did not show in any specific way how national security would be harmed by the story. After that, the *Guardian* published Greenwald's story.

Greenwald complains that the cooperative process exemplifies the "corrupting dynamics of establishment journalism" (65), creates a "climate of fear" (65), and makes the press corps "subservient" (68). He argues that his act of revealing the contents of secret government documents is what journalists do all the time, usually with the cooperation of the officials who released them. Greenwald wants to see "real adversarial journalism" (64), "a global network of people devoted to NSA transparency" (65), and the return of the reporter as "the definitive outsider" (232). In short, a vision of unfettered journalism was Greenwald's first motive for working with Snowden.

Telling the truth is the essence of journalism. Journalists question sources, said Greenwald, "in order to let the concealed truth emerge" (39). Greenwald usually prefers the word "transparency," but he is clearly committed to a vision of truth. Yet Greenwald puts the concept of truth in question when he speaks of the journalistic "fallacy of objective reporting" (231). He bristles at the suggestion, made by some of his critics, that he is an "activist," not a "journalist." The critics say in overly-simplistic terms that Greenwald expresses opinions, rather than sticking to the facts.

In reality, the point at issue is not the distinction between opinions and facts, claims Greenwald, but rather "between journalists [like himself] who candidly reveal their opinions and those who conceal them, pretending they have none" (231). Undoubtedly Greenwald is correct to acknowledge that the history and commitments of reporters shape their interpretation of the world. But to speak of "the fallacy of objective reporting" – as if there were no objectivity – seems to contradict Greenwald's commitment to transparency and letting the truth emerge.

Greenwald's Assumptions about Privacy

If journalistic integrity was Greenwald's first motive, privacy was his second. The Snowden documents reveal a massive infringement, Greenwald says, of the right to privacy. He expresses the value of privacy in these terms:

> Privacy is essential to human freedom and happiness for reasons that are rarely discussed but instinctively understood by most people, as evidenced by the lengths to which they go to protect their own (173).

In short, it is difficult to define privacy. The dictionary calls it is "the quality or state of being apart from company or observation." Greenwald says that we understand privacy "instinctively." We protect it. When we cannot do so, we usually adhere to conventional and socially expected behavior.

Such self-censorship is detrimental, Greenwald says, to a free society. "If you believe you are always being watched and judged," he writes, "you are not really a free individual" (173). He objects to those who claim that they have nothing to hide:

> Most people have experienced how privacy enables liberation from constraint. And we've all, conversely, had the experience of engaging in private behavior when we thought we were alone – dancing, confessing, exploring sexual expression, sharing untested ideas – only to feel shame at having been seen by others (173).

So even those who claim to have "nothing to hide" would not want anyone prying into their private lives. They might feel shame.

The government's ability to monitor private conversations disturbs Greenwald. "Mass surveillance by the state," he writes, "is therefore inherently repressive" (174). It

stifles "creativity, dissent, and challenges to orthodoxy," because these valuable things can only "germinate" in privacy. When people assume that their private emails are monitored, the internet ceases to be a vehicle for unfettered dialogue.

Greenwald insists upon privacy because the internet is "an unprecedented instrument of democratization and liberalization, even emancipation" (169). Privacy liberates us from constraint and shame. By contrast, the government employs secrecy as an instrument of power. Government officials "act abusively and thuggishly," writes Greenwald, "only when they believe they are safe, in the dark" (12). They deserve to be exposed. But can we say that individual privacy is always a worthy goal and that government secrecy never is? To be sure, protection from an abusive government was central to the formation of the United States. The government has powers at its disposal that individual citizens can only imagine. The Founding Fathers wanted to curb the powers of the government. But Greenwald apparently wants to absolutize both the good of public privacy and the evil of government secrecy. "Transparency is for those who carry out public duties and exercise public power," he wrote. "Privacy is for everyone else" (209). We must choose between the two, he implies, because we cannot have both.

Snowden and Greenwald as Postmetaphysical Thinkers

Earlier I said that Snowden and Greenwald exhibit aspects of "postmetaphysical" thought. I characterized such thought in four ways. Postmetaphysical thinkers:

- acknowledge that their experience shapes their worldview,
- focus on pragmatic behavior rather than on intention,
- are skeptical about theories, and
- deny that anyone has a privileged access to the truth.

Here are some examples of the postmetaphysical thought of Snowden and Greenwald.

1. Experience. The first characteristic of postmetaphysics is the acknowledgement that experience shapes our worldview. This is not unique, of course, to the postmetaphysical thinker. Even Socrates emphasized that his knowledge was limited. But postmetaphysical thought contrasts changeable experience with the fixed and firm structures of metaphysics – for example, with Aristotle's assertion that the human being by nature desires to know. Instead of focusing on the fixed and firm, the postmetaphysical thinker highlights the contingent. What counts for truth, postmetaphysically speaking, depends on a historical context that is always shifting.

We see this, for example, in Snowden's personal history. At age 20, in the wake of 9/11, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, but was discharged for medical reasons. He believed in his country's anti-terrorist cause. Later, as a contractor working for the CIA and the NSA, he became convinced that the government is not honoring the Fourth Amendment's guarantee against unreasonable search and seizure. He felt that it was destroying the freedom of the internet and widening the inequalities between a powerful government and its unwitting citizens. Snowden concluded that patriotism means more

than one thing. At one time it meant fighting for the U.S. Army. Later it came to mean leaking NSA documents. Experience had changed his understanding of the truth.

2. Pragmatism. If the focus on experience is the first aspect of postmetaphysical thinking, the second is pragmatism. Actions have priority over intentions. Such an assertion is "postmetaphysical" in the sense that traditional metaphysics values the intellectual concept over its tangible expression. For the Greeks, the sensory world is the world of change, while the world of the mind obeys eternal and unchanging rules. From a postmetaphysical viewpoint, however, the mind's seemingly "eternal and unchanging rules" merely represent a mental intention that may not correlate with the way we express it. For Snowden, for example, the government "intended" to keep Americans safe from foreign terrorists. When it came to "express" this intention, the government intruded upon our privacy and limited our freedoms.

Snowden was appalled by the government's capacity to capture internet data. But he claimed that he did not leak information to harm the government. He did so, he said, in order to provoke a debate on government spying. He said that he did not want "to destroy the NSA's capability to eliminate privacy," but "to allow the public to decide"[11] whether the government should spy. In short, he exemplified the pragmatic aspect of postmetaphysical thought. He acted, exposing NSA secrets, so that the question of government surveillance could be fully discussed. He claimed that he did not want to impose his view of the world, but to air the matter in a public forum.

3. Skepticism. A third aspect of postmetaphysical thought is the skeptical impulse. In one sense, skepticism is the hallmark of modern philosophy. We see it in the systematic doubt of Descartes, in Hume's distrust of causality, and in Kant's insistence that we only have access to phenomena, and never to "the things themselves." In postmetaphysical thought, however, the legitimacy of metaphysics itself is the issue. The skeptical impulse shows itself in the conviction that the scientific method is the paradigm for truth-seekers. There are no final or absolute truths for the postmetaphysical thinker, only states of affairs about which we can form hypotheses. These hypotheses, once proven or disproven, lead to new hypotheses, *ad infinitum*. Towards those who see things in black and white terms, the postmetaphysical response is skepticism.

A good example is Greenwald's attitude toward the U.S. government. Greenwald's critics defend the government as the maintainer of America's security. Greenwald replies that the only ones who are secure from government spying are the conventional types who do not challenge the *status quo*. Dissidents get a different treatment. We have seen how Greenwald spoke of NSA officials who "act abusively and thuggishly" when "they believe that are safe, in the dark." In his mind, state intrusion into the affairs of ordinary citizens is inexcusable. "The government has striven to show people around the world," Greenwald writes, "that its power was constrained by neither law nor ethics, neither morality nor the Constitution" (83-84). To a government that exercises so much power over its citizens, the only proper response is distrust.

[11] Ibid., p. 47.

4. Denial of Privilege. A fourth aspect of postmetaphysical thought is the denial that anyone has a privileged access to the truth. Government officials justify the surveillance of citizens by claiming that it is for their own good. The implication is that the government must secretly monitor threats so that it can contain terrorist activities. Officials know better, in short, than ordinary citizens. But from a postmetaphysical perspective, that assumption gives government officials a privilege that they do not deserve. The very existence of the "fourth estate," the press, offers a check to that privilege. By shedding the light of truth on government activities, journalists deny that the government is immune to scrutiny.

Greenwald takes a further step in his critique of journalism's "fallacy" of objectivity. Recall that he scorned his critics who described him as an "activist" rather than a "journalist." They had faulted him because he not only reported matters of fact, but also took a stand about what he reported. From Greenwald's postmetaphysical vantage point, the supposedly "model" journalists were trapped in the "fallacy of objective reporting." They may have thought that they were reporting only the facts, but were unaware that their own opinions governed how they look at facts. Greenwald even asserted that "The 'rule' of objectivity is no rule at all but rather a means of promoting the interests of the dominant political class" (232). In Greenwald's mind, a good journalist is the adversary of the state. It is always trying to aggrandize and secure its power. The journalist exposes its hidden agenda and jealously-guarded privileges.

Snowden and Greenwald and Traditional Metaphysics

The justifications of Snowden and Greenwald display characteristics of postmetaphysical thought with its common criticisms of traditional metaphysics. According to these criticisms, metaphysics wrongly teaches (1) that there are fixed and firm structures of thought, (2) that intentions take priority over actions, (3) that traditional modes of thought, even discredited ones, deserve support, and (4) that some viewpoints deserve a privileged status, even though they are not impartial. Snowden and Greenwald used a form of postmetaphysical thinking to justify their actions. Traditional metaphysics, we might be tempted to conclude, does not support their actions.

That would be premature. Even if one rejects the postmetaphysical reasoning of Snowden and Greenwald, metaphysical reasoning does not decide their case. In fact, it might well support it. Metaphysics teaches, for example, that two wrongs do not make a right. One should never do evil to accomplish a good. Following this line of reasoning, one might conclude that Snowden wrongly leaked documents in order to counteract what he called government intrusions into privacy. He had stolen and was guilty. Greenwald, by publishing articles about the documents, was profiting from stolen property.

But Snowden also claimed that he had tried to bring problems to the attention of his superiors. He tried to alert them to the abuses perpetrated in the name of national security. The superiors rebuffed him. "This was when I really started seeing," said

Snowden, "how easy it is to divorce power from accountability."[12] Snowden might have used more traditional moral reasoning to explain his actions. In such reasoning there is a right to self-defense. Snowden could have claimed, not that he needed to police the government or subvert it, but rather that he was defending himself against an unjust enemy. By releasing documents, he could have said, he was protecting himself in the only effective way he had.

Another traditional metaphysical principle is the acknowledgement of truth and the duty to tell it. Snowden had seen abuses and wanted to call attention to them. From a metaphysical standpoint, we could say that he aimed to reveal a truth that had been unjustly concealed. Even Greenwald, who looked askance at journalistic objectivity (and by implication, at the existence of truth), never advocated philosophical relativism. He firmly believed that he was nothing less than a champion of transparency. Belief in the reality of truth is the hallmark of metaphysics. Greenwald did not need to deny journalistic objectivity. He could have justified his actions by an appeal to truth.

A final aspect of metaphysical though is the belief that there is meaning and purpose in the world. The world itself, according to this tradition, is intelligible, revealing natural rules and evolving towards great depth and self-reflection. Such a conviction has given many people the courage to suffer for their beliefs, confident that their sufferings will contribute to a greater cause. Snowden could have surrendered to U.S. officials, hoping that his cause was worth the hardships of incarceration and that justice would ultimately free him. He distrusted the legal system, however, and believed that he had to break the law to restore rule by law. His flight to Russia cast a shadow on the righteous motive that he professed. Sometimes a person can do a good thing, such as revealing government abuses, for imperfect reasons. Sometimes what appears to be a smart move in the short term, such as a flight to avoid persecution, can cast doubt on the justice of a cause.

[12] Ibid., p. 42.