

# Ethical Reflections on Google Street View: A Deontological Analysis

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"The Googlization of Everything" examines the implications of Google's Street View service from the perspective of deontology or Kantian ethics. Street View raises significant ethical concerns regarding privacy and the right to control one's personal information. The argument based on deontological principles would emphasize the importance of respecting individuals' autonomy and treating them as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. According to deontology, individuals have a moral duty to uphold the principles of privacy and consent. The controversy surrounding Street View highlights the tension between the utility and convenience of the service and the ethical obligation to protect individuals' privacy. While Street View may offer practical benefits, it also challenges the fundamental principles of privacy and raises questions about the extent to which individuals should have control over their personal information. From a deontological perspective, it is essential to prioritize the protection of privacy rights and ensure that individuals have the autonomy to determine how their personal information is shared and used. In this essay, I will argue using deontology/Kantianism that Google should have prioritized privacy and implemented Street View differently to align with ethical principles. From a deontological standpoint, individuals possess inherent dignity and autonomy, which includes the right to control their personal information. Google's default approach of capturing and displaying images without explicit consent disregards individuals' autonomy and violates their privacy. By failing to respect individuals as ends in themselves and treating their personal information as a means to Google's ends, the company undermines the principles of deontology. Therefore, a deontological argument would contend that Google should have implemented stronger privacy measures, such as obtaining explicit consent or allowing individuals greater control over the visibility of their homes and personal spaces. Respecting individuals' autonomy and privacy rights would demonstrate a commitment to ethical principles and align with the core tenets of deontology.

Deontology, a moral theory based on the ideas of philosopher Immanuel Kant, provides a compelling framework for examining the ethical implications of Google's Street View service. At

its core, deontology emphasizes the inherent value of individuals and their rights, stressing that moral actions should be guided by universal principles and respect for human autonomy. In the context of Street View, deontological ethics demands that Google considers the moral duty to respect users' privacy and obtain their explicit consent before capturing and displaying images of their homes and neighborhoods. One of the key aspects of deontology is its focus on treating individuals as ends in themselves, not merely as tools to achieve a particular goal. In the case of Street View, Google's collection of personal data without explicit consent may be seen as treating users' privacy as a means to enhance its mapping services rather than respecting them as autonomous beings. From a deontological standpoint, this is ethically problematic, as it disregards the moral obligation to protect individual rights and autonomy.

In Floridi's "Privacy: Informational Friction" from *The 4th Revolution*, he brings up the argument of privacy as freedoms from informational interference and intrusion, and I believe that this is an adequate presentation of the core problem behind Google's implementation of Google Street View. By not prioritizing the protection of individuals' informational privacy and failing to obtain explicit consent, Google undermined the fundamental principles of privacy and autonomy. The lack of robust safeguards and transparent opt-out mechanisms in Google Street View created a situation where individuals felt their personal spaces and lives were exposed without their explicit permission. This disregard for privacy as a fundamental right not only eroded trust but also highlighted the ethical responsibilities that technology companies like Google have in handling personal data. Floridi's work emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of privacy in the digital age, urging us to consider the ethical implications and friction caused by the widespread collection and dissemination of personal information.

In the context of Google Street View, Floridi's concept of "informational friction" assumes significant relevance when analyzed through a deontological lens. This friction emerges from the inherent conflict between the benefits of technological advancements and the potential encroachments on individuals' privacy. Google's implementation of Street View failed to incorporate adequate measures to reduce this friction, which would have respected privacy rights while still providing valuable services. By defaulting to maximum exposure and placing the onus

on individuals to opt out, Google transformed privacy into a commodity that necessitated active protection, rather than treating it as a foundational principle upheld by default. This power asymmetry and control over personal information undermine individuals' autonomy, impeding their ability to exercise control over their own privacy. Floridi's analysis reinforces the need to strike a balance between technological progress and safeguarding individual privacy, prompting a reevaluation of the ethical obligations borne by companies like Google in their pursuit of innovation. From a deontological standpoint, it is imperative for Google to recognize privacy as an inherent right and adopt measures that prioritize individuals' autonomy and protect their privacy, even amidst technological advancements.

Additionally, in James Grimmelmann's "Privacy as product safety" in *Widener Law Journal* Vol. 19, it can further be argued that Google has also created an unsafe product and pushed it to market by not taking privacy into consideration as a fundamental concern. Grimmelmann emphasizes the importance of privacy as a form of product safety, drawing parallels between the responsibilities of companies in ensuring the safety of physical products and their obligations regarding privacy protection. By neglecting to prioritize privacy during the development and deployment of Google Street View, Google failed to meet the standards of product safety that would have safeguarded users' personal information and minimized potential risks. This disregard for privacy not only exposes individuals to potential harm but also erodes their trust in the company, undermining the overall user experience and damaging Google's reputation as a responsible and ethical technology provider.

In "The Googlization of Everything," Floridi's "Privacy: Informational Friction," and Grimmelmann's "Privacy as product safety," a compelling argument rooted in deontological ethics emerges, advocating for Google's prioritization of privacy during the implementation of Google Street View. Deontological principles, influenced by the notions of autonomy and treating individuals as ends in themselves, foreground the moral obligation to uphold privacy and consent. Regrettably, Google's approach to Street View, replete with its default image capture and display sans explicit consent, egregiously transgresses individual autonomy and pays little heed to privacy rights. From a deontological vantage point, Google ought to have embraced more robust privacy measures, encompassing explicit consent acquisition and transparent opt-out

mechanisms. Such measures would have empowered individuals to govern the disclosure and dissemination of their personal information. By championing privacy as an inalienable right, Google would have honored the inherent dignity of individuals and harmonized their actions with the ethical responsibility to venerate privacy as an inviolable tenet.

In conclusion, the examination of Google's Street View service through the lenses of deontology, as presented in "The Googlization of Everything," Floridi's "Privacy: Informational Friction," and Grimmelmann's "Privacy as product safety," underscores the issue for Google in not prioritizing privacy during its implementation. Deontological ethics, with its emphasis on individual autonomy and the intrinsic value of each person, highlights the moral duty to uphold privacy and consent. Unfortunately, Google's approach to Street View falls short of respecting individual autonomy and privacy rights, disregarding the principles of deontology. To align with ethical principles, Google should have implemented stronger privacy measures, such as obtaining explicit consent and providing transparent opt-out mechanisms. By honoring individuals' autonomy and privacy rights, Google would have demonstrated a commitment to ethical principles while navigating the tension between technological advancements and privacy concerns. Moreover, by considering privacy as a form of product safety, Google would have safeguarded users' personal information and fostered trust in its responsible and ethical approach. Ultimately, an ethical framework rooted in deontology calls for prioritizing privacy and upholding the dignity and autonomy of individuals, even in the face of technological progress.