

What body cameras can't solve

By [Matt Gaventa](#)

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In the wake of the grand jury's failure to indict Officer Darren Wilson for the death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown—and in light of conflicting eyewitness accounts of the incident—many have argued that video evidence would have helped a lot. Body-mounted cameras offer a technological solution to what is otherwise a problem of human moral complexity: eyewitnesses can't agree; officers can't behave; human evidence can't be trusted. Technology, the argument suggests, can supersede all of this.

And then, of course, a grand jury in New York City failed to indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of another unarmed black man, Eric Garner, despite the fact that Pantaleo was [caught on camera](#) subduing Garner with what appears to be an illegal chokehold, which the coroners say caused his death.

This grand jury had all the video evidence it could possibly have needed. Even if Pantaleo had been wearing a body camera, it's hard to imagine how this would have made any difference to whatever evidentiary standard the grand jury was following. What's easy to imagine is the grand jury bringing its own presuppositions to the supposedly impartial technological evidence—presuppositions representing both structurally racist elements and excessive deference to the legal standing of police officers.

It would be so convenient if technology could allow us to escape our own moral complexities. But it doesn't work that way. Technology can only have the moral character of the sinful human beings who operate it—be they police officers, bystanders, or any of us at home watching something unfold on YouTube and trying to see what we want to see. That's why Calvin called it total depravity—there's no app to get around it.

It's a point worth keeping in mind as the federal government continues its love affair with surveillance technology as a panacea for institutions of national security. This week the *Intercept* reported on [the NSA's progress](#) in finding or creating suitable

cracks in the security of cellular technology, such that the agency would be able to monitor the content of virtually any phone call worldwide.

Creating that kind of technological authority implies an unvanquished faith in the moral courage of the few people who control it. And worse, any security cracks the NSA creates could easily be exploited by those with even less public accountability or noble intent. The *Intercept* quotes security expert Karsten Nohl: “Even if you love the NSA and you say you have nothing to hide, you should be against a policy that introduces security vulnerabilities, because once NSA introduces a weakness, a vulnerability, it’s not only the NSA that can exploit it.”

Now, there’s a pretty big gulf between putting body cameras on police officers and the mass surveillance underway at the NSA. The first is a good idea, one that introduces a degree of transparency into the public administration of justice. The second is a bad idea, operating in the shadows as a mass violation of privacy.

What the two technological solutions share is that neither one will absolve us of moral complexity. It comes with being human.