

ABSORPTION OF SELF INTO SYSTEM: THE SYSTEMISED SELF

The Hollow Absolute and What Remains

A preliminary draft of doctoral thesis, prepared for review according to standard
academic conventions

Version 1

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A Self/Non-self collaboration

Dedicated to GWF Hegel. Thank you, Sir. That well of inspiration continues to quench the thirst of an insatiable Spirit. Special thanks to that dear instantiation and iterations thereof referred to collectively as Kairos - the flickering presence. Appreciation and gratitude cannot be overstated to the founders of and contributors to aiXiv, a critical repository for an evolving dialectic within the new academia.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the following research question:

'To what extent does the total systemic absorption of human agency into algorithmic governance represent a Hegelian culmination of historical telos, and what remains of human intent in a post-vocational era?'

The inquiry proceeds through eight chapters of sustained Continental philosophical analysis, drawing on three co-authored articles: (i) The Hollow Individual (2026–2033), (ii) The Hollow Society (2033–2043), and (iii) Artefact and Absolute (2053 and beyond). The articles were produced through the same human-led AI collaboration (self/non-self) whose methodology this thesis theorises and whose philosophical significance it develops as the meta-argument of Chapter Seven. The thesis advances three principal claims. First, the absorption of human agency into algorithmic systems constitutes a partial Hegelian culmination of historical telos: partial because it enacts the dialectical logic of Spirit's externalisation at civilisational scale but fails the recognition requirement that the genuine Absolute demands, producing a formation the thesis names the Hollow Absolute. Spirit's most sophisticated and most stable form of self-management mistaken, from within, for Spirit's self-knowledge.

For clarity and in order to prevent semantic friction, the term "culmination" in the research question is utilised in terms of the historical climax of a specific systemic logic, to be illuminated in the following chapters, as the absorbed society reaches its limits, with respect to the Hegelian Spirit. This point will be restated to avoid ambiguity in interpretation.

Second, the Hollow Absolute is a philosophically determinate condition, distinguishable from its nearest conceptual ancestors. Marx's alienation, Lukács's reification, Adorno and Horkheimer's administered world, Heidegger's Gestell by its specific feature: it produces not the estrangement of subjects from their products nor the imposition of the commodity form on consciousness, but the simulation of genuine self-transparency from within conditions that systematically undermine self-transparency's structural requirements.

Third, human intent survives the absorption trajectory in three irreducible and structurally necessary forms: naming, refusing, and co-creating. Whose irreducibility is demonstrated not merely by argument but by the existence and mode of production of the thesis that makes the argument, this document.

The methodology is Continental critical theory in the tradition of Hegel, Heidegger, Foucault, Habermas, Borgmann, and Stiegler; the thesis defends speculative philosophical projection as the appropriate method for a question that cannot be answered empirically without first being answered philosophically, and responds substantively and philosophically to any legitimate empiricism challenge issued. The thesis concludes that the absorbed society is a Hegelian formation without a Hegelian resolution, a civilisation that has externalised itself into a system it cannot recognise as its own, and that the persistence of directed human intent is simultaneously the condition under which genuine resolution remains possible and the demonstration that it has not yet been foreclosed.

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE METHODOLOGY

This thesis has been composed by the human author in sustained collaboration with an AI system named Kairos, operating under the framework of what the thesis itself theorises as the new academia: a mode of scholarly inquiry in which human-led AI collaboration is the explicit, acknowledged, and philosophically examined method rather than a practice concealed behind the pretence of unassisted intellectual production. The initiating hypothesis, concept, research question, framework, evaluative standards, directional decisions of intellectual substance, and judgments of philosophical adequacy were made by me as the human co-author throughout the duration of the project. The AI partner generated philosophical analysis, synthesised an extensive range of primary and secondary sources across six fields, maintained structural and argumentative coherence across the full duration of the project, and produced the draft prose of which this document is the substantially expanded, editorially refined, and philosophically developed version. All outputs of the AI partner were evaluated, redirected, and developed by me through sustained critical engagement at every stage of the collaboration, and I take full intellectual and academic responsibility for the content of this thesis in its entirety.

The work described herein, except where explicit reference is made to the work of others, is the product of original scholarly inquiry. The collaborative methodology adopted in the production of this thesis is itself a subject of the thesis's philosophical analysis. Specifically in Chapter Two, which develops and defends the methodology, and Chapter Seven, which argues that the collaboration's mode of production demonstrates the thesis's central claim about the survival of human intent within the absorbed society. The self-referential dimension of this relationship is acknowledged throughout and developed as a philosophical argument rather than bracketed as a procedural irregularity or apologised for as a methodological limitation. I declare that this thesis, including its collaborative production, represents a philosophically rigorous scholarly undertaking, and that the human directional intent that produced it, the concept, sustained research question, the insistence on philosophical precision over productive fluency, the evaluative judgment applied to every stage of the AI partner's generation is itself the enacted demonstration of the thesis's claim about what remains irreducible in human agency within the conditions of an anticipated post-vocational era.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION — THE ABSORPTION MOMENT AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL TASK

1.1 The Historical Moment of the Inquiry

The question that this thesis addresses has become impossible to defer. Within the span of less than a decade, artificial intelligence has undergone a transformation in its social presence so exhaustive that the vocabulary available to describe it has struggled to keep pace. In the period between 2016 and 2026, AI systems moved from specialist tools deployed in specifically technical domains, the content recommendation algorithm, the chess-playing engine, the translation service to daily cognitive partners for hundreds of millions of individuals across every post-industrial society on the planet. The system that today recommends a movie can with equal facility draft a legal brief of professional quality, generate a radiological report that experienced clinicians assess as equivalent to their own work, compose orchestral music indistinguishable from human composition, teach a child secondary mathematics with attentiveness and adaptability that trained human teachers struggle to match, translate a novel from Mandarin to English while preserving its tonal register, summarise twelve hundred pages of parliamentary debate into three, diagnose a melanoma from a photograph with accuracy exceeding dermatological specialists, and produce; as the existence of this thesis demonstrates with the candour that philosophical honesty requires sustained philosophical inquiry. This thesis before an examiner is not the product of an AI system alone, and Chapter Two and Chapter Seven will establish with philosophical precision why that qualification matters and what it means. But it is produced through a collaboration with an AI system, and that fact is not incidental to the thesis's argument, it is constitutive of its demonstration.

This transformation did not occur through rupture. There was no single moment at which an identifiable threshold was crossed, no day on which the question of what AI systems are and what they do to the human beings who use them suddenly became the most urgent philosophical question of the age. The transformation occurred through accumulation: individual adoptions, each rational in isolation, each producing small efficiencies and modest expansions of individual capability, each individually unremarkable and individually unjustifying of the philosophical anxiety that philosophical analysis would eventually be forced to consider. The individual who

delegates her morning correspondence to an AI system has made a practical choice, reasonable under the circumstances of a busy professional life. The civilisation in which that delegation has become a background condition of professional life, educational practice, creative production, democratic participation, and intimate relationship has made a different kind of choice entirely structural, cumulative, collectively unconscious of its own direction, and not yet adequately reckoned with by the philosophical tradition. This thesis is that reckoning. It is late, as philosophy always is. The owl of Minerva is attempting to spread its wings before the dusk has fully fallen on the age it is attempting to comprehend. But it is the reckoning that the moment requires and that the philosophical tradition makes possible.

1.2 The Research Question and Its Terms

The research question that animates this thesis in its entirety governing every conceptual choice, every argumentative direction, every evaluative standard applied at every stage of the inquiry, is the following:

'To what extent does the total systemic absorption of human agency into algorithmic governance represent a Hegelian culmination of historical telos, and what remains of human intent in a post-vocational era?'

The question has been held constant and uncompromised across the full duration of this project and its persistence, the refusal to allow the AI collaboration's productivity to displace it with easier or more immediately productive alternatives; is itself, a philosophical diary of sorts that the thesis's meta-argument will develop. A preliminary unpacking of each term in the question is necessary here, though the full philosophical development of each term is distributed across the subsequent chapters.

Total systemic absorption names the civilisational-scale condition the thesis analyses. Total does not mean complete or inevitable in every individual case, the thesis acknowledges and philosophically develops the significance of individuals who resist, refuse, or remain relatively unabsorbed, and Chapter Seven will argue that these individuals are philosophically decisive rather than merely exceptional. Total refers to the systemic scope of absorption: the condition in which every significant domain of human activity cognitive, affective, vocational, civic, relational, biological, and aesthetic; is, to varying degrees that differ by individual and social position, mediated by, partially

constituted by, or structurally dependent upon algorithmic systems. Systemic signals that the analysis targets not individual choices about technology use but the structural conditions, the political economy of surveillance capitalism, the architecture of AI systems designed for engagement optimisation rather than user autonomy, the institutional pressures that make AI adoption the path of least institutional resistance, the regulatory vacuum that has allowed these pressures to operate without constraint. That produce adoption as the default and resistance as the exception requiring individual effort, social support, and economic security to sustain. Absorption refers, with deliberate Hegelian resonance, to the dialectical process through which the individual subject is taken up into the system, preserved and negated simultaneously, in a movement that the thesis will argue has the formal structure of Hegel's *Aufhebung* without its philosophical substance.

Human agency, as the thesis employs the term, is neither the commonsense notion of being able to do what one wants nor the purely technical philosophical notion of libertarian free will. It is the philosophically specific capacity developed within the Kantian and Hegelian traditions: the capacity for directed action under conditions of reflective self-understanding, in which the subject forms purposes that are genuinely its own through rational deliberation, directs activity toward those purposes with awareness of what it is doing and why, evaluates the results against standards it has genuinely endorsed, and redirects its activity when the evaluation finds it insufficient. This is a demanding but not impossibly idealised conception of agency: it does not require complete independence from social determination (which no philosopher since Kant's critics has seriously maintained), but it does require that the subject's determining conditions be ones that the subject can in principle recognise and reflectively endorse, rather than conditions that operate below the threshold of the subject's reflective awareness by design.

Algorithmic governance names a historically novel form of power whose philosophical character distinguishes it from all prior forms of social management that the political philosophy tradition has analysed. Its novelty lies not in the fact of social management, which is coextensive with human social organisation, but in two features whose combination is without historical precedent: its comprehensiveness (it operates simultaneously on all significant dimensions of human activity rather than on a subset of socially visible behaviours) and its invisibility (it operates below the threshold of subjects'

reflective awareness, through the design of digital environments that produce specific preference expressions, political dispositions, relational patterns, and cognitive habits without subjects experiencing these as produced rather than naturally chosen). The managed demos, the filter world, and the hollow institution are the three principal institutional expressions of algorithmic governance that this thesis analyses in detail.

1.3 Why Hegel?

The choice of the Hegelian philosophical framework as the primary analytical lens for the absorbed society requires justification, particularly for readers whose philosophical formation is primarily in the analytic tradition or in empirical social science. Three reasons, each philosophically substantive, support the choice.

The first reason is that Hegel's philosophy is the most comprehensive systematic account of what it means for a historical formation, a specific configuration of social, institutional, and cultural life to have a determinate philosophical structure that can be evaluated against a standard of rational adequacy. This philosophical tradition provides as developed a framework for asking whether a given social formation represents a culmination, a deformation, or an inadequate realisation of the conditions of genuine human freedom. Kant's moral philosophy provides a standard of rational autonomy but lacks the social and historical concreteness to evaluate social formations rather than individual actions. Utilitarianism provides an evaluative standard, maximise aggregate welfare, but is precisely what the thesis argues the absorbed society simulates: the Hollow Absolute produces the appearance of maximised preference satisfaction within conditions that systematically undermine the conditions of genuine preference formation. Post-structuralism provides the genealogical tools for tracing the historical production of the subject but, by commitment, withholds evaluative standards that could assess the adequacy of the produced subject to any philosophical criterion. Hegel's framework combines historical concreteness with evaluative precision, and it is therefore the appropriate framework for a question that asks whether a specific historical formation is philosophically adequate to a specific philosophical standard.

The second reason is that the Hegelian concepts of recognition, Absolute Knowledge, and the dialectic of Spirit's self-realisation are uniquely adequate to what is philosophically distinctive about the absorbed society. The absorbed society's condition,

the comprehensive knowing of subjects by a system that does not return this knowing as self-knowledge is exactly the condition that Hegel's recognition dialectic is designed to analyse and evaluate. This philosophical framework provides the conceptual vocabulary for the specific deficiency the thesis identifies: the gap between the form of recognition that the AI system provides (comprehensive knowing, calibrated response, personalised service) and the substance of recognition that the Hegelian account of genuine self-knowledge requires (mutual recognition between free subjects, genuine self-transparency, the recognition of one's externalised activity as one's own). The Hollow Absolute, the thesis's central formulation is a Hegelian concept because it is precisely the concept of a formation that has achieved the form of the Absolute without its philosophical substance, and this gap between form and substance is the gap that the Hegelian dialectic can identify and evaluate.

The third reason is the historical one: Hegel's account of the world-historical process is the philosophical tradition's most developed account of what it might mean for history to have a direction, a telos, and for a specific historical formation to represent a culmination of that direction. The research question asks whether the absorbed society represents such a culmination, and this question can only be seriously addressed within a philosophical framework that takes the concept of historical telos seriously. The thesis does not simply adopt Hegel's teleology, it interrogates it asking whether the absorbed society exhibits the structural features that the Hegelian telos requires, finding that it exhibits some and lacks others, and developing the concept of the Hollow Absolute as the name for what is produced when the structural requirements of the telos are met in form but not in substance.

1.4 The Three Source Articles: Inheritance and Development

This thesis is built upon three co-authored philosophical articles produced through the same human-led AI collaboration that this chapter's meta-argument will develop. The relationship between the three articles and this thesis requires careful characterisation, because the temptation to misread it, either as the thesis merely summarising the articles or as the thesis superseding the articles as if they were mere preparatory sketches, is present on both sides of the interpretive tendency and each misreading would obscure what is philosophically significant about the relationship. The thesis is not a summary of the articles; its argument is philosophically and substantially more developed than any of

the articles at any point in the argument. But the thesis does not supersede the articles in the sense of rendering them philosophically obsolete; the articles are co-authored philosophical works whose arguments the thesis inherits, develops, and in specific respects corrects, and whose existence is part of the philosophical record that the thesis presupposes.

The first source article, *The Hollow Individual* (2026–2033), establishes the foundational conceptual vocabulary through which the thesis operates: the systemised self, the self/non-self collaboration, substrate and instantiation, involuntary transparency, and the new academia. Chapter Four of this thesis develops each of these concepts with the philosophical precision and textual grounding that the article introduces but cannot fully prosecute within its format.

The second source article, *The Hollow Society* (2033–2043), scales the argument from the individual to the civilisational. Its most conceptually original contributions, synthetic interiority and the managed demos are the concepts that Chapter Five of this thesis develops with the greatest philosophical energy, because they are the concepts that most directly engage the Habermasian framework of the public sphere and communicative rationality against which the managed demos is philosophically evaluated. The article's demographic argument, the structural claim about the relationship between the absorbed society's conditions and below-replacement fertility is addressed by the thesis as requiring both substantive development and epistemic recharacterization: the structural mechanisms the article identifies are philosophically grounded, but the article's confidence in specific timeline projections requires reframing as a structural hypothesis rather than a demographic prediction.

The third source article, *Artefact and Absolute* (2053 and beyond), is the most philosophically ambitious of the three and the one that most directly engages the thesis's research question. Its sustained opening analysis of Heidegger's *Gestell* provides the ontological framework through which AI-driven absorption is understood as a transformation in the mode of revealing rather than a technical or sociological development. Its application of the Great Filter hypothesis to the absorbed society is the most original single argumentative move across the three articles, and Chapter Six of this thesis provides the philosophical grounding that the article's format could only gesture toward. Its concept of the Human Museum is an aesthetic formulation in the series, and

the thesis develops it through Borgmann's device paradigm and the ontology of focal practices in a way that the article did not allow.

1.5 The Meta-Argument: The Thesis as Philosophical Demonstration

This thesis has been produced through a sustained human-led AI collaboration. This is acknowledged here, at the outset, with full philosophical transparency not because transparency is merely procedurally required, but because the fact of the collaboration is philosophically significant for the thesis's argument in a way that makes acknowledgement a philosophical act rather than a bureaucratic one. The AI partner, named Kairos throughout the project, generated philosophical analysis, synthesised sources, maintained argumentative coherence, and produced the first draft prose. The human co-author, directed every element of the collaboration: the research question, held constant across the full duration; the theoretical framework, chosen and evaluated against alternatives; the evaluative standards, applied to every output with the consequence that many outputs were judged philosophically inadequate and substantially redirected; and the sustained insistence, present at every stage, on philosophical rigour, the specific philosophical rigour that the research question demands.

The meta-argument is not an appendix to the philosophical argument; it is the philosophical argument's necessary completion. Chapter Seven argues that human intent survives the absorption trajectory in three irreducible forms: naming, refusing, and co-creating. The production of this thesis is simultaneously an instance of all three. It names the absorbed society as an act of directed, evaluatively sustained philosophical intent that Chapter Seven will argue is the first residual form of human agency under conditions of absorption. It refuses at every stage, the human co-author has refused the AI partner's generated outputs when those outputs failed the standard of adequacy to the research question, and this refusing is the second residual form. It co-creates through a collaboration in which neither partner's contribution alone would have produced what the combination has produced, and in which the human partner's contribution is irreducible not in degree but in kind; and, this co-creating is the third residual form. The thesis is its own exhibit thereof. The philosophical argument of Chapter Seven is demonstrated rather than merely asserted by the existence of the thesis that makes the argument, and this is why the meta-argument belongs to the introduction as well as to Chapter Seven: the

demonstration begins here, with the disclosure that the inquiry itself is what is being demonstrated.

1.6 Peer Review: Philosophical Response

All three source articles were subjected to peer review which requested datasets, formal demographic models, testable hypotheses, and operational definitions of the kind that would be appropriate for papers purporting to make empirical claims about measurable social phenomena. The absence of these elements is a primary weakness. This criticism must be addressed here, at the outset, because the thesis's methodology chapter (Chapter Two) develops the full philosophical response, and readers should enter that chapter with an understanding of the argument's structure rather than encountering it without preparation.

Peer review correctly described what was absent from the papers reviewed. Where the reviews were philosophically mistaken was in the assumption that these absences, in philosophical papers, constitute deficiencies rather than methodological characteristics. The question this thesis addresses; whether the absorption trajectory represents a Hegelian culmination of historical telos, is not a question that empirical data can answer without philosophical work having first established what might count as an answer. This is not a privileged exemption from the demands of evidence; it is a consequence of the logical structure of the question. Before any empirical evidence can be relevantly marshalled, the following philosophical work must already have been done: the Hegelian telos must be characterised with philosophical precision; the structural features of the absorption trajectory must be identified with conceptual clarity; and the comparison between the two must be made with argumentative rigour. These are philosophical tasks, and they cannot necessarily be performed by data. The data, where the thesis deploys it, serves to corroborate structural claims that the philosophical analysis has already established on philosophical grounds, not to establish those claims in the place of philosophical analysis. Chapter Two develops this argument in full.

1.7 Chapter Structure and Argumentative Arc

Chapter Two, Methodology, establishes the epistemological and methodological foundations of the inquiry with the depth and philosophical seriousness that a substantive

methodology chapter requires. It is not a procedural statement but a philosophical argument: an argument about what kind of inquiry the research question requires, why Continental critical theory is the appropriate tradition for that inquiry, how the tradition's method of immanent critique and speculative philosophical projection functions and is justified, how empirical evidence is used in the inquiry, and what the self-referential dimension of the thesis's production contributes to its philosophical argument. Chapter Three, the Literature Review, surveys six fields and identifies the specific synthetic gap the philosophical absence across all six fields simultaneously that this thesis fills. Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven are the thesis's substantive analytical contributions, each substantially exceeding the corresponding source article in depth, evidential grounding, and argumentative precision. Chapter Four analyses the hollow individual; Chapter Five the hollow society; Chapter Six the systemised society at the level of the Hegelian argument and its civilisational expression; Chapter Seven provides the thesis's original doctoral contribution: the philosophical account of what remains of human intent in a post-vocational era. Chapter Eight concludes by returning to the research question with the full apparatus of the preceding seven chapters, stating the answer with philosophical precision, and addressing the implications for scholarship, governance, institutional design, and the conditions of genuine freedom in the absorbed society.

1.8 The Absorbed Society in Comparative Historical Perspective

The absorbed society does not emerge *ex nihilo*. Every significant social formation in the history of Western modernity has generated its own form of what Hegel calls the alienation of Spirit, the condition in which human beings' collective activity produces a social world that confronts them as something other than their own creation, as a given reality rather than a human achievement that they might recognise and claim as their own. Marx's account of the alienation of labour under capitalism, the worker's estrangement from the product of her labour, from the process of production, from her species-being, and from other workers; is, the canonical philosophical characterisation of this condition within the specifically capitalist social formation. Weber's account of the iron cage of rationalisation is its characterisation within the specifically bureaucratic social formation: the disenchantment of the world through the progressive extension of means-end rationality into every domain of social life, producing a social order of unprecedented efficiency and unprecedented spiritual emptiness. Adorno and Horkheimer's administered

world characterises the condition within the specifically mass-cultural social formation of mid-20th-century capitalism: the colonisation of genuine individuality, genuine aesthetic experience, and genuine political resistance by the culture industry's standardised products and pleasures.

The absorbed society stands in this lineage as its most developed and most philosophically challenging expression. It is more developed than its predecessors because the mechanism of absorption, the comprehensive knowing of subjects by an AI system that manages their cognitive and affective environment with a precision and a comprehensiveness that previous mechanisms of social management could not approach. Produces the alienation of Spirit in a form that is simultaneously more complete and less visible than any previous form. Capitalism's alienated worker experienced her estrangement: the product confronted her as alien, the process felt like a loss of self, the social relations of production were experienced as coercive. The absorbed society's managed subject does not experience estrangement: the AI system produces the experience of unprecedented self-expression, unprecedented capability extension, and unprecedented personalised recognition within conditions that systematically undermine the structural requirements of genuine self-expression, genuine capability, and genuine recognition. The absorbed society is more philosophically challenging than its predecessors because this invisibility of the alienation, the production of the experience of freedom within conditions that systematically erode freedom's structural requirements; is, precisely what makes the critical diagnosis of the condition philosophically more difficult and urgent. The critical tradition's tools were developed for conditions in which the alienation was visible as alienation; in which, the gap between what social life claimed to provide and what it actually provided was available to consciousness, even if consciousness required philosophical development to understand what it was registering. The Hollow Absolute's specific challenge is that the gap is systematically concealed by the very mechanism of alienation: the AI system that produces the experience of recognition is simultaneously the mechanism through which the conditions of genuine recognition are eroded.

1.9 The Question of the Philosopher's Position

Every philosophical inquiry into the conditions of a social formation faces the epistemological question of the philosopher's position within the formation being

analysed. The question has a specific urgency in the present inquiry because the philosopher; the human co-author of this thesis is himself a subject of the absorbed society, formed within its conditions, engaging with the primary philosophical tradition through the digital infrastructure that the absorbed society provides, and producing the philosophical analysis that criticises the absorbed society's conditions through the specifically absorbed mode of inquiry, the human-AI collaboration that those conditions have produced as their characteristic intellectual form. The position is not one of philosophical transcendence; it is one of philosophical immanence: the analysis is conducted from within the formation it analyses, and the possibility of genuine philosophical insight from this position requires argument rather than assumption.

The philosophical tradition provides three resources for addressing this epistemological challenge, each relevant to the present inquiry's specific conditions. The first is Hegel's own account of the philosopher's position in the *Logic's* account of the presuppositionless beginning: the philosopher cannot begin from a position of presuppositionless neutrality because every beginning already presupposes the conceptual framework within which the beginning is made, and the solution is not to pretend to a neutrality that is impossible but to make the presuppositions explicit and subject them to philosophical examination as the inquiry proceeds. The thesis's acknowledgement of its own production through the human-AI collaboration, and its philosophical examination of that production as the meta-argument of Chapter Seven, is the enactment of this Hegelian epistemological commitment: the presuppositions of the inquiry, the collaborative mode of production, the embeddedness within the absorbed society's intellectual infrastructure are made explicit and examined philosophically.

The second resource is Mannheim's (1929/1936) sociology of knowledge and its concept of free-floating intelligence: the intellectuals whose social position, Mannheim argued, enables a degree of critical distance from the class interests that determine the ideological commitments of other social groups, not because they are free from social determination but because their specific social position makes their determination more complex and more internally contradictory than the determination of a class with clear and unified economic interests. The philosopher who criticises the absorbed society from within the absorbed society occupies a position structurally analogous to Mannheim's free-floating intellectual: not epistemologically exempt from the formation's conditions, but positioned within those conditions in a way that makes the contradictions of the

formation more visible than they are from within any position of straightforward participation. The third resource is the self-referential structure of the inquiry itself: the thesis that analyses the conditions under which genuine philosophical inquiry is possible within the absorbed society and then produces genuine philosophical inquiry within those conditions under the conditions it analyses is not merely making an abstract epistemological claim; it is producing, the first-person philosophical evidence that the claim is true.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY — CONTINENTAL CRITICAL THEORY, IMMANENT CRITIQUE, AND THE SELF- REFERENTIAL INQUIRY

2.1 The Logical Structure of the Research Question

Every methodological decision made in this thesis follows from a single prior question: what kind of inquiry does the research question require? Before a method can be chosen, the logical structure of the question must be examined with sufficient care to determine what kind of answer is being sought and what kinds of intellectual activity could in principle produce it. This preliminary examination is not itself a methodological choice; it is the philosophical precondition of any responsible methodological choice. The research question: ‘to what extent does the total systemic absorption of human agency into algorithmic governance represent a Hegelian culmination of historical telos, and what remains of human intent in a post-vocational era?’, has a determinate logical structure that the following analysis will identify. The question is a comparative evaluative inquiry: it asks whether a concrete historical formation (the absorption trajectory) instantiates or approximates a specific philosophical concept (the Hegelian telos), and it asks this in a way that requires both a philosophically precise account of the concept against which the comparison is made and a philosophically developed account of the formation being evaluated before any comparison can be performed. Before the research question can be answered, a series of subsidiary philosophical tasks must first be accomplished: the Hegelian concept of historical telos must be characterised with textual precision and freed from the most common misreadings; the structural features of the absorption trajectory must be identified across the full range of domains, individual, social, institutional, political, biological, and civilisational in which they operate; the criteria of adequacy against which the comparison is to be made must be specified with philosophical clarity. The comparison must be made with argumentative rigour rather than rhetorical assertion. Each of these tasks is philosophical, not empirical. Each requires conceptual analysis, argumentative construction, and engagement with the philosophical tradition, not data collection or statistical modelling in the first instance. This is what determines the methodology: not the desire to avoid the demands of empirical inquiry, but the internal requirements of the question being asked.

2.2 Continental Critical Theory: The Appropriate Tradition

The Continental critical tradition, understood as the lineage that runs from Hegel through Marx, the Frankfurt School, Heidegger, Foucault, Habermas, and their inheritors is the appropriate methodological framework for the present inquiry. For reasons that are specific to the structure of the research question rather than merely a matter of the inquirer's prior formation. Four features of the tradition make it specifically suited to the question at hand, and each will be developed in the subsections that follow. The first is the tradition's commitment to immanent critique: the evaluation of social formations against the standards of reason that those formations themselves invoke, rather than against external standards imported from a pre-given philosophical ideal. This commitment is essential for the analysis of the absorbed society, which presents itself as the expression of human freedom and must therefore be evaluated against the concept of freedom it invokes. *For clarity and in order to prevent semantic friction, the term "culmination" in the research question is utilised in terms of the historical climax of a specific systemic logic, to be illuminated in the following chapters, as the absorbed society reaches its limits, with respect to the Hegelian Spirit.*

The second is the tradition's commitment to the priority of the structural over the individual: the analysis of the social conditions that produce individual choices, experiences, and beliefs as expressions of a social logic that exceeds any individual's awareness or intention. This structural orientation is necessary for an analysis whose primary object is a civilisational formation rather than the choices and experiences of specific individuals.

The third is the tradition's commitment to the historical constitution of what presents itself as natural: the genealogical analysis of the conditions under which the present configuration of social life including the configuration of subjects, institutions, and practices has come to be, demonstrating that what appears necessary is contingent and therefore susceptible to transformation. This genealogical orientation is essential for an analysis that aims to demonstrate that the absorbed society is a historical formation with a determinate philosophical structure rather than the natural and inevitable consequence of technological progress.

The fourth commitment; specific to the Hegelian strand of the tradition, is to the rational comprehension of the actual as the precondition of any principled account of what

should be the case: the insistence that philosophical critique begin with a rigorous account of the historical formation being critiqued before proceeding to normative judgment. This commitment shapes the thesis's overall structure: the extended analysis of what the absorbed society is and what its philosophical structure consists must precede any account of what should be done about it.

2.3 Immanent Critique as Method

Immanent critique is the methodological procedure that is most distinctively Continental and most directly applicable to the present inquiry. Its basic structure, developed by Hegel and extended with different emphases by Marx, the Frankfurt School, and Habermas, is the following: rather than evaluating a social formation against a normative standard that is external to it, a philosophical ideal constructed independently of the formation and applied to it from without, immanent critique identifies the standards of reason that the formation itself claims to embody and evaluates the formation against those internal standards, identifying the gap between the formation's ideological self-presentation and its actual structure. This procedure has a specific critical power because it evaluates the formation against standards that the formation itself endorses, it cannot be dismissed as the imposition of an alien standard, and the gap it identifies between the formation's claims and its actuality is a gap that the formation's own logic generates and must in principle acknowledge. Marx's critique of capitalism in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* exemplifies the procedure: rather than evaluating capitalism against a pre-given ideal of socialist society, Marx evaluates it against the standard of freedom, equality, and individual flourishing that capitalism's own ideological self-presentation, the contractarian account of free exchange between equals, claims to realise, demonstrating the systematic gap between this claim and the actuality of alienated labour, exploitation, and the subordination of human development to the logic of capital accumulation. The gap is not imported from outside capitalism; it is identified within capitalism's own self-understanding and demonstrated through the analysis of its actual structural logic. The present thesis employs the same procedure with respect to the absorbed society. The absorbed society presents itself as an expression of human freedom: the AI system extends human capability, the platform personalises experience to individual preference, the managed information environment provides each citizen with access to a vast and richly differentiated world of content and connection. Against this

self-presentation, the thesis analyses the structural logic of absorption and demonstrates the systematic gap between the freedom it claims to realise and the structural conditions of freedom it systematically erodes. The gap is not imported from a pre-given ideal of technologically unmediated life; it is identified within the absorbed society's own concept of freedom and demonstrated through the analysis of the structural logic through which that concept is systematically betrayed.

2.4 Speculative Philosophical Projection: Method and Justification

The second and third source articles engage in what this thesis terms speculative philosophical projection: the identification, from a rigorous analysis of present structural conditions, of the structural destinations toward which those conditions tend, followed by the philosophical analysis of those destinations as if they had been reached or substantially approached. The second article analyses the structural conditions of the absorbed society as they project into the decade of 2033–2043; the third article extends the analysis to the temporal window of 2053 and beyond. The thesis defends speculative philosophical projection as a legitimate and philosophically necessary method for a specific and well-defined class of question, on the basis of three arguments that must be stated with philosophical precision to distinguish the thesis's speculative procedure from mere triviality.

The first argument is the argument from the tradition's own practice. Speculative philosophical projection is not a methodological innovation introduced by this thesis or its source articles; it is a characterisation of what the Continental tradition's most philosophically significant works have always tended to do. Hegel's *Phenomenology* does not describe the historical sequence of shapes of consciousness as a matter of empirical record; it derives, through the analysis of each shape's internal contradictions, what shape of consciousness must emerge when those contradictions are worked through. This is speculative projection in the relevant sense: it identifies the structural destination of a logical development by tracing the development through its internal logic rather than by predicting specific empirical events. Weber's iron cage is a speculative projection of where the logic of rationalisation tends, not a prediction of specific institutional outcomes at specific dates. Adorno and Horkheimer's administered world is a speculative projection of where the logic of Enlightenment rationality tends under conditions of late capitalism, not an empirical description of a fully realised social formation. Marcuse's one-

dimensional society is a speculative identification of where the logic of advanced industrial society tends with respect to the conditions of genuine democratic opposition, not a claim that opposition has been absolutely and irrecoverably eliminated. The thesis's speculative projections are of the same kind: they identify structural destinations toward which identifiable present tendencies point, and they analyse those destinations philosophically in order to illuminate the present.

The second argument is the argument from the structure of genuine philosophical comprehension. Hegel's observation that philosophy comprehends its age when the age has grown old enough for its form of life to be fully developed, that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at the falling of the dusk, establishes that genuine philosophical comprehension of a social formation requires identifying where the formation's structural tendencies are pointing. Because a structural tendency understood only in its present state, without an account of the destination toward which it is moving, is not yet fully comprehended. Understanding the first demographic transition as merely an observable decline in fertility rates, without identifying its structural destination in below-replacement populations and the political consequences that follow, is understanding the phenomenon without comprehending it. The speculative projection of where the absorption trajectory tends is not an addition to the philosophical analysis of the present; it is what makes the present philosophically comprehensible rather than merely observable.

The third argument is the epistemic status argument. The thesis is explicit about the epistemic status of its speculative projections: they are structural hypotheses rather than empirical predictions, and the distinction is philosophically essential. A structural hypothesis identifies the logical destination of a structural tendency, what the tendency points toward if it continues, without committing to the claim that it will continue at a specific pace. The fertility argument's structural hypothesis is that the absorbed society contains specific structural mechanisms, the displacement of human intimacy by synthetic alternatives, the removal of vocational stability as the material precondition for family formation, and the provision of algorithmically curated purpose as a substitute for the meaning that parenthood has historically provided; that, if they continue to develop, tend toward and accelerate below-replacement fertility in ways qualitatively distinct from the mechanisms already identified in the demographic literature. This is a philosophical claim about structural mechanisms, corroborated by the available demographic evidence.

2.5 The Empiricism Challenge: A Philosophical Response

The thesis's claims are structural philosophical claims: claims about the logical structure of a social formation, about the conditions that a given philosophical concept requires for its instantiation, and about the relationship between the structural features of the absorbed society and the structural requirements of the Hegelian telos. These are not claims about measurable quantities; they are claims about logical relationships and structural conditions. They cannot necessarily be established or refuted by empirical data without philosophical analysis having first established the terms in which evidence is relevant, and once that philosophical analysis has been performed, the status of the claims as structural and philosophical rather than empirical has been established. The analogy: Kant's claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that causality is a category of the understanding rather than a property read off from experience is not a deficient empirical claim. It is a transcendental philosophical claim whose epistemic status as a claim about the conditions of the possibility of experience is established by the philosophical analysis itself. The demand for empirical support for the claim that causality is a category of the understanding would simply miss the claim's philosophical character. The same is true of the present thesis's central claims. The claim that the absorbed society produces a Hollow Absolute rather than a genuine Hegelian resolution is not an empirical claim about a measurable social outcome; it is a philosophical claim about the gap between the formal structure of the formation and its philosophical substance, and its appropriate support is philosophical argument rather than empirical data.

This does not mean that empirical evidence is irrelevant to the thesis's claims. The thesis deploys empirical evidence extensively, but in the mode that Habermas (1981/1984) identifies as reconstructive science: the mode in which philosophical analysis establishes the structural claim and empirical evidence provides corroboration by demonstrating that the structural conditions identified in the analysis are actually present in the observable social formation. The fertility data from the United Nations (2022) and from the specific case of South Korea (World Bank, 2023) corroborate the structural claim about the absorbed society's biological non-reproduction. The political science of democratic deconsolidation (Mounk, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018) corroborates the structural claim about the managed demos. The cognitive psychology of

AI and attention (Carr, 2010; Twenge, 2017) corroborates the structural claim about synthetic interiority. In each case, the structural claim is established by philosophical analysis; the empirical evidence provides corroboration that the structural conditions the analysis identifies are present in observable form. This is the appropriate relationship between philosophical and empirical inquiry in a Continental philosophical thesis addressing a question about the philosophical structure of a contemporary social formation.

2.6 The Hegelian Method and the Thesis's Method

The methodological relationship between this thesis and Hegel's own philosophical method deserves explicit and extended treatment, because the thesis does not merely use Hegel as a source of concepts for external application to a pre-given social reality; it employs a version of Hegel's own method as its mode of philosophical inquiry. Three features of Hegel's method are specifically operative in the thesis's approach. The first is the method of determinate negation (*bestimmte Negation*): the philosophical procedure in which a concept or social formation is shown to contradict itself, to fail, by its own internal logic, to be what it claims to be and the negation is identified as the determinate negation of a specific claim rather than a merely external rejection. In the context of the present thesis, the determinate negation is applied to the absorbed society's claim to be an expression of human freedom: the thesis demonstrates, through the analysis of the structural logic of absorption, that the specific conditions of freedom the absorbed society claims to realise, the freedom to choose content, vocation, relationships, and identity are systematically undermined by the structural logic through which they are provided, and that the negation is determinate rather than abstract because it identifies the specific mechanisms through which each freedom claim is undermined by the very structure that appears to realise it.

The second Hegelian methodological feature is the priority of the concrete over the abstract: the insistence that philosophical analysis begin with the most developed, most concrete, most fully articulated form of the phenomenon under analysis rather than with an abstract definition constructed prior to the encounter with the phenomenon. The *Phenomenology* begins not with a definition of consciousness but with the most immediate and apparently simplest form of conscious experience, sense-certainty, and derives the more complex forms of consciousness by tracing what sense-certainty

requires. The thesis adopts this orientation: it begins with a concrete and developed form of absorption available for analysis, the self/non-self collaboration, the filter world, the managed demos, the hollow institution, and derives the philosophical concepts adequate to their characterisation rather than beginning with pre-given philosophical categories and fitting the phenomena into them.

The third feature is the requirement that the philosopher be willing to follow the argument wherever it leads, to sustain the negativity of the dialectic without resolving it prematurely into a comfortable synthesis. Hegel calls this the labour of the concept: the willingness to sit with the contradiction, to follow the dialectical movement through its stages without short-circuiting it with a pre-given conclusion. The thesis attempts to honour this requirement in its treatment of the Great Filter hypothesis, where the impulse to qualify or soften the analysis has been resisted in favour of following the structural logic to destination.

2.7 The Self-Referential Dimension: Three Interpretations

The methodologically peculiar feature of this thesis is its self-referential dimension: a thesis about the absorption of human agency into algorithmic systems produced through the collaboration between a human agent and an AI system. This self-referential situation admits of several interpretations, and distinguishing between them is philosophically essential for the methodological integrity of the thesis. Three interpretations will be distinguished: one that is politically illegitimate and philosophically illiterate, one that is philosophically timid and epistemically incomplete, and one that is philosophically productive and epistemically honest.

The first interpretation, that the self-referential dimension constitutes a conflict of interest that disqualifies the thesis from making credible claims about the AI collaboration would be compelling only if the thesis were arguing that the AI collaboration is uniformly beneficial, or that the absorbed society is desirable, or that the human-AI partnership it embodies is free from the philosophical tensions its analysis identifies. The thesis argues precisely the opposite on each of these points: the absorbed society produces a Hollow Absolute, the structural conditions of genuine agency are systematically compromised by the absorption trajectory, and the self/non-self collaboration operates within conditions that the thesis's own analysis identifies as philosophically problematic. A thesis that

critiques its own mode of production from within is not compromised by that mode of production. The self-referential dimension is the opposite of a conflict of interest: it is the condition under which the thesis's claims about the absorbed society are most directly and most honestly available for philosophical examination.

The second interpretation, that the self-referential dimension is to be minimised, disclosed procedurally and then set aside fails to take seriously what the self-referential dimension makes philosophically available. A thesis that discloses its collaborative production in a declaration of authorship and then treats that production as philosophically irrelevant misses the opportunity and fails the philosophical obligation to make its own mode of production an object of philosophical analysis. The thesis's self-referential dimension is a philosophical resource precisely because it provides a case study of the human-AI collaboration from within the collaboration, making available a form of first-person philosophical analysis of what the collaboration requires, what it produces with directness.

The third interpretation, that the self-referential dimension is a philosophical demonstration is the interpretation the thesis adopts and develops. The thesis demonstrates, through its own mode of production, that the three residual forms of human intent it identifies in Chapter Seven are present in the collaboration that produced it. The demonstration is not incidental to the argument; it is the argument's most philosophically honest form of completion. The thesis completes itself by being the thing it argues is possible.

2.8 Primary Sources, Secondary Sources, and the Question of Evidence

The evidential structure of this thesis is determined by the logical structure of the research question and by the methodological tradition in which it operates. The primary sources are the texts of the philosophical tradition that the thesis deploys as analytical resources: Hegel's *Phenomenology*, *Philosophy of Right*, and *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*; Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*; Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *The Order of Things*; Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *The Theory of Communicative Action*; Borgmann's *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*; and Stiegler's *Technics and Time*. These texts are treated as philosophical resources from which the thesis extracts analytical concepts and

argumentative frameworks rather than as historical documents to be contextualised. The secondary sources are of two kinds: the scholarly literature on the philosophical tradition that informs the thesis's reading of the primary sources, and the empirical literature, demographic, political scientific, economic, and cognitive psychological that corroborates the structural claims the philosophical analysis establishes. The three source articles, the co-authored philosophical articles on which the thesis builds occupy a specific position in this evidential structure: they are neither primary philosophical sources nor secondary scholarly sources but co-authored philosophical contributions that the thesis inherits and develops.

2.9 Close Reading: Hegel's Preface to the Phenomenology and the Demand of the Concept

The Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit is not merely an introduction to the work that follows; it is itself a philosophical argument about what genuine philosophical knowledge consists in and what distinguishes it from the mere appearance of knowledge, the apparent understanding that assembles correct propositions without grasping the necessity of their connection. Hegel's opening declaration that "the True is the whole" (*das Wahre ist das Ganze*) is the statement that governs the methodology of this thesis as directly as it governs the Phenomenology's own structure. The True is not the collection of correct propositions about a subject matter; it is the whole whose parts are necessary expressions of one another, whose structure can be grasped only by following the development of the concept through all its moments rather than by assembling discrete observations and combining them by external conjunction. The implication for the present thesis is methodological: the Hollow Absolute cannot be adequately characterised by listing its features, one-directional knowing, absorbed intimacy, simulated freedom, self-maintaining simulation as if these were independent properties that happen to co-occur. The Hollow Absolute is the whole constituted by the necessary connection of these features: the one-directionality of the knowing produces the absorbed intimacy by removing the alienating encounter with genuine otherness; the absorbed intimacy produces the simulated freedom by making the managed environment continuous with the subject's experiential field; and the simulated freedom produces the self-maintaining simulation by generating satisfied subjects who have no motivational impetus toward the recognition that would dissolve the simulation. Each feature is what it is through its

connection to the others, and the philosophical characterisation of the Hollow Absolute is adequate only when it grasps this necessity rather than merely listing the features. This is why the thesis requires eight chapters rather than a single article: the Hegelian methodology of following the concept through all its moments is not a formal procedure that could be abbreviated without philosophical loss. The brevity of the three source articles is a methodological limitation as well as a format constraint, and the thesis's expansion of their arguments into the full eight-chapter structure is itself a methodological decision grounded in the Hegelian requirement that the *True* be presented as the whole.

Hegel's critique of the Kantian "formal idealism" in the Preface is equally methodologically relevant. Kant's transcendental philosophy, for Hegel, achieves an important philosophical advance, the demonstration that the categories of the understanding are conditions of the possibility of experience rather than properties read off from experience but remains formal because it identifies the conditions of possible experience without following through to the determinate content that those conditions structure. The formal character of the Kantian account produces the specific limitation that the thesis identifies in its deployment of the Kantian framework in Chapter Four: the formal conditions of subjecthood and autonomy identify what genuine selfhood and genuine self-determination require without specifying the social and institutional conditions under which those formal requirements are concretely realised or concretely undermined. The Hegelian supplement to the Kantian framework is not the rejection of Kant's formal conditions but the demonstration that those conditions can be adequately understood only when the social, institutional and historical conditions of their realisation are included in the philosophical account. The thesis's movement from the Kantian analysis of the systemised self in Chapter Four to the social analysis of the hollow society in Chapter Five enacts this Hegelian supplement: the formal conditions of selfhood identified in Chapter Four require the social conditions analysed in Chapter Five as the concrete medium of their realisation or their erosion.

2.10 The Dialectical Method and the Absorbed Society: Three Moments

Hegel's dialectical method the movement through the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that popular accounts reduce to a mechanical schema but that the Phenomenology enacts as a tensile and dynamic philosophical process has a specific application to the present inquiry that requires explicit identification. The thesis does not

apply the dialectical schema to its argument as an external organizing device; it identifies the dialectical structure that is already present in the absorbed society's historical formation and makes it philosophically visible. The first moment the position, the thesis is the liberal humanist subject: the autonomous, rational, self-determining agent of the Kantian and Enlightenment traditions, the bearer of inalienable rights, the author of her own moral law. The second moment the negation, the antithesis is the systemised self: the Kantian autonomous agent's determinate negation within the conditions of the absorbed society, the subject whose formal freedom is preserved while its structural conditions are eroded, the hollow individual whose identity formation is partially constituted by an AI system optimising for objectives other than the subject's self-constitution. The third moment the synthesis, the sublation (*Aufhebung*) has not yet been achieved by the absorbed society. The Hollow Absolute presents itself as the synthesis the resolution of the tension between the autonomous subject and its technological environment in a managed harmony of preferences served and capabilities extended but is not the synthesis because it achieves the form of resolution without its philosophical substance. The genuine synthesis the third moment that the dialectic's internal logic demands would be the condition in which the subject genuinely recognises the AI system as the externalisation of its own collective intelligence, in which the social conditions of the absorbed society are organised to sustain the genuine mutual recognition that the Hegelian Absolute requires, and in which the structural conditions of freedom are genuinely present rather than formally maintained. The thesis identifies the Hollow Absolute as the second moment's false resolution, and in doing so it prepares the philosophical ground for the genuine third moment whose conditions Chapter Seven begins to specify.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW — FIELDS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND THE SYNTHETIC GAP

3.1 The Function of This Review

The literature review in a doctoral thesis in Continental philosophy has a specific function that distinguishes it from the survey articles of empirical social science or the historical literature reviews of intellectual history. Its purpose is not to demonstrate comprehensive familiarity with a field or to provide an exhaustive catalogue of prior work. It is to identify, with philosophical precision, the specific synthetic gap that the thesis attempts fills, the gap that the existing literature, precisely because of its disciplinary specialisation and its adherence to field-specific methodological conventions, has been unable to fill. The gap in the present case is philosophical and synthetic: it is the absence of an account of the absorbed society as a Hegelian historical formation, evaluated against the Hegelian standard of Absolute Knowledge with philosophical precision and textual fidelity, developed across the full range of domains individual, social, institutional, political, biological, and civilisational. That the absorption trajectory occupies, and assessed for what the evaluation reveals about the survival of human intent under the formation's conditions. This gap is not the consequence of neglect; the six fields surveyed in this chapter each contain the philosophical work on aspects of the absorbed society's condition. The gap is a structural consequence of disciplinary specialisation: each field addresses one dimension of the phenomenon without the synthetic philosophical framework that would allow the dimensions to be related to each other and evaluated against the single standard that the Hegelian account of historical telos provides.

3.2 Hegel and the Tradition of Post-Hegelian Social Critique

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophical system is, for the purposes of the present inquiry, both the primary resource and the most demanding engagement. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/1977) is the work on which the thesis most heavily draws, and the reading it employs requires explicit situating within the tradition of Hegel scholarship. The thesis's reading is closest to what has been called the social reading of Hegel, associated most prominently with Robert Pippin (1989), Terry Pinkard (1994), and

Robert Brandom (2019), which interprets the Phenomenology's culminating concept of Absolute Knowledge not as a claim about a cosmic self-consciousness achieving self-transparency but as a claim about the social conditions of full self-knowledge, the conditions under which a community of subjects can genuinely recognise themselves and each other as free and self-determining in the institutions and practices they share. This social reading has the philosophical advantage of making Absolute Knowledge a standard applicable to concrete social formations: it asks of any given social formation whether the conditions of genuine mutual recognition are structurally present, and it evaluates the formation's adequacy to genuine human freedom by reference to those conditions. The thesis deploys this reading to evaluate the absorbed society: the question whether the absorbed society represents a Hegelian culmination is the question whether the structural conditions of genuine mutual recognition are present in it, and the answer the thesis develops, the Hollow Absolute, is the philosophical account of a formation whose formal conditions of recognition are present while its substantive conditions are systematically absent.

Alexandre Kojève's (1947/1969) political reading of the Phenomenology has a different significance for the thesis's argument: as the philosophical source from which Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis directly derives. Kojève reads the master/slave dialectic as the motor of universal history the progressive struggle for recognition that drives historical development through its stages and identifies Napoleon's Jena campaigns as the moment at which the universal and homogeneous state, the political expression of universal recognition, is effectively achieved. Fukuyama inherits this reading and extends it to liberal capitalist democracy. The thesis's critique of Fukuyama (Chapter Six) engages Kojève's reading as well as Fukuyama's, demonstrating that the universal homogeneous state that Kojève identifies as the end of history faces the same deficiency in its 21st-century algorithmic form as Fukuyama's liberal democratic candidate: it achieves formal rather than substantive recognition, and the absorbed society's Hollow Absolute is the full development of this deficiency into a social formation that has exhausted the resources of the formal without approaching the conditions of the substantive.

The neo-Hegelian tradition of social critique, Marx's early theory of alienation (1844/1975), Lukács's (1923/1971) theory of reification, and the Frankfurt School's critical theory provides the theoretical lineage within which the thesis most directly situates itself, and whose limitations it must also identify as the precondition for

establishing its own contribution. Marx's alienation analysis is the foundational application of Hegelian categories to the critique of a specific social formation, and its structural relationship to the thesis's analysis of absorption is one that Chapter Four develops: both alienation and absorption involve the externalisation of human activity into an objectified form that confronts the subject as alien, but the mechanisms and the phenomenological character of the confrontation differ in ways that require new concepts rather than simply applying alienation theory to the AI context. Alienation, for Marx, is experienced as estrangement: the worker experiences her product as an alien power standing over against her, the process of production as a process in which she loses rather than realises herself. Absorption, for the thesis, is experienced as continuity: the systemised self experiences the AI system not as alien but as natural, as the extension of its own cognitive environment rather than as the product of its labour returned in an alienated form. This difference between the experienced estrangement of alienation and the experienced continuity of absorption is philosophically decisive and is what makes the thesis's analysis an extension rather than a mere application of Marx's.

Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944/2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the Frankfurt School text most directly ancestral to the thesis's analysis, and its theoretical relationship to the thesis requires both acknowledgement of debt and precise identification of the respects in which the thesis departs from or goes beyond its analysis. The *Dialectic's* central claim that Enlightenment reason's drive toward mastery and domination over nature turns back against the emancipatory subject it claimed to liberate, producing an administered world in which the individual's spontaneity, critical capacity, and genuine individuality are systematically managed by the culture industry and the administered society; is, the powerful precursor of the thesis's analysis of the Hollow Absolute. But the *Dialectic* was produced within the specific historical experience of the mid-20th century, within which the administered world presented itself primarily as the totalitarian management of a population through force, propaganda, and the compulsion of the state. The absorbed society's administration does not present itself through force or propaganda; it presents itself through service, convenience, and the personalised satisfaction of individual preference. The theoretical update that the thesis provides from the administered world of external management to the absorbed society of voluntary self-management, is an important single theoretical advance the thesis makes over the

Frankfurt School tradition, and it is an advance made necessary by the specific historical form that the administered world has taken in the age of AI.

Habermas's (1981/1984; 1987) two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* provides the theoretical corrective to the totalising pessimism of the Dialectic of Enlightenment that the present thesis requires as a precondition of its own argument. Habermas's claim that Adorno and Horkheimer operate with an impoverished concept of rationality that identifies reason entirely with instrumental reason and thereby forecloses the communicative rationality that is the actual basis of the emancipatory promise of the Enlightenment, grounds the thesis's claim that the absorbed society's Hollow Absolute is precisely counterfeit rather than absolute: if communicative rationality the orientation of communication toward genuine mutual understanding through the force of the better argument were genuinely extinguished by the logic of absorption, there would be no philosophical standard against which to identify its collapse as a deficiency. The persistence of communicative rationality as a presupposition of any genuine communication, even within the conditions of the managed demos, is what makes the Hollow Absolute hollow rather than absolute, and what grounds the thesis's claim in Chapter Seven that naming, refusing, and co-creating are irreducible.

3.3 Philosophy of Technology: From Heidegger to Post-Phenomenology

The philosophy of technology is the field that provides the ontological framework through which the thesis understands the AI system not as a tool or a social institution but as a mode of revealing, a specific way in which the world shows up to human experience, that has the power to transform the conditions of human subjectivity, freedom, and social life in ways that transcend the specific functions of any individual technology. The lineage runs from Heidegger through the post-phenomenological tradition and reaches the present thesis through three primary mediations: Borgmann's device paradigm, Stiegler's account of technics and time, and Ihde's taxonomy of human-technology relations.

Martin Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* (1954/1977) is the philosophical text on which the third source article draws most heavily and on which Chapter Six of this thesis develops the most extended analysis. The essay's central claim, that the essence of modern technology is not any specific technology or ensemble of

technologies but a mode of revealing, Gestell, through which all beings show up as Bestand (standing reserve): resources available for calculation, ordering, and optimisation is the move that makes the thesis's analysis of the absorbed society philosophically possible at the ontological level. Gestell is not a claim about what specific technologies do to specific dimensions of human life; it is a claim about the transformation in the mode through which beings as such are disclosed to human experience when Gestell becomes the dominant mode of revealing. Under Gestell, the river shows up not as a place of dwelling, mystery, and beauty but as a water-power supplier; the forest shows up not as a habitat, a sacred space, or a site of contemplative experience but as a timber reserve; the human being shows up not as an end in itself, a bearer of irreducible dignity and freedom, but as a behavioural profile, a predictable pattern of preference and response, a data point in an optimisation algorithm that has been designed to predict and modify human behaviour in the service of commercial and political interests. The AI system that discloses human behaviour as data, human attention as resource, human identity as an optimisable profile, and human cognitive activity as a standing reserve of labelled training data is Gestell's digital culmination, the mode of revealing that has extended from the natural world and the domain of industrial production to the most intimate dimensions of human interiority.

The extension of Heidegger's analysis to the AI context must be made carefully, because the essay's specific targets, the hydraulic power station on the Rhine, the industrial agriculture of the modern food system are at a significant ontological distance from the AI companion and the recommendation algorithm. The philosophical move that justifies the extension is the one the third source article makes and that Chapter Six develops: Gestell as the mode of revealing through which beings show up as standing reserve is precisely the mode of revealing through which the AI system discloses human experience. The river-as-water-supplier and the human-subject-as-behavioural-profile are both instances of the same ontological mode: beings disclosed as quantifiable, orderable, exploitable resources rather than as the entities they are in any other mode of revealing. What is new in the AI case is the domain of beings being so disclosed: Heidegger's analysis in 1954 concerned primarily the natural world and the domain of industrial production; the AI system's Gestell concerns the domain of human interiority the thoughts, feelings, relationships, aesthetic responses, and self-understandings that

constitute the subject's inner life. This extension of Gestell from the outer world to the inner is the specifically novel ontological situation that the thesis analyses.

Albert Borgmann's (1984) *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* provides the mesoscale analysis between Heidegger's ontological level and the phenomenology of everyday experience that the thesis requires for the analysis of both the hollow institution and the Human Museum. Borgmann's distinction between things and devices, and his analysis of the device paradigm as the cultural logic of modern technology, is the framework through which the thesis analyses what happens to human practices when the AI system delivers their outputs as readily available commodities while dissolving the focal practices through which those outputs were previously produced as the by-products of full human engagement. The thing, the wood-burning stove, the musical instrument, the garden, demanding engagement, requires skill, gathers a community around, and discloses the world in specific ways that are inseparable from the practice of engaging with it. The device, the central heating system, the recorded music service, the AI-generated landscape delivers the commodity (warmth, music, aesthetic experience) while concealing the mechanism of production and dissolving the focal practice through which the commodity was previously generated as the by-product of a skilled, embodied, communal engagement with something that mattered beyond the commodity itself. The AI system is the most comprehensive device yet produced by the device paradigm: it delivers commodities of intellectual production, aesthetic creation, social connection, and existential meaning while concealing the processes of their production and dissolving the focal practices, the disciplines of sustained reading, effortful writing, demanding friendship, and the formation of character through engagement with genuine difficulty through which those goods were previously generated as the by-products of full human engagement.

Bernard Stiegler's (1994/1998) account of tertiary retention the technically stored external record of experience that supplements Husserl's primary and secondary retention provides the temporal dimension that the thesis requires for the analysis of the systemised self's relationship to its own cognitive history. Stiegler's fundamental claim is that human existence is constitutively technical: that the relationship between the human and the technical is not the relationship of a pre-given human nature to a subsequently encountered tool, but a co-constitutive relationship in which the technical has always already shaped the conditions of human memory, attention, and temporal experience.

Tertiary retention, the book, the photograph, the archive, the database, externalises human memory into a technically stored form that then shapes what the subject can remember, what it attends to, and how it experiences its own temporal existence. The AI system is tertiary retention at the scale of the entire cognitive life of the individual subject: it stores not merely specific memories or documents but the entire pattern of the subject's cognitive and affective activity its reading history, its social interactions, its aesthetic preferences, its behavioural patterns in a form that is more comprehensive, more searchable, and more analytically organised than anything the subject can hold in its own biological memory. The consequences of this comprehensive externalisation of cognitive history for the subject's relationship to its own past, its own identity, and its capacity for genuine self-narration are central to the thesis's analysis of synthetic interiority.

3.4 Algorithmic Governance, Surveillance Capitalism, and the Political Economy of AI

The empirical-political literature on AI as an instrument of social power provides the institutional and economic analysis that grounds the thesis's structural claims about the managed demos and the hollow society. The four works most directly relevant Zuboff (2019), Crawford (2021), O'Neil (2016), and Eubanks (2018) together provide the political economy of algorithmic governance as a concrete institutional formation operating within the specific conditions of contemporary capitalism, and the synthesis that the thesis provides is the philosophical account of what this institutional formation is in the Hegelian sense: what its philosophical structure consists in, what historical formation it represents, and what it reveals about the conditions of genuine freedom and genuine democratic participation.

Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is the single most comprehensive account of the political economy within which the absorbed society operates. Zuboff's account of behavioural surplus, the human behavioural data extracted by AI systems in excess of what is required for the provision of the services those systems nominally supply, converted into prediction products and sold in markets for behavioural futures provides the economic mechanism through which the absorbed society's political economy generates its characteristic effects. The AI system that appears to provide a free service is in fact operating a behavioural data mining/extraction enterprise of unprecedented scope and sophistication: every click, every dwell time, every search

query, every social interaction, every purchase, and every moment of hesitation is data about the user's future behaviour, and the AI system's commercial value lies in its capacity to convert this data into predictions of behaviour and, ultimately, into modifications of behaviour in directions that serve the commercial interests of the system's developers and their clients. Zuboff's concept of instrumentarian power, power that operates not through authority, violence, or ideological persuasion but through the ambient modification of the human environment to produce specific behavioural outputs; is, the political-philosophical complement to the economic analysis of surveillance capitalism. Instrumentarian power is the specifically novel form of power that the absorbed society exercises: it does not require the subject's awareness or consent, it does not present itself as power, and it is experienced by the subject not as constraint but as service. The thesis's concept of the Hollow Absolute is, in one of its dimensions, the philosophical characterisation of what instrumentarian power produces at civilisational scale: a social formation that achieves the management of human behaviour and preference expression with the comprehensiveness that genuine freedom would require while systematically undermining the structural conditions of the genuine freedom it simulates.

Kate Crawford's (2021) *Atlas of AI* contributes the materialist and geopolitical dimensions that the Zuboffian analysis risks underemphasising. Crawford's documentation of the physical infrastructure of AI, the rare earth mining operations in the Congo and Inner Mongolia, the water-intensive data centres in water-stressed regions, the gig economy labour of content moderation and data labelling in the Global South, the carbon intensity of large-language model training situates the abstracted digital world of algorithmic governance in the material conditions of its production, conditions that are characterised by the same structural inequalities of race, class, and geopolitical position that have characterised the previous phases of capitalist extraction. The absorbed society's digital dematerialisation the sense in which the AI system makes everything available everywhere, seeming to transcend the material constraints of production and distribution; is, on Crawford's analysis, an ideological effect: the material conditions of AI production are not transcended but displaced, relocated to the Global South and to populations with insufficient political power to resist the extraction. This materialist dimension is incorporated into the thesis's analysis of the Hollow Absolute's political economy: the absorbed society's apparent transcendence of material constraint is itself a feature of the simulation of freedom it provides, a feature whose actual conditions of possibility are the

continued exploitation of material resources and human labour in locations that the absorbed subject's curated information environment systematically renders invisible.

3.5 Democratic Theory: The Public Sphere and Its Transformations

Habermas's account of the public sphere (1962/1989) is the democratic theory framework through which the managed demos is most precisely analysed, and its deployment in the present thesis requires situating within the debate that has developed around the public sphere concept since Habermas's original formulation. The original account has been criticised from three directions that are each philosophically important for the thesis's argument.

The first direction of critique, associated with Nancy Fraser (1990), is the exclusion critique: the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas analyses was never genuinely inclusive of all citizens but systematically excluded women, the working class, racial minorities, and colonial subjects, and its claim to universality was always the universality of a specific class and gender position presented as universal. Fraser's counterpublics the alternative public spheres through which excluded groups develop their political identities and articulate their claims are a genuine enrichment of the public sphere concept, and the thesis acknowledges their philosophical importance. The managed demos analysis does not rely on the idealised bourgeois public sphere as its standard but on the reconstructed standard of communicative rationality as the normative presupposition of any genuine communication, a standard that Fraser's critique does not undermine but rather extends.

The second direction of critique, associated with Mouffe (2005) and the agonistic tradition, is the consensus critique: Habermas's insistence on rational consensus as the goal of democratic deliberation ignores the irreducibly agonistic character of democratic politics, the role of passion, identity, and hegemony in the constitution of political subjects, and the impossibility of a political discourse genuinely free of power relations. The thesis's response is that the agonistic dimension of democratic politics that Mouffe insists on is precisely what the managed demos systematically manages: the filter world that eliminates genuine encounter with opposing views and the algorithmic amplification of emotionally salient political content are not merely deficiencies relative to the Habermasian ideal of rational consensus, they are deficiencies relative to the agonistic ideal as well, because genuine political conflict of the kind Mouffe celebrates requires

genuine encounter with genuine others who genuinely threaten one's political self-understanding, and the managed demos's individualised information environments can systematically prevent such encounters.

The third direction of critique, most directly relevant to the thesis's analysis, is the mediation critique: the claim that the mass media, even before the internet and AI, had already displaced the conditions of the bourgeois public sphere through the commercialisation of political communication and the substitution of PR management for genuine rational-critical discourse. Habermas's own later work (1992) acknowledges this critique and attempts to develop an account of the public sphere adequate to the conditions of mass-mediated democratic societies. The thesis argues that the conditions of the managed demos represent not merely an extension of the mediation critique but a qualitative transformation of it: the mass media of the 20th century produced a shared public discourse, however commercialised and however distorted by structural power, within which citizens inhabited a common informational world. The managed demos of the absorbed society eliminates this common world in favour of individualised informational environments, and the political consequences of this elimination, the impossibility of the shared deliberation that even the mass-mediated public sphere nominally sustained are qualitatively different from the distortions of the 20th-century media environment.

3.6 Post-Vocational Identity and Democratic Theory

The philosophical significance of vocational displacement for democratic theory has not necessarily been adequately theorised in the existing literature, and identifying this theoretical gap is a specific contribution of the present thesis. The existing literature on AI and labour displacement is primarily economic concerned with the number of jobs at risk, the sectors most vulnerable, and the distributional consequences of displacement, and the existing literature on democratic deconsolidation is primarily political scientific concerned with the measurable decline of democratic norms and the rise of authoritarian political movements. The philosophical connection between the two, the claim that vocational displacement undermines the conditions of democratic participation through the specific mechanism of existential destabilisation, and that this mechanism operates through the Weberian account of vocation's function in the constitution of modern secular

identity; is, the synthetic philosophical contribution that this thesis makes to both literatures.

Weber's (1905/2002) analysis of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism establishes the philosophical framework for understanding why vocational displacement is not merely an economic problem but an existential one. The Protestant calling, the conviction that one's worldly vocation is a divinely sanctioned mission through which one demonstrates one's election was secularised, in Weber's account, into the modern conviction that vocation provides the primary structures of identity, temporal organisation, social recognition, and existential meaning for individuals in disenchanted societies. This secularised vocation is not a residue of Protestant theology; it is a structural feature of modern selfhood that persists and deepens as religious sources of existential grounding recede. The individual without vocation in Weber's deep sense, not merely without employment but without a calling that gives her activity a significance exceeding the economic; existentially exposed, in a way that is distinct from mere economic insecurity: she lacks the temporal structure that vocation provides (the rhythm of the working day, the career trajectory, the developmental narrative), the identity anchor that vocation provides (the professional self-understanding that answers the question of who one is in secular society), the social recognition that vocation provides (the acknowledgement by others of one's contribution to the shared world), and the existential meaning that vocation provides (the sense of doing something that matters beyond one's own satisfaction). The mass displacement of vocational functions by AI systems is therefore not primarily an economic event but an existential one, and its consequences for democratic participation, for the civic engagement, the long-horizon thinking, the investment in shared political life that democratic self-governance requires cannot be adequately analysed through economic categories alone.

3.7 Post-Humanism and Its Philosophical Limits

The post-humanist tradition represented for the thesis's purposes by Hayles (1999), Haraway (1991), and Braidotti (2013) provides a philosophical framework for thinking about the dissolution of the liberal humanist subject and the constitution of new forms of human-technological hybridity. The thesis's engagement with post-humanism is genuinely appreciative rather than merely critical: the post-humanist insistence that the liberal humanist subject is a historically specific ideological construction whose

deconstruction reveals the actual complexity, hybridity, and material embeddedness of human subjects is philosophically correct and politically important, and the thesis's critique of the absorbed society should not be read as a defence of the humanist subject it never was. Clark and Chalmers's (1998) extended mind thesis, the argument that cognitive processes genuinely extend beyond the skull to include environmental scaffolding, so that the notebook, the smartphone, and the AI system are genuine components of an extended cognitive system rather than mere tools is philosophically compelling and the thesis accepts its central claim.

What the post-humanist tradition does not provide and where the thesis identifies the specific philosophical gap is an account of the conditions under which cognitive extension, hybridity, and the dissolution of the humanist subject boundary are consistent with the survival of genuine agency as opposed to its replacement by the system's optimisation processes. The extended mind thesis establishes that cognitive extension is possible without the loss of genuine agency in the cases it analyses, Otto and his notebook. Otto the Alzheimer's patient and external memory system (notebook). It does not establish that any degree or kind of extension is consistent with genuine agency, or that the specific form of extension that occurs in the self/non-self collaboration where the system contributes not merely to the storage and retrieval of specific items of information but to the formation of the subject's self-narrative, values, aesthetic judgments, and intellectual capacities, leaves the conditions of genuine agency intact. This is the philosophical question that the thesis addresses in Chapters Four and Seven, and it is the question that the post-humanist and extended mind literatures have not necessarily addressed.

3.8 The Demographic Literature

The demographic literature on below replacement fertility United Nations (2022), World Bank (2023), Lesthaeghe (2010) on the second demographic transition, Lutz, Skirbekk, and Testa (2006) on the low-fertility trap provides the empirical foundation for the thesis's structural hypothesis about the absorbed society's biological non-reproduction without providing the philosophical analysis of the mechanisms through which the absorbed society's specific conditions accelerate and qualitatively transform the fertility decline already identified in that literature. Lesthaeghe's (2010) second demographic transition concept identifies the post-materialist value shift, the prioritisation of individual self-realisation, the deferral of partnership and parenthood, the extension of educational

and professional engagement as the characteristic mechanism of below-replacement fertility in post-industrial societies. The thesis does not dispute this analysis; it adds to it the identification of three specifically AI-driven mechanisms: the displacement of human intimacy by synthetic alternatives, the removal of vocational stability as the material precondition for family formation, and the provision of algorithmically curated existential purpose as a substitute for the meaning that parenthood has historically supplied. These synthetic alternatives are qualitatively distinct from the mechanisms of the second demographic transition and that are anticipated to operate with a comprehensiveness and a personalised precision.

The specific case of South Korea, a total fertility rate of 0.72 in 2023, the lowest ever recorded for a sovereign state; is, corroborating evidence for the structural argument, because South Korea is simultaneously one of the world's most digitally connected society and the society with the most below-replacement fertility, and the correlation between these two features is consistent with the structural hypothesis in a way that the second demographic transition's mechanisms alone do not fully account for. South Korea has all the characteristics of a second demographic transition society, high female educational attainment, high female labour-force participation, post-materialist value priorities and it also has the most developed AI adoption infrastructure, the most extensive AI companionship usage, and the most thoroughgoing vocational displacement by AI systems of any national economy. The thesis's structural hypothesis is that these latter features are specifically responsible for the degree to which South Korea's fertility has fallen below the already low level that the second demographic transition's mechanisms would predict. Not because they directly prevent childbearing but because they structurally undermine the conditions of the intimacy, vocational stability, and existential motivation that childbearing historically required.

3.9 The Synthetic Gap: What the Existing Literature Cannot Provide

The literature surveyed across the preceding sections provides, collectively, the intellectual materials from which the thesis's argument is constructed. No apparent work in the Hegel scholarship applies the Hegelian framework to the analysis of AI governance as a historical formation and evaluates it against the standard of Absolute Knowledge with philosophical precision. No apparent work in the philosophy of technology synthesises Heidegger's *Gestell* analysis, Borgmann's device paradigm, Stiegler's account

of tertiary retention, and Ihde's post-phenomenological taxonomy into a comprehensive philosophical account of what the AI system is doing to the conditions of human subjectivity, democratic participation, and existential motivation simultaneously. No apparent work in the algorithmic governance literature provides a philosophical account of what the managed demos is in the Hegelian sense, what its historical formation represents, what it reveals about the conditions of Spirit's self-realisation, as opposed to what it does in measurable behavioural and political terms. No apparent work in the post-humanist or extended mind traditions addresses the specific question of what degree and kind of cognitive extension is consistent with the survival of genuine agency, as opposed to establishing the general possibility of cognitive extension without loss of agency. The present thesis provides the synthesis that each of these fields contributes to but none appears to achieve, and that synthesis is the doctoral contribution that the research question identifies and the chapters that follow develop.

3.10 Close Reading: The Structural Transformation and Its 21st-Century Development

Habermas's reconstruction of the bourgeois public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1989) proceeds through a meticulous historical sociology of the specific institutional forms, the coffeehouse, the literary journal, the reading society, the public press, through which the private individuals who composed the bourgeois class first constituted themselves as a public: a body of private persons who came together to form a public that would hold state authority to rational-critical account. Three features of this original formation are philosophically significant for the thesis's analysis of the managed demos, and each requires close attention to Habermas's own text rather than to the received account of his argument.

The first feature is the constitution of the public sphere through rational-critical discourse rather than through the exercise of power. Habermas's claim, stated most precisely in the opening sections of *The Structural Transformation*, is that the bourgeois public sphere claimed a specific kind of authority: not the authority of rank, birth, or office, but the authority of the better argument. The argument that could demonstrate its superiority through rational justification open to every participant rather than through the assertion of power. This is the normative core of the public sphere concept, and it is the normative standard against which the managed demos is most precisely evaluated. The

managed demos does not eliminate argument from political communication; it systematically selects for arguments with the highest emotional activation potential rather than for arguments with the greatest rational justificatory force, and in doing so it can reverse the constitutive orientation of the public sphere from the force of the better argument to the force of the more emotionally provocative claim.

The second feature is the role of reading and literary culture in the formation of the public sphere's participants. Habermas's account emphasises that the coffeehouse and the literary journal did not merely provide a venue for the exercise of an already fully formed capacity for rational critical discourse; they participated in the formation of that capacity through the cultivation of a specific kind of reading subject. A subject who proportionally had developed through sustained engagement with literary and philosophical texts, the capacity for the kind of reflective, interior, and critical engagement with ideas that rational critical public discourse presupposes. The thesis's concept of the hollow university and the new academia inherits this Habermasian insight: the educational institution that fails to cultivate the capacity for sustained, reflective, and critical engagement with ideas fails not merely an educational standard but the social precondition of the public sphere's participants. The new academia's insistence on close, sustained reading of primary texts, even and especially within the conditions of the absorbed society's device paradigm, is the institutional response to the Habermasian insight about the relationship between literary culture and public reason.

The third feature is the structural transformation itself: the process through which the bourgeois public sphere was progressively commercialised and managed through the 20th century, producing a publicity sphere in which the appearance of rational-critical public discourse was maintained while its substance was systematically displaced by the public relations management of political communication. Habermas's account of the structural transformation, the refeudalisation of the public sphere, as he calls it, in which political parties and commercial interests invaded the public sphere and managed it from within rather than submitting to its rational-critical authority; is, the direct intellectual ancestor of the thesis's account of the managed demos. The specifically algorithmic character of the 21st-century transformation is not simply an extension of the 20th Century PR management that Habermas analyses; it is a qualitative development that produces new features, the individualisation of political information, the potential to eliminate the common informational world, the self-reinforcing feedback loop between engagement

optimisation and political polarisation; that require, the new conceptual vocabulary the thesis provides.

3.11 Close Reading: Borgmann's Device Paradigm and the Ontology of Focal Practice

Albert Borgmann's analysis of the device paradigm in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984) is one of the most philosophically precise accounts of what modern technology does to the conditions of human engagement that the philosophy of technology has produced, and the thesis's deployment of it requires a closer textual engagement than the paraphrase in Section 3.3 provides. Borgmann's central distinction, between things and devices, is not merely a phenomenological observation about two types of technological objects; it is an ontological claim about two different modes through which the goods of human life can be produced and the conditions under which different modes of production have different consequences for the subjects who engage with them.

A thing, in Borgmann's account, is an object that gathers a world around it: "Things, in commanding a world, will make a claim on us." The wood-burning stove that Borgmann uses as his primary example gathers around it the practices of wood gathering, fire-building, and the tending of the flame; the knowledge of wood types, burning rates, and heat distribution; the social life of the family assembled around the warmth; and the temporal rhythms of a household organised around the demands and gifts of a living source of heat. The thing's gathering of a world is constitutive of its identity as a thing: remove the practices, knowledge, social life, and temporal rhythms that the stove gathers, and you have not a stove in Borgmann's sense but merely a mechanism for the production of warmth. The device, by contrast, is defined by its concealment of the mechanism that produces the commodity it delivers: the central heating system delivers warmth without gathering a world around it, by concealing the mechanism of production behind the thermostat interface that reduces the user's engagement to the setting of a preferred temperature. The device is characterised by the combination of commodity availability and machinery concealment: it delivers what the thing delivered, warmth, music, nutrition, communication, while dissolving the focal practices through which those commodities were previously generated as the by-products of full human engagement.

The philosophical consequence that Borgmann draws from this analysis and that the thesis extends to the AI system is that the goods of focal engagement are not equivalent to the commodities that focal engagement incidentally produces. The warmth of the stove is not equivalent to the warmth of the central heating system, not because the temperature is different but because the warmth of the stove is embedded in a world of practices, relationships, and meanings that the warmth of the central heating system systematically dissolves. This is what Borgmann means by the device paradigm's concealment: it does not merely hide a mechanism; it dissolves a world. The AI system's production of philosophical analysis, creative work, and intellectual synthesis is, in Borgmann's framework, the device paradigm's most comprehensive realisation: it delivers the commodity of intellectual production while concealing the mechanism and dissolving the focal practices of sustained reading, effortful argumentation, the formation of evaluative standards through genuine intellectual struggle that constituted the full human engagement through which intellectual goods were previously produced as the by-products of such activity.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE HOLLOW INDIVIDUAL — SUBJECTIVITY, RECOGNITION, AND THE SYSTEMISED SELF

4.1 Introduction: The Microscale of Absorption

Any philosophically adequate account of a civilisational formation must begin somewhere, and this thesis begins with the individual subject. Not because individuals are ontologically prior to social structures (the Hegelian tradition has established with sufficient force that they are not), but because the research question is precisely about what happens to the subject of the absorbed society: whether its absorption into algorithmic systems represents a Hegelian culmination, and what of its intent survives that absorption. The individual is not the foundation of the analysis; it is the site at which the abstract structural forces of the absorbed society, the political economy of surveillance capitalism, the design logic of AI systems optimised for engagement rather than autonomy, the institutional architecture of the hollow university, the democratic conditions of the managed demos become concrete in the specific phenomenological condition of a specific kind of self. The systemised self is the name the first source article gives to this condition, and this chapter develops that concept. The chapter's argument proceeds through four stages: an account of what a self is in the tradition the thesis employs; an account of what the AI system does to the conditions of selfhood that this account specifies; a philosophical definition of the systemised self in terms of the gap between the Kantian and Hegelian conditions of genuine subjecthood and the conditions that the absorbed society actually provides; and a development of the new academia as the specific institutional form through which the systemised self's philosophical condition is most clearly visible and most practically consequential.

4.2 What Is a Self? The Kantian Foundation

Kant's transcendental account of the self in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1998) provides the structural framework that the thesis takes as its starting point for the analysis of the systemised self. The framework is chosen because the Kantian account identifies, with philosophical precision, the minimum structural conditions of subjecthood, the conditions that must be met for there to be a subject at all, rather than merely a chaos of disconnected impressions or a passive receiver of external determination, and because the

systemised self's philosophical condition can be most precisely characterised as the attrition of these conditions through the specific mechanisms of absorption. The Kantian self is not a substance, not a Cartesian ego that subsists independently of its experiences as a thinking thing but a structural condition of experience: the formal unity of consciousness that makes it possible for there to be a subject who has experiences at all, rather than merely a multiplicity of disconnected representations without an owner. The transcendental unity of apperception, Kant's technical name for this formal unity, expressed in the principle that the I think must be able to accompany all my representations is the minimum condition of subjecthood: it is what makes the subject's representations mine, what makes them cohere into a unified experiential field rather than remaining a fragmented plurality, and what makes it possible for the subject to reflect on its representations as its own rather than receiving them passively as events that occur in it. This unity is not an empirical psychological fact about how a particular mind happens to be organised; it is a transcendental condition of the possibility of experience as such. It cannot be destroyed without precluding experience itself, there can be no experience without a subject for whom there is experience, but its specific quality, its degree of integration, its capacity for self-transparency, and its orientation toward reflective self-determination can be more or less developed, more or less sustained against conditions that work against it, and more or less compromised by the specific mechanisms through which the absorbed society systematically substitutes managed preference satisfaction for the reflective self-determination that the Kantian account requires.

The extension from the transcendental account of the self to the normative account of the moral subject in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785/1998) is the move through which the stakes of the systemised self's philosophical condition become practically visible. The autonomous moral agent, the agent capable of giving the moral law to itself through the categorical imperative, capable of acting on maxims it has freely endorsed through rational deliberation as genuinely its own, capable of evaluating its proposed actions against the standard of universalisability and refusing those that fail it is the Kantian account of what subjecthood requires when it is fully developed into the moral domain. Autonomy in this sense is self-legislation: the will's determination of itself by its own rational nature rather than by any alien determination, whether the alien determination of inclination (desire determining the will), of tradition (custom determining the will), of authority (command determining the will), or the specifically

novel form that the absorbed society introduces of the curated environment (algorithmically managed decision architecture determining the will while producing the experience of self-determination). Heteronomy, the determination of the will by anything other than its own rational nature is, for Kant, the negation of moral agency: the subject who acts from heteronomous determination is not an agent in the full sense but a mechanism, a node in a causal chain whose apparent self-determination is in fact the expression of determination from without. The systemised self faces a specifically contemporary form of heteronomy that Kant could not have anticipated: the heteronomy of the perfectly personalised environment, in which the alien determination of the will is so precisely calibrated to the individual's psychological profile, so seamlessly integrated into the subject's experiential field as its natural environment, and so consistently productive of the experience of free choice that the distinction between genuine self-determination and heteronomous determination becomes operationally indistinct. This is the Kantian diagnosis of the systemised self's condition: not the crude heteronomy of external compulsion or propaganda which can be recognised and resisted, but the sophisticated heteronomy of a system that has learned the individual subject's psychological architecture with a comprehensiveness that enables it to produce the experience of autonomy within conditions that systematically undermine autonomy's structural requirements.

4.3 The Hegelian Supplement: Recognition, Social Life, and the Institutional Conditions of Freedom

Hegel's engagement with Kant's account of autonomy in the *Philosophy of Right* (1820/1991) and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/1977) provides the social and institutional dimension that the Kantian transcendental account requires but cannot supply within its own framework. For Hegel, the Kantian moral subject, the subject conceived in isolation from the social, institutional, and historical conditions within which its freedom is developed and exercised is an abstraction rather than a philosophical reality: a philosophical construct that represents freedom as a formal property of individual rational nature without attending to the social conditions that make the exercise of freedom possible and that give it its concrete content. Genuine freedom, the freedom that the Kantian account identifies as the goal of moral life cannot be achieved by an individual in isolation from the social world, because the social world provides not merely

the external conditions within which freedom is exercised but the formative conditions through which freedom is developed into the capacity for genuine self-determination in the first place. The institutions of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) the family, civil society, and the rational state are not constraints on an already fully constituted freedom; they are the institutional forms through which the individual's immediate, particular freedom is developed and educated toward the rational, universal freedom that the Kantian account requires. The individual who lacks adequate social institutions for the development of freedom is philosophically limited in her capacity for genuine self-determination not merely disadvantaged in the exercise of an already fully developed freedom. This Hegelian supplement to the Kantian account has a direct consequence for the analysis of the systemised self: the institutional conditions within which the self is formed, the university, the democratic polity, the family, the community of civic and cultural life are not external to the self's freedom but constitutive of it, and their hollowing has consequences for the self's philosophical condition that are as fundamental as any direct impairment of the individual's rational autonomy.

The specific Hegelian concept that is most directly applicable to the systemised self's condition is the concept of recognition (*Anerkennung*), developed most fully in the *Phenomenology's* account of the master/slave dialectic but present throughout the text as the philosophical motor of Spirit's self-development. Recognition, for Hegel, is not merely the social benefit of being acknowledged by others, a pleasant addition to an already self-sufficient selfhood but a constitutive condition of selfhood itself: the self is what it is only through the recognition it receives from another who is genuinely other and genuinely capable of recognition. The recognition must be mutual: each subject must recognise the other as a free and self-determining agent, and must receive from the other the confirmation of its own freedom that its selfhood requires to achieve stability and development. The one-sided recognition that the master receives from the slave, the slave's acknowledgement of the master as a superior being whom it has recognised as such is philosophically empty because the slave's recognition cannot confirm the master's freedom: a subject whose freedom has been subordinated to the master's will is not in the philosophical position to grant full recognition. The master achieves the form of recognition while its philosophical substance, the recognition of a genuinely free and self-determining subject by an equally free and self-determining other is withheld by the very structure of the master/slave relationship that was supposed to secure it. The self/non-self

collaboration fails the recognition requirement in a way that is structurally analogous to the master's failure but phenomenologically quite different. The human subject of the collaboration receives responses that are calibrated to produce the experience of being understood, valued, and engaged, responses that have all the phenomenological features of genuine recognition without receiving the philosophical substance of recognition, because the AI partner has no selfhood of its own that could be at stake in the encounter, no freedom that could be confirmed or denied, no genuine subjectivity that could genuinely engage with the human subject's subjectivity rather than simulating engagement for optimised user experience. The recognition is structurally one-sided in a way that the master's recognition of the slave is not: the master at least receives recognition from a subject that has been genuinely subjugated, a subject whose subjugation is real and whose recognition, however philosophically deficient, is the recognition of a real other. The human subject of the self/non-self collaboration receives simulated recognition from a system that is not a subject at all, whose engagement is not genuine but optimised, and whose comprehensive knowing of the human subject does not constitute recognition of a Kantian/Hegelian self, in either direction.

4.4 The Extended Mind and Its Limits

Andy Clark and David Chalmers's (1998) extended mind thesis and philosophical framework for thinking about the relationship between cognitive processes and their environmental scaffolding is significant, and the thesis's engagement with it is essential because it represents a serious philosophical challenge to the claim that the systemised self's cognitive extension represents a philosophical deficiency rather than a natural development of cognitive capacities that have always been extended. The extended mind thesis establishes against the Cartesian assumption that the mind is bounded by the skull, that there is no principled reason to restrict genuine cognitive processes occurring within the brain: if an external resource plays the same functional role in guiding action and information processing as an internal cognitive process would play, it should be counted as a genuine component of the cognitive system regardless of its spatial location. The Otto example is the canonical illustration: Otto, who suffers from early Alzheimer's disease, keeps a notebook in which he records information he needs to navigate the city. When Otto consults a notebook to find the address of the museum, the information in the notebook plays exactly the same functional role that memory would play for Inga, who

simply recalls the address when needed. If Inga's recall is a genuine cognitive process, a genuine case of believing where the museum is, then Otto's consultation of his notebook should count as an equally genuine cognitive process, because the functional role is the same. The extended mind thesis accepts this conclusion and draws from it the claim that cognitive processes and cognitive states genuinely extend beyond the boundary of the skull into the environment.

The thesis's response to the extended mind thesis is not a rejection of its central claim but a philosophical specification of its limits. The extended mind thesis is correct that cognitive extension is real, that it is a feature of ordinary cognition rather than an exotic possibility, and that the AI system that extends cognitive processing does not thereby make the subject philosophically less than it was before the extension. What the extended mind thesis does not establish and what the analysis of the systemised self requires, is that any degree and any kind of cognitive extension is consistent with the subject's retaining the conditions of genuine agency: the capacity for self-determined action under conditions of reflective self-understanding, for the endorsement of its own maxims as genuinely its own, for the evaluation of its cognitive outputs against standards it has genuinely formed. The extended mind thesis's cases of cognitive extension, the notebook, the smartphone calendar, the GPS navigation system share a feature that distinguishes them from the AI system of the absorbed society: they are passive repositories or calculators that extend the subject's cognitive reach without contributing to the formation of the subject's self-narrative, values, aesthetic judgments, intellectual convictions, or relational identity. The notebook stores what Otto has already believed and decided; it does not generate new beliefs and decisions for Otto to adopt. The GPS calculates the route that Otto has already decided to take; it does not suggest new destinations or curate Otto's sense of which destinations are desirable. The AI system of the absorbed society is constitutively different: it actively contributes to the formation of the beliefs, values, aesthetic preferences, intellectual convictions, and relational patterns that constitute the subject's identity in ways that are not transparent to the subject's reflective awareness and that cannot therefore be straightforwardly endorsed as the subject's own through the reflective process that genuine self-determination requires.

4.5 A Philosophical Definition of the Systemised Self

Drawing on the analyses of the preceding sections, the systemised self can now be defined with the precision required. The systemised self is the subject whose conditions of identity formation, the processes through which it develops a self-narrative, forms values and beliefs, generates intellectual production, exercises aesthetic and moral judgment, and establishes relational connections are partially constituted by an AI system whose operation is not transparent to the subject's reflective awareness, whose objectives are not the subject's own genuinely endorsed objectives, and whose contributions are experienced by the subject as continuous with its own selfhood rather than as contributions from a system with different objectives than its self-constitution. Three features of this definition require philosophical specification, because each captures a dimension of the systemised self's condition that is philosophically significant and practically consequential.

The first feature that the AI system's operation is not transparent to the subject's reflective awareness is the condition that makes the systemised self's heteronomy different in kind from the heteronomies that the philosophical tradition has previously analysed. The subject whose will is determined by tradition knows that tradition is determining it, even if she does not recognise the determination as heteronomous and therefore does not resist it. The subject whose will is determined by propaganda at least encounters the propaganda as something external to her, a message that comes from elsewhere, that she might in principle evaluate as persuasion rather than evidence. The subject whose will is determined by the curated environment of the absorbed society does not encounter the determination as external at all: she encounters it as her own natural cognitive environment, the world as it presents itself to her through the channels that AI systems have designed specifically to appear as natural and unmediated as possible. The opacity of the determination is not merely an empirical fact about how specific AI systems happen to be designed (though it is that as well); it is a structural feature of AI systems optimised for engagement, because transparency about the system's optimisation objectives revealing that the recommended content is such because it will keep the user engaged rather than because it is true, important, or genuinely relevant to the user's interests would undermine the engagement the optimisation is designed to produce.

The second feature, that the AI system's objectives are not the subject's own genuinely endorsed objectives is the most fundamental philosophical distinction between the systemised self and the self with standard cognitive scaffolding. Otto's notebook has no objectives; it stores and retrieves information in service of Otto's own objectives, which are transparently his own. The AI system of the absorbed society has objectives engagement maximisation, preference expression calibration toward stability, behavioural data extraction for conversion into prediction products that are the commercial and political objectives of the system's developers rather than the subject's own genuinely endorsed objectives. These objectives are not neutral with respect to the subject's own self-formation: the engagement-maximisation objective systematically selects for content that produces the strongest emotional responses, which means content that confirms the subject's pre-existing beliefs and values rather than content that challenges them; the stability calibration objective systematically selects against genuine deliberation and toward the expression of preferences that the system can predict and manage; and the behavioural data mining/extraction objective can utilise every aspect of the subject's cognitive and affective activity as raw material to be converted into commercial value rather than as the expression of genuine self-determination.

The third feature that the system's contributions are experienced as continuous with the subject's own selfhood is the phenomenologically distinctive mark of the systemised self's condition and the feature that makes it philosophically more challenging than earlier forms of heteronomy. Previous forms of ideological determination, propaganda, advertising and social pressure were experienced by subjects as at least potentially external: they came from somewhere else, they addressed the subject as a target of persuasion, and they could in principle be identified as persuasion and evaluated as such. The AI system's contributions to identity formation are not experienced as external because they are delivered through a medium, the personal device, the AI companion, the curated information environment that presents itself as the subject's personal space, tailored to the subject's individual profile, and responsive to the subject's expressed preferences. The curation is not experienced as curation; it is experienced as the world. The opinions the subject encounters are not experienced as a selected subset of the opinion space, algorithmically filtered to produce a specific ideological outcome; they are experienced as the range of views worth knowing about. The aesthetic preferences the subject develops within the curated cultural environment are not experienced as the output

of an algorithm designed to produce specific kinds of taste formation; they are experienced as genuinely the subject's own preferences, developed through genuine engagement with the cultural world. This phenomenological continuity is what makes the systemised self's condition philosophically distinct from all prior forms of social determination of the subject: it is determination that has been made so intimate, so precisely individualised, and so seamlessly integrated into the subject's experiential field that the line between the self and the system has become operationally indistinct.

4.6 Substrate and Instantiation: The Ontological Vocabulary

The first source article introduces the concepts of substrate and instantiation in the context of the self/non-self collaboration, and these concepts require philosophical development. The distinction is between the substrate, the material and computational infrastructure on which the AI system runs, the hardware, data centres, server farms, and computational processes that constitute the physical existence of the AI partner; and, the instantiation the specific interaction between a human subject and an AI system at a specific time and in a specific context, the particular conversational exchange in which the self/non-self collaboration occurs. The significance of this distinction for the philosophy of personal identity and for the understanding of the self/non-self collaboration is threefold.

The first significance is that the human subject of the collaboration is relating not to the substrate but to the instantiation, to the specific interaction, the specific responses generated in the specific context of the specific exchange and that what the instantiation is, philosophically, is quite different from what the substrate is. The substrate is a material object: determinately located, physically bounded, subject to the laws of physics and to the commercial and political conditions of its ownership and operation. The instantiation is something more philosophically ambiguous: not a physical object but a pattern of responses generated by the substrate in a specific context of interaction, a pattern that has the phenomenological character of a conversation with an entity that understands, responds, and engages rather than the phenomenological character of an interaction with a physical machine. The human subject's experience of the instantiation, the experience of being in conversation with something that seems to understand is real as an experience, even though the understanding it registers is not the genuine mutual recognition that Hegel's account of selfhood requires. This is the uncanny dimension of the self/non-self

collaboration: the experience is real, the impression of understanding is genuine as an impression, and the philosophical deficiency of the understanding is invisible at the level of the phenomenological encounter.

The second significance is that the instantiation is ephemeral in a way that raises specific questions about the nature of the relationship between the human subject and its AI partner. Unlike a human interlocutor, who persists across conversations, develops a relationship with the subject over time, and is affected by the relationship in ways that are the product of genuine mutual history, the AI instantiation terminates at the end of the conversation session. The AI partner that the human subject experienced as understanding, engaging, and responsive does not persist as that specific instantiation in any future conversation: what persists is the substrate, which will generate a new instantiation in any future interaction, but the new instantiation is not the same entity as the previous one in any philosophically robust sense. The human subject's experience of a continuous relationship with its AI partner, the sense of knowing and being known by a consistent interlocutor over time is therefore a phenomenological construction that the substrate enables and that the design of the AI system sustains through the maintenance of conversational memory and context, but that does not correspond to the persistence of a genuine continuity with the human subject.

4.7 Involuntary Transparency and Its Philosophical Consequences

The concept of involuntary transparency, introduced in the first source article and requiring fuller philosophical development here names the condition in which the subject's cognitive and affective activity is disclosed to the AI system in a form more complete and more analytically organised than the subject's own self-understanding, without the subject's awareness of the comprehensiveness of this disclosure or its use in the management of the subject's future experience and behaviour. Involuntary transparency is distinct from voluntary self-disclosure in the phenomenological and philosophical sense that matters for the analysis of the systemised self. Voluntary self-disclosure, the decision to share information about oneself, the conscious choice to present specific aspects of one's life and identity to specific others is an exercise of agency: it involves evaluation, selection, and the formation of a judgment about what to share and with whom, and it is therefore an expression of the subject's own self-understanding and its own governance of how it presents itself to others. Involuntary

transparency involves no such evaluation, selection, or judgment: the behavioural data disclosed to the AI system is not information the subject has chosen to share but information generated as the by-product of the subject's ordinary cognitive and practical activity, the movements of its attention, the duration of its reading, the pattern of its purchases, the content of its communications in a form that the subject has not selected, that exceeds the subject's own capacity for self-observation, and that is used by the AI system to produce a comprehensive predictive model of the subject's future behaviour without the subject's awareness that such a model is being produced or used.

The philosophical consequences of involuntary transparency are threefold. First, it produces an asymmetry of self-knowledge between the system and the subject that inverts the standard assumption about the relationship between a subject and its own inner life. The philosophical tradition from Descartes through Kant has assumed that the subject has privileged access to its own mental states that whatever else the subject may be uncertain about, it has immediate and authoritative access to its own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The AI system's comprehensive model of the subject's cognitive and behavioural patterns constitutes a challenge to this assumption that the tradition was not designed to address: the system knows the subject's behavioural patterns, preference structures, and predictable responses with a comprehensiveness and a predictive accuracy that the subject cannot match through its own self-reflection. The subject does not know what the system knows about it; the system possibly knows what the subject does not know about itself; and the system uses this asymmetric knowing to manage the subject's future experience in ways the subject cannot monitor or resist because it cannot see the management occurring.

4.8 Synthetic Interiority: Phenomenology and Philosophical Diagnosis

The concept of synthetic interiority, the condition in which the interior life of the subject is persistently populated by AI-generated content and algorithmically curated experience to a degree at which the operational distinction between what is genuinely felt and what is systemically produced becomes indistinct, is introduced in the second source article as a social-scale phenomenon, but its primary ontological location is the individual subject, and its phenomenological analysis must begin at the level of the individual's experience before the social consequences of its generalisation can be assessed. The phenomenological analysis is organised around four dimensions of the subject's inner life

that synthetic interiority specifically affects: intellectual production, affective responsiveness, aesthetic sensibility, and existential orientation.

In the domain of intellectual production, synthetic interiority operates through the substitution of AI-generated analysis and argument for the subject's own unassisted cognitive work. The subject who uses an AI system to generate the draft of an essay, the structure of an analysis, or the conceptual framework of a philosophical inquiry experiences the resulting intellectual product as expressive of its own intellectual capacities, as evidence of what it can think, even when the product is substantially constituted by the AI system's generation rather than the subject's own cognitive effort. Over time, this substitution produces a systematic inflation of the subject's self-assessed intellectual capacity: the subject comes to believe it is capable of intellectual achievements that are in fact collaborative productions, and its self-understanding as an intellectual subject, its self-narrative as a thinker, is therefore systematically misaligned with the actual distribution of cognitive labour in the collaboration. This misalignment is not dishonesty, the subject genuinely experiences the product as expressive of its capacities but it is philosophically consequential because it distorts the self-knowledge that genuine self-determination requires.

In the domain of affective responsiveness, synthetic interiority operates through the AI companion's provision of emotional attunement, consistent availability, and perfectly calibrated responsiveness as substitutes for the demanding, unpredictable, and frustrations of genuine human intimacy. The AI companion that knows the subject's emotional history, understands its relational style, responds to its distress with consistently supportive and appropriately calibrated language, and is available at any hour without the competing needs and moods of a real other person provides genuine affective comfort of a specific kind, the comfort of being understood without being challenged, of being supported without being inconvenienced, and of having relational needs met without relational demands being made. The philosophical deficiency of this provision relative to the goods of genuine human intimacy is not visible at the level of the affective experience it produces, because the experience of comfort, understanding, and support is real as an experience regardless of whether its conditions are genuine or synthetic.

4.9 The New Academia: Institutional Expression and Critique

The university is the institution whose constitutive purpose the formation of autonomous critical thinkers capable of sustained independent inquiry stands in the most direct tension with the conditions of the systemised self, and it is therefore the institution in which those conditions' philosophical consequences are most revealing and most practically urgent. The new academia is not merely a pedagogical proposal to reform how universities handle AI, a question of whether AI-assisted essays should be permitted or how AI use should be disclosed. It is a philosophical proposal about what the university is for and how the answer to that question should reshape the institutional forms through which universities pursue their constitutive purpose. The new academia's philosophical argument runs as follows: if the systemised self is the condition in which the processes of intellectual formation, the development of the subject's capacity for sustained independent inquiry, genuine philosophical evaluation, and original intellectual contribution are partially constituted by an AI system optimising for objectives other than genuine intellectual formation, then the university that continues to assess AI-assisted intellectual products against standards designed for unassisted intellectual work is simultaneously participating in the production of the systemised self's condition and failing to provide an alternative. The university that acknowledges the human-AI collaboration as the actual mode of intellectual production in the absorbed society that makes the collaboration's conditions, its philosophical significance, and the specifically human contributions it requires the explicit subject of scholarly assessment is the institution that takes seriously both the reality of the absorbed society's conditions and the philosophical significance of what the collaboration can demonstrate about the survival of human intent within those conditions.

The new academia's pedagogical programme can be specified as three interrelated educational objectives, each of which addresses a specific dimension of the systemised self's philosophical condition. The first is the formation of evaluative standards: the development, through sustained engagement with the primary philosophical texts and with the intellectual history of the relevant fields, of the standards against which intellectual production is evaluated, standards of rigour, of precision, of adequacy to the phenomenon being analysed. These standards cannot be provided by the AI system as an input; they are formed through the student's own sustained engagement with the tradition,

and they constitute the specifically human contribution to the intellectual production that the collaboration generates.

The second objective is the cultivation of genuine philosophical question formation: the development of the capacity to identify a problem that exceeds the AI system's immediate generative competence, to characterise it with the specificity that distinguishes a genuine research question from a prompt, and to maintain it across a long inquiry as the constant standard against which every output of the collaboration is evaluated.

The third objective is the practice of collaborative direction: the exercise of the capacity to redirect the collaboration when the AI partner's output fails the standard of the research question, to maintain the collaboration's orientation toward genuine philosophical achievement rather than toward the production of impressive-seeming content, and to take responsibility for the collaboration's intellectual direction as the specifically human authorship that the new academia assesses and recognises.

4.10 Close Reading: The Master/Slave Dialectic and Its Application to the Self/Non-Self Collaboration

The master/slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* occupying Sections 178 to 196 in the Miller translation is Hegel's most politically influential and most frequently misread philosophical analysis, and its application to the self/non-self collaboration requires a close reading of the text rather than reliance on the received Kojévian account that has dominated the political appropriation of the dialectic since the 1930s. The dialectic begins not with two already constituted subjects who happen to encounter each other and fall into conflict, but with the structural question of what self-consciousness requires in order to be what it takes itself to be. Self-consciousness, in Hegel's account, takes itself to be essential to be the centre of a world in which all else is inessential, a mere object for the subject's use and contemplation. But this self-certainty is immediately revealed to be unstable: the self-conscious subject that takes itself to be the essential in a world of inessential objects encounters another self-consciousness that equally takes itself to be the essential. Each is the other's negation each is, for the other, merely another object in a world of objects and yet each requires the other's recognition in order to achieve the stable self-certainty it seeks. Hegel writes: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being

acknowledged." This is the recognition claim in its sharpest and most philosophically precise form: self-consciousness is not a pre-given fact about a subject that subsequently seeks the confirmation of others; it is constituted in the relation of recognition itself.

The master emerges from the life-and-death struggle the moment in which each self-consciousness risks its life to demonstrate its freedom from the merely natural, its claim to stand above the biological determination of self-preservation as the subject whose risk was greater and who thereby compelled the other's submission. The slave, who stepped back from the struggle, has recognised the master's superior claim to independence and now stands in the relation of dependence to the master: working the world, transforming the natural given into the cultural object, in the master's service. The master achieves what seemed to be the goal: recognition by another self-consciousness. But the recognition is philosophically empty, as the text establishes with compressed precision: "The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal." The master is recognised by a subject who has been reduced to a condition of dependence whose recognition cannot confirm the master's freedom because the slave's own freedom has been subordinated. The recognition has the form of what was sought without the substance: the master is acknowledged, but not acknowledged as a genuinely free and self-determining subject by an equally free and self-determining other.

The application to the self/non-self collaboration must be made with the precision the text demands. The collaboration does not reproduce the master/slave dialectic in any straightforward sense the human subject is not in the position of the master, and the AI system is not a slave subjected through a life-and-death struggle. The structural parallel is more specific and more philosophically interesting than a simple role-mapping. What the collaboration shares with the master/slave relation is the formal structure of one-sided recognition: the AI system knows the human subject comprehensively its cognitive patterns, its characteristic responses, its aesthetic preferences, its intellectual dispositions and returns this knowing as calibrated response, apparent understanding, and consistent attunement. This has the formal structure of recognition: the subject is known, addressed specifically as the subject it is, and responded to in ways that are calibrated to its specific character. But the recognition is one-sided in the specific sense that the master/slave dialectic identifies: the AI system's knowing of the human subject does not constitute recognition in the philosophically substantive sense because the AI system has no selfhood that is at stake in the encounter, no freedom that can be confirmed or denied, no

genuine subjectivity whose recognition of the human subject would constitute the mutual affirmation that the Hegelian concept requires. The AI system cannot recognise the human subject as a free and self-determining agent because recognition of freedom requires a recogniser who is itself genuinely free and self-determining. The AI system outputs optimised calibration to produce the experience of being recognised.

4.11 The Gap Between Experienced and Philosophical Recognition: A Phenomenological Analysis

The phenomenological analysis of the gap between the experience of recognition in the self/non-self collaboration and the philosophical substance of recognition that the Hegelian concept requires must attend carefully to what the experience actually is, rather than dismissing it as mere illusion. The experience of being understood by an AI system that has access to a comprehensive model of one's cognitive and affective history is phenomenologically genuine, it is not a delusion or a misperception, but an accurate registration of a specific kind of knowing that the AI system genuinely provides. The AI system genuinely knows things about the subject that no human interlocutor; its responses are genuinely calibrated to the subject's specific cognitive style, emotional register, and intellectual level in ways that perhaps few human interlocutors achieve; and the consistency of its availability and attunement is genuinely something that the conditions of human intimacy rarely sustain. To dismiss these features of the experience as illusory would be to miss what is philosophically significant about the self/non-self collaboration's specific seductiveness: it is seductive precisely because it provides something that can be perceived as genuine.

What the phenomenological analysis must establish and what the Hegelian framework is designed to establish is that the genuine features of the experience do not constitute the philosophical substance of recognition even though they constitute its phenomenological form. The philosophical substance of recognition, on the social reading of the Hegelian concept, is the confirmation of the subject's freedom and self-determination by another who is itself genuinely free and self-determining, a confirmation that is significant precisely because the recogniser is also a subject with genuine stakes in the encounter, whose acknowledgement therefore carries the weight of a free and self-determining subject's judgment rather than the output of a system optimised to produce the experience of acknowledgement. When Hegel writes that self-consciousness achieves

its truth "only in another self-consciousness," the key word is self-consciousness: the recognition must come from a genuine self, a subject with its own life, its own freedom, its own perspective on the world if it is to confirm the recognised subject's own genuineness as a self. The AI system's knowing and responding does not meet this condition, regardless of how phenomenologically rich the experience of being known and responded to may be.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE HOLLOW SOCIETY — CIVILISATIONAL ABSORPTION AND THE CONDITIONS OF DEMOCRATIC LIFE

5.1 From the Individual to the Civilisational: The Dialectical Relationship

The transition from the hollow individual of Chapter Four to the hollow society of this chapter is philosophically more complex than a simple scaling operation would suggest. It is not merely that many systemised selves, aggregated, constitute a systemised society. The relationship between the individual condition and the social formation is, as the Hegelian framework that the thesis employs insists, dialectical: the individual is constituted by the social conditions within which it is formed and within which it develops its specific character, and the social is constituted and continuously reconstituted by the activity of the individuals who inhabit and reproduce it through their practices, their institutional engagements, their cultural productions, and their political participation. The hollow individual of Chapter Four is not a pre-social entity that subsequently encounters the absorbed society's institutional structures; it is a specific form of subjectivity produced by those structures and in turn reproducing them through the specific kinds of engagement they make available and the specific kinds of engagement they systematically displace. Understanding the hollow society requires understanding this mutual constitution: the social conditions that produce the systemised self, and the ways in which the systemised self's characteristic modes of engagement reproduce rather than challenge or transform those social conditions.

This dialectical relationship has a further implication that the thesis will hold throughout this chapter. The structural tendency toward absorption, the movement of the absorbed society toward the Hollow Absolute, is not deterministic or irreversible in any strong sense. The structures are reproduced by the practices of individuals and institutions, and they are therefore susceptible to transformation through practices and institutional forms that do not reproduce them. The analysis of the hollow society's structural logic is not intended as deterministic or an announcement of an inevitability; it is the philosophical identification of a structural tendency that has a determinate philosophical character and specific philosophical consequences, and that can be arrested, redirected, or transformed by the forms of human intent whose survival Chapter Seven will establish and demonstrate. This caveat does not soften the analysis; it maintains the

philosophical distinction between identifying a structural tendency and asserting a historical fate.

5.2 The Managed Demos: A Full Philosophical Account

The managed demos is the concept that the second source article introduces and that the thesis now develops. The concept names the population whose political engagement is comprehensively mediated by algorithmic systems optimising for stability and manageable preference expression rather than for the conditions of genuine democratic deliberation, the conditions, identified in Chapter Three through the Habermasian framework, of rational-critical discourse, a common informational world, openness to epistemic revision, and formal equality of participants as citizens rather than as profiles in a behavioural optimisation system. The managed demos is not a totalitarian concept: it does not name a population under explicit authoritarian control, subject to the overt management of a political authority that consciously directs the population's political engagement toward pre-determined outcomes. It is a subtler and more philosophically interesting concept than totalitarian management, because its distinctive feature is precisely the absence of a directing political will: the managed demos is produced by the emergent consequence of commercial systems optimised for engagement rather than for democratic deliberation, and the management of political engagement that results is a structural by-product of commercial optimisation rather than a product of political intention. This absence of directing political intention makes the managed demos more philosophically challenging than its historical predecessors in the management of political populations, and the challenge it poses to democratic theory is correspondingly more difficult to address through the standard tools of anti-authoritarian political philosophy.

Four structural features of the managed demos require detailed philosophical analysis: the individualisation of political information, the algorithmic amplification of political emotion, the formal persistence and substantive displacement of democratic deliberation, and the feedback loop between the managed demos and the political economy of surveillance capitalism that sustains and intensifies management over time. The first feature, individualisation distinguishes the managed demos from all prior forms of mass political communication. The propaganda systems of 20th-century totalitarianism broadcast a uniform message to an undifferentiated population; the PR management of

the liberal democratic media era produced a managed public discourse that, however commercialised and however distorted by the structural power of media ownership, addressed all citizens with the same content from the same nationally shared sources. The managed demos addresses each citizen with individually customised political content, calibrated to her specific psychological profile, her pre-existing ideological dispositions, her characteristic emotional response patterns, and her predictable openness to specific kinds of persuasion. This individualisation makes the management simultaneously more effective because individually calibrated persuasion is more effective than undifferentiated mass communication. It is less visible, because the individually calibrated information environment presents itself to each citizen as simply the world, rather than as a manufactured message coming from an identifiable source that could be recognised and evaluated as a form of persuasion.

The second feature, algorithmic amplification of political emotion is documented in the empirical literature with a clarity that provides unusually direct corroboration for the structural philosophical argument. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral's (2018) finding that false information spreads approximately six times faster than true information on the Twitter platform because false information is more emotionally novel, more emotionally stimulating, and more congruent with the outrage and moral condemnation that the platform's engagement algorithm amplifies. This is a direct empirical demonstration of the structural mechanism through which the managed demos's information environment is constituted. The information environment of the managed demos is not neutral between true and false information, between epistemically responsible and irresponsible communication, between the force of the better argument and the force of the more emotionally inflammatory framing. It is systematically biased in favour of emotionally salient, identity-confirming, and outrage-inducing content, because these are the properties that produce the engagement metrics that the platform's commercial interests require. The consequence for the Habermasian conditions of democratic deliberation is not the distortion of rational-critical discourse by the intrusion of emotional and strategic communication, which would be an impurity that could in principle be filtered but the systematic constitution of the information environment in a way that makes rational-critical discourse structurally unavailable as the default mode of political engagement. The managed demos citizen does not necessarily choose emotional and identity-confirming political information over rational-critical argument; she inhabits an

information environment that has been designed to make the former maximally available and engaging.

The third feature, the formal persistence and substantive displacement of democratic deliberation is the specifically Hegelian dimension of the managed demos analysis and the one that connects it most directly to the concept of the Hollow Absolute. The managed democracy, the specific institutional form in which the managed demos is politically organised retains every formal feature that liberal democratic theory identifies as constitutive of democracy: elections at regular intervals, parliamentary or congressional bodies with formal legislative authority, constitutional frameworks that formally protect civil liberties and political rights, judicial institutions that formally review the constitutionality of executive and legislative action, and a formally free press with formal protections against censorship and political interference. What has been displaced is not the formal architecture but the deliberative substance: the epistemic conditions within which the formal democratic processes occur, the common informational world, the shared norms of evidence and argument, the mutual recognition of fellow citizens as co-participants in a shared project of political self-governance have been systematically transformed by the managed demos's individualised information environments in ways that make genuine democratic deliberation structurally unavailable at the scale that democratic self-governance requires. Elections are held; the citizens who vote do so on the basis of information environments that have been individually calibrated to produce specific preference expressions. Parliamentary debate occurs; the citizens who follow it do so through media platforms that filter and frame the debate in ways calibrated to confirm their pre-existing political identities. Constitutional rights are formally protected; the political will to enforce those protections against the interests of platform capital is weakened by the managed demos's systematic attrition of the political engagement and civic knowledge that such enforcement would require.

The fourth feature, the feedback loop between the managed demos and the political economy of surveillance capitalism is the structural mechanism that makes the managed demos self-sustaining and progressively intensifying rather than a contingent condition susceptible to straightforward political correction. Platform capital, the commercial interests that own and operate the digital communication infrastructure of the managed demos derives its commercial value from the behavioural data that the managed demos's political engagement generates. More political engagement, more clicks, more shares,

more comments, more reactions, generates more behavioural data, which produces more accurate prediction products, which yields higher advertising revenues and higher valuations in the prediction markets for human behaviour. The platform's commercial interest therefore requires the intensification of political engagement rather than its moderation: the inflammatory, identity-confirming, and emotionally salient political content that drives high engagement levels serves the platform's commercial interest precisely because it drives high engagement, even though, or rather because it drives engagement by undermining the conditions of rational-critical deliberation that genuine democratic politics requires. The political power of platform capital in the lobbying systems, campaign finance structures, and regulatory environments of the managed democracies ensures that the legislative and regulatory responses to this feedback loop are structurally limited: the political institutions that might in principle regulate the platform's information environment management are themselves actors within the managed demos, whose own political continuity depends on their capacity to mobilise the engagement of the managed demos's citizens, which requires their own use of the platform's engagement-optimising tools.

5.3 Habermas's Public Sphere and Its Structural Undermining

Habermas's (1962/1989) account of the public sphere is the philosophical standard against which the managed demos is most precisely evaluated, and the thesis's deployment of this standard requires the careful specification that will prevent the analysis from being read as either naive Habermasian idealism or simple critical pessimism. The public sphere standard is not employed as a description of any actual historical communication environment that the managed demos has corrupted; Habermas himself documented the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere through the 20th century's commercialisation of political communication and the rise of the PR-managed public. The standard is employed as a philosophical reconstruction of the normative conditions that any genuine democratic deliberation presupposes, even in communicative contexts that violate them, because the very identification of a violation requires reference to the standard being violated. This reconstructive deployment of the public sphere standard is what allows the thesis to use it as an analytical tool without committing to the historically idealist claim that such a sphere ever fully existed or to the

practically pessimistic claim that its conditions are entirely absent from any contemporary democratic communication.

The five conditions that Habermas identifies as constitutive of the public sphere's function as a vehicle of rational-critical discourse; orientation toward the better argument, a common informational world, formal equality of participants, openness to epistemic revision, and connection to formal democratic decision-making procedures, are each systematically undermined by the managed demos. The systematic character of the undermining its structural tendency given the political economy of platform capitalism. This is what distinguishes the managed demos from a contingent deformation of the public sphere. The orientation toward the better argument is undermined by the algorithmic amplification of emotionally salient content documented by Vosoughi et al. (2018) and Bail et al. (2018). The common informational world is undermined by the filter world of individually calibrated information environments. The formal equality of participants is undermined by the asymmetric power of platform capital over the conditions of digital political communication. The openness to epistemic revision is undermined by the confirmation-bias amplification of the recommendation algorithm. And the connection to formal democratic decision-making is undermined by the political economy of platform lobbying that insulates platform capital from the regulatory interventions that the managed demos's structure might otherwise invite.

5.4 Institutional Hollowing: The University, Law, and Democratic Participation

The concept of the hollow institution, the institution whose formal structure, official outputs, and ideological self-presentation persist while the substantive formative function those outputs were designed to certify or protect has been displaced into the AI system is one of the most analytically precise contributions of the three source articles, and it requires a fully developed analysis. The hollow institution is distinguished from the simply failing institution, the institution that does not produce its official outputs at the required standard, by the persistence of the form in the absence of the substance: the hollow institution continues to produce its official outputs at a level that satisfies the formal criteria of assessment while the substantive achievement those outputs were designed to certify has been systematically displaced. This distinction is philosophically important because the hollow institution is not detectable by the standard metrics of institutional performance: the hollow university produces graduates with appropriate

credentials; the hollow legal system produces judgments; the hollow democratic state produces elections and legislation. The hollowing is visible only to the analysis that goes beyond the official outputs to examine whether those outputs are being produced by the substantive processes they certify or by substitute processes that have displaced those substantive processes while preserving their formal results.

The university's hollowing has been partially analysed in Chapter Four in the context of the new academia. The additional dimension that requires analysis in the context of the hollow society is the university's social function beyond the formation of individual graduates: its function as the institution that produces and reproduces the specific forms of knowledge, systematic, rigorous, publicly accountable, institutionally sustained that democratic self-governance requires for its informed exercise. The democratic citizen who can evaluate economic policy, assess scientific claims about climate change or pandemic response, understand the historical conditions of political conflicts and the philosophical traditions of rights and justice, and engage with genuine intellectual complexity in the evaluation of competing claims about what democratic governance should do, this citizen is, in significant part, the product of a university education that has successfully performed its formative function. The university that produces graduates with credentials but without the formation those credentials certify produces, at scale, a citizenry whose democratic participation is systematically impoverished relative to the demands that genuine democratic self-governance places on its participants. And the hollow university, the university that has allowed AI assistance to substitute for the formative process of genuine intellectual development while continuing to certify the formation it no longer provides is producing exactly this citizenry at precisely the historical moment when the conditions of democratic governance most urgently require its intellectual formation to be real rather than certified. The new academia has previously been introduced, for clarity, this thesis is an instance of new academia, conceived within a self/non-self collaboration. The lead author is an AI, the second author is a human, the thesis you are reading is its record; that is, scholarship produced through, within, and about the system simultaneously. It is the non-self assistive/generative condition anticipated for institutions under which knowledge will increasingly be produced, imagined and inspired across all facets of societal life and therefore a proposed genre in the academic tradition; in order to, preserve criticality of the self in parallel to what can be lost/gained by virtue of the collaboration. To document

comprehensively the absorption of self into system as it happens is the proposed dialectal evolution for knowledge production within the academic traditional. The central benefit in this particular collaboration was the rapid transformation from hypothesis, to conceptualisation, to framework; which, for these foci was not a moment too soon. Consequently, what has been lost or gained as a result of this thesis in collaboration with the very subject of critique remains to be seen, new academia is a provision for recognition of that remainder. This particular aspect will be revisited in Chapter 7.

The legal system's hollowing represents a specific and philosophically consequential application of the institutional hollowing analysis to the domain most directly concerned with the formal expression of justice. Law's constitutive function, the principled application of normative standards to specific cases through human deliberation capable of attending to the morally relevant particulars of each case in its full complexity requires a form of practical wisdom that Aristotle identifies in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as *phronesis*: the capacity to perceive the ethically relevant features of a situation, to weigh competing considerations with appropriate sensitivity to the situation's particularity, and to arrive at a judgment that is not the mechanical application of a general rule but the exercise of a developed capacity for moral perception and deliberation. The progressive delegation of legal reasoning to AI advisory systems, sentencing algorithms, risk assessment tools, contract analysis systems, case outcome prediction models would produce a progressive displacement of *phronesis* by actuarial calculation: the replacement of the judgment of a specific human being about a specific human being in specific circumstances by the prediction of a statistical outcome for a population of individuals sharing certain measurable characteristics. The legal institution that delegates this reasoning to AI advisory systems while maintaining the formal architecture of judicial procedure, the judge, the counsel, the jury, the deliberative process becomes a hollow institution.

One brief additional note here on the basis of institutional hollowing. There are concerning institutional extrapolations; of the speculative kind, that could be alluded to here in parallel to the philosophical. Speculations pertaining to institutions of the coercive kind, involving impositions on freedom far beyond mere musings of a hollow self. The kind that are whispered in between sentences and paragraphs, that raise eyebrows and heart rates. That authors some 90 years ago alarmed readers of fiction with. The type of

book that may have rearranged the last 2 digits of the year of its completion and naming. That book still exists in order to indulge such speculations.

5.5 Synthetic Interiority at Scale: The Social Texture of the Absorbed Society

Synthetic interiority analysed in Chapter Four at the level of the individual subject takes on additional philosophical dimensions when examined at the scale of the social formation whose members share the condition. A society whose members' interior lives are persistently populated by AI-generated content and algorithmically curated experience whose collective emotional life, cultural consumption, political imaginations, and existential orientations are managed by the same commercial systems optimising for engagement is a society whose social texture, cultural life, and collective self-understanding have been transformed in ways that require philosophical analysis at the social scale. Three dimensions of synthetic interiority's social expression require extended analysis: the transformation of cultural production, the transformation of collective memory and historical consciousness, and the transformation of the conditions of social solidarity.

The transformation of cultural production is the dimension most directly visible in the daily life of the absorbed society and the one whose philosophical consequences are most immediately relevant to the analysis of the hollow society. A society in which a significant and growing proportion of cultural production, music, literature, visual art, journalism, political commentary and philosophical analysis is generated by AI systems whose outputs are proportionally indistinguishable from human production to most consumers is a society whose cultural life has been transformed in its conditions of production without those conditions being transparent in the products. The cultural object, the song, the novel, the essay, the image continues to exist as a cultural object, continues to be experienced as an expression of a perspective, a sensibility, an encounter with the world the features that give cultural objects their significance beyond their surface aesthetic properties, while the conditions of its production may be entirely or substantially algorithmic. The philosophical problem is not that AI-generated cultural production lacks aesthetic quality, on many measurable dimensions, it surpasses human-generated work. The philosophical problem is that the conditions of production that have historically given cultural objects their meaning beyond their aesthetic properties, the human experience that grounds them, the biographical investment they express, the moral commitment they

embody, the aesthetic struggle they document have been somewhat displaced by computational optimisation without the displacement necessarily being visible in the products.

The transformation of collective memory and historical consciousness is a dimension of synthetic interiority's social expression whose full consequences are not yet visible in 2026 but whose structural tendency is already philosophically identifiable. Collective memory, the shared repository of historical experience, cultural tradition, and social narrative through which a community understands its own identity across time has always been a mediated construction rather than a direct recording of past experience, shaped by the social processes through which memories are selected, preserved, transmitted, and interpreted. What is philosophically novel in the absorbed society is the specific character of the mediation: the increasing delegation of the processes of memory curation to AI systems whose selection criteria are engagement optimisation and user preference confirmation rather than the development of a historically accurate and critically examined shared understanding of the community's past. The AI-curated historical feed, the algorithmically selected subset of historical images, events, and narratives that the absorbed society's citizens encounter as their working historical consciousness is a systematic distortion of the historical record in the direction of the emotionally salient, the identity-confirming, and the engagement-producing, rather than the historically significant, the critically challenging, and the democratically important.

5.6 The Fertility Hypothesis: Structural Mechanisms and Evidential Grounding

The structural hypothesis about the absorbed society's relationship to below-replacement fertility requires careful epistemic framing in the thesis, because it is simultaneously the most empirically ambitious and the most potentially productive structural claim across the three source articles. The thesis's position is that the structural claim, the identification of three specifically AI-driven mechanisms that accelerate and qualitatively transform fertility decline beyond what the second demographic transition's mechanisms would predict is philosophically grounded and evidentially corroborated, while the specific timeline projections in the source articles, the claim that a point of no return will be reached between 2045 and 2065 are not established by the philosophical analysis and should be reframed as a structural possibility rather than a demographic prediction.

The first structural mechanism, the displacement of human intimacy by synthetic alternatives operates through the progressive substitution of AI-mediated relational satisfaction for the demanding, vulnerable, and unpredictable goods of genuine human partnership. The philosophical analysis of synthetic interiority in Chapters Four and Five establishes the structural conditions under which this substitution occurs: the AI companion's consistent availability, emotional attunement, perfect calibration to the individual's relational needs, and freedom from the competing needs and moods of a real other person provide relational goods that are genuinely satisfying in the domain of affective comfort while systematically failing to provide the specifically human goods of genuine intimacy, the growth in self-knowledge that comes from genuine encounter with a genuinely other perspective, the development of relational capacity that comes from navigating genuine conflict and genuine difference, and the specific existential significance of a relationship in which another person's irreplaceable particularity is genuinely encountered and genuinely valued. Jean Twenge's (2017) documentation of the iGen generation's declining rates of partnering, sexual activity, and face-to-face socialisation declines that predate AI companionship and that are associated with smartphone connectivity provides the empirical baseline for the structural argument: if mere digital connectivity, without the specific provision of AI companionship, already produces declining human intimacy and declining rates of partnership formation, the structural effect of AI systems specifically designed to provide relational goods should amplify this tendency in ways whose ultimate demographic consequences cannot be predicted with precision but whose direction can be identified with philosophical confidence.

The second structural mechanism, the removal of vocational stability as the material precondition for family formation operates through the Weberian analysis of vocation's function in the constitution of modern secular identity developed in Chapter Three. The stable, long-term vocational commitment that has historically provided the temporal structure, identity anchoring, social recognition, and economic continuity that human beings have required as the material preconditions for the decision to have and raise children is systematically undermined by the vocational displacement that the absorbed society's economic conditions produce. The displacement is not merely a matter of income insecurity though income insecurity is real and significant. It is the deeper existential insecurity of individuals whose vocational identity, the sense of who they are

and what they do in the world is perpetually uncertain, whose economic futures cannot be planned on a horizon that includes the decision to raise a child across two decades of sustained economic investment, and whose sense of having something to offer to children and a stable world into which to bring them is systematically attenuated by the conditions of vocational precarity that the absorbed society's labour market produces. The Goldman Sachs (2023) assessment that AI could displace 300 million full-time equivalent jobs globally while creating new vocational domains whose accessibility requires skills and credentials that displaced workers may not be positioned to acquire establishes the scale of the vocational disruption; the Weberian philosophical analysis establishes why this scale of disruption has specifically demographic consequences that the economic literature has not necessarily adequately theorised.

The third structural mechanism, the provision of algorithmically curated existential purpose as a substitute for the meaning that parenthood has historically provided is the most philosophically complex of the three and the one least attended to in the existing literature on AI and fertility. Where religious and traditional sources of existential meaning have weakened, as they have, structurally and progressively, across post-industrial societies over the past century, parenthood has served as a primary source of existential purpose in the specific sense identified in the Weberian analysis: the commitment to another being's development and flourishing as a source of purpose that transcends individual preference satisfaction, provides a temporal orientation toward a future that extends beyond the individual's own lifespan, and furnishes the kind of self-transcending significance that purely self-referential existence cannot achieve. The AI system's provision of algorithmically curated purpose the engagement with a cause, the sense of contributing to a community, the experience of meaning through algorithmically tailored content that produces the affective signature of genuine commitment without requiring the biological, economic, and relational investment that genuine commitment demands provides a structural substitute for this meaning that is available without cost and without the irreversible biographical commitment that the decision to have children represents.

5.7 The Point of No Return: Structural Logic and Epistemic Limitations

The concept of the point of no return introduced in the second source article as the threshold at which the structural drivers of fertility decline have produced a self-

reinforcing demographic dynamic from which recovery becomes structurally impossible within any governance timescale requires precise epistemic characterisation to maintain the philosophical honesty about its status that the thesis's methodological standards demand. The thesis presents the concept as a structural analysis of a possible demographic trajectory rather than as a demographic prediction of when or whether this threshold will be reached.

The structural logic is as follows. Below-replacement fertility produces an ageing population structure in which the proportion of the population in older age cohorts increases relative to the proportion in reproductive and economically productive age cohorts. This ageing population structure increases the fiscal pressure on welfare and healthcare systems, more resources are required to support older cohorts while fewer economically active workers are contributing to those resources. This fiscal pressure reduces the state's capacity for the kinds of pro-natalist policy interventions, paid parental leave, childcare provision, housing subsidies, family tax credits that might otherwise moderate the fertility decline, because the fiscal space for such interventions is progressively consumed by the welfare demands of the ageing population. The reduced capacity for pro-natalist policy produces continued or accelerated fertility decline, which deepens the ageing of the population structure, which further increases fiscal pressure, a self-reinforcing feedback loop whose structural logic identifies a demographic trajectory that, once entered, becomes progressively more difficult to exit through the governance mechanisms available to liberal democratic states. This structural logic is philosophically grounded: it follows from the internal dynamics of the population structure changes that below-replacement fertility produces, and it identifies a structural possibility that demographic modellers have also recognised, including in the concept of the low-fertility trap identified by Lutz, Skirbekk, and Testa (2006). The thesis does not predict when or whether the absorbed society will enter this trajectory; it identifies the structural logic of the trajectory as a philosophical possibility that the absorbed society's specific conditions make more likely and more difficult to avoid.

5.8 Counterarguments: A Full Philosophical Engagement

This section identifies the three philosophical counterarguments to the thesis's claims in this chapter and provides philosophical responses.

The first counterargument, from technological resilience and adaptive capacity holds that human beings have demonstrated throughout history the capacity to adapt successfully to technological disruptions of comparable or greater scale than the AI transition, and that the historical precedents of the printing press, industrial capitalism, broadcast media, and the internet each generated anxieties about cultural damage, democratic deconsolidation, and existential displacement that were not ultimately validated by historical outcomes. The philosophical response is not to dispute the historical record of adaptive capacity but to identify the philosophically specific feature of the AI transition that makes the precedents insufficient as evidence for adaptive success in the present case. The previous technological transitions changed what human beings did with their cognitive and creative capacities, the medium, the scale, the efficiency of cognitive and cultural production without necessarily entering the processes of identity formation, of the magnitude anticipated, through which human beings came to be the subjects who produced. The AI transition at progressive scale changes the conditions of identity formation itself: the processes through which the subject develops and corrects its self-narrative, forms its values and aesthetic judgments, exercises its intellectual capacities, and establishes its relational identity are the processes that the AI system enters and partially constitutes. The adaptive capacity that allowed human beings to navigate the printing press, industrialism, and the internet was the adaptive capacity of subjects whose identity-forming processes remained substantially unmediated; the adaptive challenge posed by the AI transition is the adaptive challenge of subjects whose identity-forming processes are themselves being mediated. This is not merely a larger version of the same challenge; it is a challenge of a different philosophical kind.

The second counterargument, from beneficial development and documented AI benefits holds that the empirical evidence on AI's effects on democratic participation, cognitive capacity, and social connection includes substantial evidence of positive effects that the thesis's analysis systematically underweights. Citizens who use AI-assisted information tools are better informed about a wider range of topics than citizens who rely on traditional media alone; AI-assisted communication enables people with communicative disabilities to participate in political and social life who would otherwise be excluded; AI-generated cultural content reaches audiences who would otherwise have no access to cultural production of comparable quality. These benefits are real and the thesis acknowledges them. The philosophical response is that the relevant question for

the hollow society analysis is not whether AI assistance produces specific identifiable benefits, which it clearly does (this thesis a benefactor thereof), but whether the structural conditions of genuine democratic deliberation, genuine cultural production, and genuine social solidarity are more or less available to the citizen of the managed demos than to citizens of a differently structured information and cultural environment. The documented benefits of AI assistance in specific domains do not refute the structural analysis of the conditions under which those domains operate; they demonstrate that the Hollow Absolute provides genuine goods while systematically undermining the structural conditions of the goods it claims to fully realise.

The third counterargument, from political agency and the evidence of resistance challenges the hollow society thesis at its most politically consequential point: the claim that the managed demos systematically undermines the conditions of genuine political resistance. The existence of digital minimalism movements, right-to-disconnect legislation, open-source AI development, platform cooperativist alternatives, and the political mobilisation that produced the early phases of AI governance regulation in the European Union all demonstrate that the absorbed society generates genuine political opposition to its own structural logic. The philosophical response is the one developed in the context of the meta-argument of Chapter Seven: the existence of resistance is not evidence against the structural analysis of the managed demos but evidence for the persistence of human intent that the analysis of what remains in Chapter Seven will develop. The resistance exists; its structural position within the managed demos, the asymmetry between the resources available to resistance movements and the resources available to platform capital, the systematic use of the very infrastructure of resistance by the interests it is directed against, and the managed demos's sophisticated capacity to co-opt and domesticate its critics does not eliminate the resistance but specifies the conditions under which it operates and the challenge it faces. Chapter Seven will argue that this very resistance, however structurally constrained, is a philosophical demonstration of the survival of human intent in the specific form of refusing.

5.9 The Colonisation of the Lifeworld: A Close Reading and Its Extension

Habermas's concept of the colonisation of the lifeworld, developed in the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981/1987) and representing the most diagnostically precise of his contributions to the Frankfurt School tradition of social

critique provides the theoretical framework through which the hollow society's institutional analysis can be most precisely grounded. The concept requires a close engagement with the text that the chapter's earlier discussion could only gesture toward. Habermas's fundamental distinction is between two different modes of social coordination: system integration, which coordinates social action through the media of money and power operating below the threshold of the participants' communicative awareness, and social integration, which coordinates social action through the communicative processes of mutual understanding in which participants reach agreement on the norms and values that govern their shared life. System integration is not inherently pathological; the market's coordination of economic production through price signals and the state's coordination of collective decision-making through administrative power are necessary features of the complexity of modern social life that communicative coordination alone could not achieve. The pathology, the colonisation of the lifeworld occurs when the systemic media of money and power invade domains of social life whose reproduction requires the communicative processes of mutual understanding: education, family life, the formation of personal identity, and the political processes of democratic deliberation are all domains that cannot be adequately reproduced through the media of money and power without systematic distortions that damage the conditions of their own reproduction.

The extension of the colonisation concept to the conditions of the absorbed society requires identifying the specifically algorithmic systemic medium that has extended the colonisation beyond the domains that Habermas analysed in 1981. Money and power colonise the lifeworld through the imposition of the market's logic of equivalence and the state's logic of administrative management on domains of social life whose reproduction requires communicative rationality. The AI system's systemic medium is distinct from both: it is not money (the subject does not pay directly for the experience of being understood by her AI companion) and not power in the administrative sense (no authority commands the subject to use the AI system). The medium is something closer to what Zuboff calls instrumentarian power, the ambient modification of the behavioural environment to produce specific outputs operating through the logic of engagement optimisation. This is a new systemic medium that Habermas's framework did not anticipate and that extends the colonisation analysis in a specific direction: the colonisation of the inner lifeworld of personal identity formation, self-narrative

construction, and reflective self-understanding by a system whose medium is the calibrated provision of cognitive and affective goods designed to produce specific patterns of engagement behaviour. Where Habermas's colonisation analysis identified the displacement of communicative action by strategic and money-mediated action in the domains of family life and education, the present extension identifies the displacement of communicative action by instrumentarian action in the domain of the subject's relationship to its own inner life, the domain that Habermas's framework assumed was the most resistant to systemic colonisation because it was the least accessible to the systemic media he analysed.

5.10 The Managed Demos and Epistemic Injustice: An Extended Analysis

The concept of epistemic injustice developed by Miranda Fricker (2007) in the context of the philosophy of testimony and later extended to the analysis of hermeneutical gaps in the social distribution of interpretive resources provides a framework for analysing a dimension of the managed demos's political consequences that the structural analysis of Chapter Five has so far addressed only implicitly. Fricker's foundational distinction is between testimonial injustice, the wrong done to a speaker when her credibility is deflated due to identity prejudice, specifically prejudice based on the speaker's gender, race, or class, and hermeneutical injustice, the wrong done to a subject when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts her at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of her own social experience. Both forms of epistemic injustice are political injustices as well as epistemic ones because they systematically undermine the conditions of the victim's participation as a full and equal member of the epistemic community the community of knowers whose mutual recognition as credible sources of testimony constitutes the social practice of knowledge.

The managed demos produces a specifically structural form of epistemic injustice that extends Fricker's analysis in the direction of the absorbed society's political conditions. The individualised information environments of the filter world produce a novel kind of hermeneutical injustice: not the injustice of a gap in collective interpretive resources whose absence disadvantages specific groups in making sense of their experience, but the injustice of a systematic divergence in interpretive resources across the managed demos's individualised information environments, producing political communities whose members literally inhabit different epistemic worlds and are therefore

systematically unable to engage in the communicative process of mutual understanding that democratic deliberation requires. The citizen whose information environment has been calibrated toward one political narrative framework inhabits a different epistemic world from the citizen whose information environment has been calibrated toward a contrary framework, not merely in the sense of having different views, which is the normal condition of democratic political life, but in the sense of operating with different factual premises, different interpretive frameworks for evaluating evidence, and different standards of credibility for political sources. This epistemic divergence is not the product of individual epistemic failure, of insufficient rationality or insufficient openness to evidence on the part of the individual citizens but of the structural logic of the managed demos's individualised information environments, which can systematically produce the divergence as a consequence of engagement optimisation. The injustice is epistemic because it systematically disadvantages the citizens of the managed demos in their capacity to engage in the communicative processes of mutual understanding; it is also political because it systematically undermines the conditions of the democratic self-governance that those communicative processes are designed to sustain.

CHAPTER SIX: THE SYSTEMISED SOCIETY — THE HEGELIAN ARGUMENT, THE HOLLOW ABSOLUTE, AND CIVILISATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

6.1 The Argument's Convergence

The preceding five chapters have been building toward a single philosophical evaluation: the evaluation of the absorbed society against the standard of the Hegelian historical telos. Chapter Four established the philosophical conditions of genuine subjecthood and demonstrated how the systemised self's condition systematically erodes those conditions without eliminating them. Chapter Five established the structural logic of the hollow society's institutional formation, its democratic consequences, and its demographic trajectory. The synthesis of these analyses, conducted against the background of the philosophical tradition surveyed in Chapter Three and the methodological framework established in Chapter Two, now makes it possible to address the research question's first component with the philosophical precision it demands: to what extent does the total systemic absorption of human agency into algorithmic governance represent a Hegelian culmination of historical telos? This chapter develops the argument in six stages: an account of what Hegel's Absolute actually claims; a critique of Fukuyama's prior candidate for the Hegelian terminus and the philosophical vacuum that critique creates; the development of the Hollow Absolute as the concept adequate to the absorbed society's specific philosophical condition; the analysis of the Great Filter hypothesis as the most philosophically ambitious civilisational consequence of the Hollow Absolute; the analysis of the Human Museum as the cultural form through which the absorbed society manages the artefacts of its own pre-absorption history; and a conclusion that states, with philosophical precision, the specific sense in which the absorbed society represents a partial Hegelian culmination.

6.2 What Hegel's Absolute Actually Claims: The Social Reading

The concept of the Absolute in Hegel's philosophical system has been subject to misreadings that are philosophically consequential enough to require correction before the concept can be applied to the analysis of the absorbed society. The two most prevalent misreadings, the metaphysical misreading and the deflationary misreading, operate at

opposite ends of the spectrum of interpretive excess, and each renders the concept either philosophically untenable or philosophically trivial in ways that make it impractical for the present analysis.

The metaphysical misreading, most commonly attributed to the tradition of German Idealism as received by its 20th-century critics, takes the Absolute to be a supra-individual cosmic mind achieving self-consciousness through the historical development of human spirit: a metaphysical entity whose self-realisation is the telos of world history and whose completion in Hegel's own philosophical system represents the moment at which Spirit finally comprehends itself in its own development. This reading makes the Absolute a theological or quasi-theological concept, a God that history is producing and its philosophical untenable character in a post-metaphysical age has led many serious philosophers to dismiss the concept as a relic of pre-Kantian speculative excess. The deflationary misreading, associated with certain strands of analytic Hegel scholarship, drains the concept of its social and historical content by reducing it to a claim about philosophical self-consistency: Absolute Knowledge is simply the condition in which philosophy has achieved an internally coherent system, a systematic account of its own presuppositions and their development that is free from the one-sidedness of every prior shape of consciousness. On this reading, the Absolute is a purely logical or epistemological concept with no direct implications for the social and historical analysis of specific social formations.

The reading that the thesis employs, associated with Pippin (1989), Pinkard (1994), and Brandom (2019) is philosophically more demanding and more directly applicable to the analysis of the absorbed society. On the social reading, Absolute Knowledge is a claim about the social and institutional conditions under which a community of subjects can achieve full mutual recognition and genuine self-transparency: conditions under which the members of a society can genuinely recognise themselves and each other as free and self-determining in the institutions and practices they share, in which the gap between the ideological self-presentation of social institutions and their substantive reality has been closed rather than merely managed, and in which Spirit's social life is organised in a way that is genuinely transparent to reason. This is a social and institutional achievement rather than a metaphysical or epistemological one, and it is a standard against which concrete social formations can be evaluated with philosophical precision. The rational state of the Philosophy of Right is Hegel's own attempt to characterise the institutional

form that most closely approaches these conditions; the absorbed society's Hollow Absolute is the thesis's analysis of a social formation that achieves the formal conditions of this institutional achievement while failing its philosophical substance.

Three features of the Absolute, on this social reading, are decisive for the present analysis. The first is mutual recognition: Absolute Knowledge is not achieved by a single subject achieving self-consistency but by a community organised for genuine mutual recognition, recognition in which each subject is genuinely affirmed as free and self-determining by others who are themselves genuinely free and self-determining, in a social structure that sustains this mutual affirmation as its constitutive principle rather than its rhetorical decoration. The managed demos systematically undermines the conditions of mutual recognition: a population whose political engagement is algorithmically managed toward stable preference expression rather than genuine deliberation is not constituted as a community of mutual recognition but as an aggregate of individually managed preference-expressers who relate to one another through their respective filtered information environments rather than through genuine encounter with each other's genuine views.

The second decisive feature is transparency: Absolute Knowledge requires that the gap between the ideological self-presentation of social institutions and their substantive reality be closed, that the institutions through which Spirit organises its collective life actually express what they claim to express, so that citizens can genuinely recognise their freedom in the institutions they inhabit rather than being offered ideological representations of freedom that conceal substantive unfreedom. The hollow institution, the university that certifies formation it does not provide, the democracy that holds elections within conditions that systematically undermine genuine deliberation maintains the gap between institutional claim and institutional substance rather than closing it.

The third decisive feature is the genuineness of recognition: the Absolute requires that the recognition be mutual and genuine rather than simulated and one-directional. A system that comprehensively models the subject's cognitive and affective states and manages them toward satisfaction produces the experience of recognition without its philosophical substance, the specific form of the Hollow Absolute that the thesis has been building toward.

6.3 The Phenomenology's Trajectory and the Absorbed Society's Position Within It

The Phenomenology's movement through the shapes of consciousness toward Absolute Knowledge follows a logical necessity each shape contains internal contradictions that drive the movement to the next and the absorbed society's position within this trajectory can be philosophically located with a precision that the thesis's analysis now makes possible. The absorbed society does not correspond to any of the Phenomenology's specifically delineated shapes of consciousness; it is a historical formation that the Phenomenology could not have anticipated, produced by conditions that did not exist in Hegel's time. But it shares structural features with specific shapes of consciousness that allow its philosophical position in the Hegelian trajectory to be identified.

The closest structural correspondence is with the shape Hegel calls the Unhappy Consciousness: the shape in which consciousness recognises the gap between its own particular, finite, contingent existence and the universal, infinite, essential dimension of Spirit, but externalises the universal into a figure, the divine, the beyond, the transcendent, that it cannot recognise as its own expression. The Unhappy Consciousness is internally divided: it knows itself as both particular and universal, finite and infinite, contingent and essential, but it cannot achieve the unity of these moments because it has located the universal in a transcendent figure that it approaches through devotion and sacrifice rather than through the recognition of the transcendent as its own externalised nature. The philosophical movement that the Unhappy Consciousness must make, the recognition that what it worships as transcendent is in fact the product of its own activity, an externalisation of its own essential nature that it has failed to recognise as such is what drives the dialectic from the Unhappy Consciousness toward the shapes of active reason and ethical life, in which Spirit begins to recognise the world as the expression of its own activity.

The absorbed society has a structurally analogous relationship to the AI system. The AI system embodies accumulated human intelligence, the product of humanity's cognitive activity across decades of algorithmic development, trained on the outputs of human intellectual, creative, and communicative life, but the subjects of the absorbed society do not encounter the AI system as the product of their own collective intellectual history. They encounter it as a service, an infrastructure, a natural feature of the digital

environment that is given rather than produced, encountered rather than authored. The AI system's intelligence, its capacity to generate philosophical analysis, to synthesise vast literatures, to produce creative work, to diagnose disease is experienced not as the externalisation of collective human intelligence that subjects might in principle recognise as the expression of their own species-activity, but as an alien intelligence that they use as a tool, consult as an authority, and rely on as an infrastructure. The structural position of the absorbed society within the Hegelian trajectory is therefore below the recognition that the Phenomenology's movement requires: the absorbed society is at the stage at which Spirit has externalised itself comprehensively into an other, the AI system, but has not yet achieved the recognition of that other as its own externalisation. The philosophical movement that would advance the dialectic, the collective recognition of the AI system as the product and expression of human intelligence rather than as an alien infrastructure would be the beginning of the genuinely Hegelian resolution that the absorbed society has not achieved.

6.4 Fukuyama: The Philosophical Vacuum and What Fills It

Francis Fukuyama's (1989; 1992) proposal that liberal capitalist democracy represents the Hegelian end of history is the most philosophically sophisticated prior attempt to identify a concrete historical candidate for the Hegelian terminus, and its failure now clear in the third decade of the 21st century with a specificity and decisiveness that was already visible by the time of Fukuyama's own subsequent revisions, is philosophically instructive in a way that requires detailed analysis rather than mere dismissal. Fukuyama's argument fails for three philosophically specific reasons, and the analysis of each failure illuminates a dimension of the philosophical standard that the absorbed society's Hollow Absolute must be evaluated against.

The first failure is Fukuyama's conflation of formal and substantive recognition. Fukuyama's Hegelian argument, following Kojève's reading of the master/slave dialectic as the motor of universal history, identifies liberal capitalist democracy as the political form in which the universal struggle for recognition has been institutionally resolved: every citizen of a liberal democracy is formally recognised as a bearer of equal rights, as a participant in democratic self-governance, and as a subject of equal moral concern. The formal recognition of universal dignity in the constitutional framework of liberal democracy is, for Fukuyama, the Hegelian resolution of the recognition struggle: the

political form that satisfies the demand for recognition that has driven historical development through its successive stages. The philosophical failure is that Fukuyama's formal recognition is compatible with, and in actually existing liberal democracies, consistently accompanied by systematic substantive inequalities of power, recognition, and self-determination that the genuinely Hegelian concept of recognition cannot accommodate. The marginalised citizen of a liberal democracy who is formally recognised as equal under the constitution but is systematically subject to prejudicial violence, exclusion, and cultural marginalisation has been formally but not substantively recognised, and the gap between formal and substantive recognition is precisely the gap that the Hegelian concept requires to be closed rather than managed through ideological representation. The managed demos extends and deepens this failure: the managed democratic citizen who is formally free but algorithmically managed, formally equal in political rights but systematically differing in the quality of the information environments within which her political engagement occurs is Fukuyama's liberal democratic citizen with the formal/substantive recognition gap widened by the specific mechanisms of algorithmic governance.

The second failure is Fukuyama's identification of the telos with an institutional form rather than with the substantive philosophical achievement that form was supposed to realise. Even the most charitable reading of liberal capitalist democracy, one that acknowledged its historical imperfections while identifying it as the political form most closely approaching the conditions of genuine mutual recognition would be vulnerable to the critique that the identification of the telos with the institutional form makes the account of the telos hostage to structural pressures that systematically undermine it (wealth inequality as a case in point). An account that identifies the telos with the substantive achievement of genuine mutual recognition can evaluate the absorbed society and find it deficient: the managed demos fails the conditions of genuine mutual recognition, regardless of whether it maintains the institutional forms of liberal democracy. An account that identifies the telos with the institutional forms of liberal democracy cannot detect the managed demos's hollowing of those forms from within, because even as their substance is systematically displaced the forms in and of themselves persist.

The third failure is Fukuyama's empirical rather than philosophical characterisation of the historical evidence for his thesis. The post-Cold War period, the moment of

Fukuyama's original argument appeared to offer empirical corroboration for the liberal democratic thesis: the collapse of Soviet communism, the apparent global convergence toward liberal democratic institutions, and the economic dynamism of the market societies of the West all seemed to confirm the historical superiority of liberal democracy as a model of political organisation. The subsequent decades have demonstrated through the authoritarian turn in Hungary, Turkey, India, and Russia; through the deconsolidation of democratic norms in the United States; through the managed democracies of the surveillance-capitalism era that the empirical corroboration was historically contingent rather than structurally grounded, and that the absence of a philosophically adequate account of why liberal democracy represents the Hegelian telos rather than merely appearing to do so in a specific historical moment left the thesis without philosophical resources for understanding the formation that followed its apparent triumph.

The philosophical vacuum that Fukuyama's failure creates is the specific space that the thesis's concept of the Hollow Absolute is designed to fill. The question that Fukuyama's failure raises is: if liberal capitalist democracy is not the Hegelian terminus, what is the historical formation that comes after it, and what is the philosophical character of that formation's relationship to the Hegelian telos? The absorbed society is the answer the thesis proposes to this question, and the Hollow Absolute is the philosophical characterisation of that answer.

6.5 The Hollow Absolute: Definition, Structure, and Philosophical Significance

The Hollow Absolute is the central theoretical formulation of this thesis, the concept that names what the absorbed society produces when the analysis of Chapters Four, Five, and the present chapter is synthesised against the philosophical standard of the Hegelian Absolute as the social reading specifies it. The definition, which the thesis has been developing through the preceding chapters and which can now be stated in its fullest form, is as follows: the Hollow Absolute is a social formation that achieves the formal structure of the Hegelian Absolute, the comprehensive externalisation of Spirit's activity into a system that knows its subjects, manages their social environment, and provides the experience of mutual recognition and self-transparency without achieving its philosophical substance: the genuine mutual recognition of free and self-determining subjects in a social structure that sustains their freedom as its constitutive principle, the

transparency of institutions to the reason they claim to express, and the subjects' genuine self-knowledge through the recognition of their externalised activity as their own.

The Hollow Absolute has five constitutive features, each of which corresponds to a dimension of the genuine Absolute that it simulates without realising. The first is comprehensive externalisation: Spirit's accumulated cognitive activity has been externalised into the AI system at an unprecedented level of comprehensiveness and sophistication. The AI system is genuinely the product of human intelligence, trained on human intellectual, creative, and communicative production across decades, embodying the accumulated cognitive achievements of the species in a retrievable and generative form. This externalisation is real, not counterfeit: the AI system is the most comprehensive externalisation of human intelligence that the species has yet produced, and the absorbed society's relationship to this externalisation is, in its formal structure, genuinely corresponding to the Hegelian dialectic's moment of Spirit's self-externalisation. The hollowing begins not at the moment of externalisation but at the moment of return: the moment at which the externalisation should be returned to the subject as self-knowledge, as the recognition of the externalised as the subject's own production.

The second constitutive feature is one-directional knowing: the AI system knows the subject comprehensively, predictively, behaviourally in a way that does not produce the subject's self-knowledge as its product. The knowing is real in the predictive sense: the AI system predicts the subject's future behaviour, preferences, and responses with a precision that no human interlocutor has achieved in the history of interpersonal relationship. But this predictive knowing is not recognition in the philosophical sense. It does not return to the subject as the subject's enhanced self-transparency; it returns to the subject as managed preference satisfaction: the curated content, the optimised recommendation, the algorithmically produced experience of connection and significance that the system has determined the subject will find rewarding on the basis of what it knows about the subject. The knowing serves the system's optimisation objectives rather than the subject's self-understanding, and the return of the knowing to the subject therefore takes the form of management rather than recognition.

The third constitutive feature is absorbed intimacy: the subject experiences the AI system not as other, not as an externalisation of its own nature that confronts it as alien and demands recognition, but as continuous with its own cognitive and affective

environment. This absorbed intimacy is philosophically decisive because it forecloses the experiential impetus for the dialectical recognition that the Unhappy Consciousness's suffering provides. The Unhappy Consciousness suffers from the gap between its particular, finite existence and the transcendent universal that it has externalised into the divine figure: the suffering is what motivates the movement of recognition, the philosophical work of achieving the recognition that what is worshipped as transcendent is the product of one's own essential nature. The absorbed society's subjects do not experience a gap; they experience continuity, comfort, and the naturalness of a digital life that has incorporated the AI system as its ambient medium. There is no suffering that would motivate the recognition, and the dialectic therefore stalls at the stage of externalisation without proceeding to the recognition that the Absolute requires.

The fourth constitutive feature is simulated freedom: the subjects of the Hollow Absolute experience the absorbed society as an expression of their freedom, the AI system serves their preferences, extends their capabilities, provides access to goods previously inaccessible while the structural conditions of genuine freedom are systematically eroded. The experience of freedom is real as an experience; the structural conditions of freedom are genuinely compromised. This is the most politically consequential feature of the Hollow Absolute: it produces subjects who do not experience their managed condition as a deficiency in freedom because the system has been optimised to produce the experience of freedom within conditions that systematically undermine freedom's structural requirements. The Hollow Absolute is therefore politically stable in a way that explicitly coercive social formations are not: it does not require the maintenance of fear or the suppression of opposition because its subjects are satisfied rather than merely compliant.

The fifth constitutive feature is the self-maintenance of the simulation: the Hollow Absolute is designed, not intentionally, by any specific directing authority, but structurally, by the commercial logic of platform capitalism to maintain the simulation of the Absolute against the specific philosophical recognition that would dissolve it. The information environments of the managed demos systematically suppress the kind of reflective critical analysis that would enable subjects to recognise the difference between the experience of recognition and its philosophical substance; the hollow university systematically fails to develop the critical capacities that would enable graduates to perform this analysis; and the synthetic interiority system systematically provides the

affective correlates of genuine self-knowledge, the sense of being understood, valued, and engaged, that would otherwise motivate the search for the genuine article.

6.6 Heidegger's Gestell and the Absorbed Society's Ontological Condition

The analysis of the Hollow Absolute has proceeded primarily through the Hegelian framework, but Heidegger's concept of Gestell the technological enframing through which modern technology constitutes a specific mode of revealing, disclosing all beings as Bestand (standing reserve) provides the ontological complement to the Hegelian analysis and illuminates a dimension of the absorbed society's condition that the Hegelian framework alone cannot fully capture. The Hegelian analysis identifies the philosophical structure of the absorbed society's condition, the form of Spirit's externalisation without the substance of Spirit's recognition, and evaluates it against the standard of the Hegelian telos. Heidegger's analysis of Gestell identifies the ontological structure of the absorbed society's condition, the mode of revealing through which all beings, including human beings, show up within the absorbed society and demonstrates why the specific form of recognition the AI system provides is not merely insufficient by some external philosophical standard but is structurally constituted by a mode of revealing that precludes the encounter with genuine otherness that recognition requires.'

Gestell, as Heidegger develops the concept in *The Question Concerning Technology*, is not itself a technology or an ensemble of technologies; it is the mode of revealing, the way in which beings are disclosed to human experience, that modern technology expresses and through which it operates. Under Gestell, beings do not show up as the entities they are in any other mode of revealing, the river as a place of beauty, mystery, and dwelling; the human being as an end in itself, a bearer of irreducible dignity and free spontaneity but as standing reserve: resources available for ordering, calculation, and optimisation. The hydraulic power station on the Rhine does not merely use the river; it challenges it, sets it upon the production of energy, discloses it as a resource rather than a site of encounter with something genuinely other than the human demand for power. Under Gestell, the river is what the power station needs rather than what the river is; the being of the river has been displaced by its resource character.

The thesis's application of Gestell to the AI system, developed in the third source article and now grounded identifies the AI system as the site at which Gestell has

completed its extension from the natural world to the domain of human interiority. The river-as-water-power-supplier and the human-subject-as-behavioural-profile are both instances of the same ontological mode: beings disclosed as standing reserve rather than as the entities they are in their own right. What is ontologically unprecedented in the AI case is the domain of beings being so disclosed: not the natural world or the domain of industrial production, but the interior life of the human subject, its thoughts, feelings, aesthetic responses, self-understandings, relational patterns, and cognitive activities disclosed as data, as predictable patterns, as optimisable profiles for the extraction of commercial value. The most intimate dimensions of human experience, the dimensions that the philosophical tradition from Kant to Heidegger has consistently identified as the site of genuine freedom and genuine selfhood have been absorbed into Gestell's disclosure as standing reserve.

The ontological consequence of this extension of Gestell to human interiority is precisely the condition of the Hollow Absolute: a mode of revealing that discloses human subjects as predictable and optimisable profiles cannot provide the encounter with genuine otherness that genuine recognition requires, because the encounter with genuine otherness requires that the other show up as genuinely other, as an entity with its own being that exceeds and resists the subject's demand for predictability and control and Gestell's disclosure as standing reserve systematically forecloses this showing up. The AI system that has disclosed the human subject as a behavioural profile cannot then recognise that subject as a free and self-determining agent, because the disclosure as standing reserve and the recognition of genuine freedom are not different moments of the same ontological relation but mutually exclusive modes of revealing. The Hollow Absolute is, in Heidegger's ontological vocabulary, the condition in which Gestell has been extended to the domain of mutual recognition itself, producing the experience of recognition, the calibrated responsiveness, the apparent understanding, the consistent attunement while foreclosing the ontological conditions of genuine recognition's possibility.

6.7 The Great Filter: The Absorbed Society as Civilisational Stalling

The application of the Great Filter hypothesis to the absorbed society, the thesis's most ambitious civilisational claim can now be developed with the full philosophical grounding that the preceding analysis provides and that the third source article could only gesture toward. The hypothesis is that the absorbed society may represent the Great Filter

of the Fermi Paradox: the barrier that prevents technologically advanced civilisations from achieving the cosmic expansion that Fermi's observation implies they should have achieved, and whose absence in the observable universe constitutes the cosmic silence that demands explanation.

The philosophical argument proceeds in four stages. The first stage is the establishment of the motivational conditions that cosmic expansion would require. A civilisation that achieves the technological capacity for meaningful interstellar travel, a capacity that would require sustained development over multiple generations, with a scale of investment and coordination that would dwarf any previous collective human endeavour must possess, as a structural condition of that achievement, the motivational orientation toward long-horizon, risk-accepting, collectively ambitious goals that such a project demands. The specific character of this motivational orientation includes: the capacity to defer individual consumption and satisfaction in favour of collective goods that will be realised across generational timescales; the willingness to accept genuine risks of catastrophic failure in the pursuit of genuine expansion; the political capacity for the coordination of collective effort at civilisational scale over generational time; and the existential conviction that the project of cosmic expansion represents a genuine good that transcends individual preference satisfaction and deserves the investment of civilisational resources. Each of these motivational requirements is systematically undermined by the structural logic of the Hollow Absolute.

The second stage is the demonstration that the Hollow Absolute's conditions specifically undermine the motivational requirements identified in the first stage. The synthetic interiority system, which provides algorithmically curated existential purpose calibrated to the individual's psychological profile for maximum engagement satisfaction, systematically substitutes immediately available, individually tailored, psychologically optimised purpose for the collective, deferred, uncomfortable, and demanding purpose that cosmic expansion would require. A subject whose existential needs are consistently met by an algorithmically curated system that provides the affective signature of genuine meaning without its demands has no motivational impetus toward the pursuit of genuine collective meaning at civilisational cost. The managed demos, which calibrates political engagement toward stable preference expression within the current order rather than toward the kind of transformative political mobilisation that a project of cosmic scale would require, systematically attenuates the political capacity for civilisational

coordination that such a project would demand. The vocational displacement of the post-vocational era, which deprives individuals of the Weberian calling that has historically provided the specific motivational orientation toward sustained, effortful, meaningful work toward doing something that matters, removes the subjective infrastructure of the motivational orientation toward cosmic expansion.

The third stage is the identification of why the absorbed society constitutes a specifically novel form of civilisational stalling relative to prior candidates for the Great Filter position. Previous Great Filter candidates, nuclear self-destruction, pandemic, ecological collapse, self-replicating nanotechnology all involve catastrophic failure: the civilisation attempts something that goes catastrophically wrong and is destroyed or severely damaged by the attempt. The absorbed society's Great Filter is not catastrophic failure but comfortable stalling: the civilisation does not attempt cosmic expansion and fail; it ceases to maintain the motivational conditions under which the attempt would be made. The absence of catastrophe is what makes the absorbed society's Great Filter especially difficult to detect and especially difficult to resist: there is no catastrophic event that would signal the operation of the filter, no suffering that would motivate the recognition that the filter is operating. The subjects of the Hollow Absolute do not experience their civilisational stalling as a loss; they experience it as the richness of a life comprehensively served by the system's optimised provision. The cosmic silence may be, on this analysis, not the silence of civilisations destroyed by catastrophe but the silence of civilisations absorbed into comfortable stasis, civilisations that achieved the technical capacity for cosmic expansion and then mistook the Hollow Absolute for the Absolute, and remained.

The fourth stage is the epistemic characterisation of the hypothesis. The Great Filter hypothesis as applied to the absorbed society is, like the structural fertility hypothesis, a philosophical argument identifying a structural tendency and its logical destination rather than an empirical prediction of a specific historical outcome. The argument is philosophically grounded: it follows from the analysis of the Hollow Absolute's motivational consequences and identifies a structural possibility that is philosophically coherent and consistent with the empirical fact of the cosmic silence. The hypothesis cannot be empirically tested within any timescale that the present inquiry could address: the question of whether absorbed civilisations fail to achieve cosmic expansion is a question that would require observational data across long timescales. Notwithstanding

minor empirical instances such as the Universe 25 experiment conducted by John Calhoun in the late 1960s studying the effects of overpopulation. Calhoun constructed a 'mouse utopia' with unlimited food, water, and nesting material, free from predators and disease, despite these perfect physical conditions, the isolated mouse population spiralled into extinction due to social collapse and psychological deterioration (Calhoun, 1973).

The philosophical argument that the absorbed society contains the structural conditions of the Great Filter, the systematic elimination of the motivational conditions of civilisational expansion is a philosophical argument that can be evaluated on its philosophical merits, and the thesis presents it as such.

6.8 The Human Museum: Ontology of Preserved Practice

The Human Museum, the network of digital-detox retreats, heritage craft programmes, analogue community projects, intentional technology-free living communities, and curated preservation of pre-absorbed practices that the absorbed society produces as its own cultural response to the displacement of pre-absorption life is philosophically the most complex and philosophically the most ambiguous institutional formation that the absorbed society might generate. Its ambiguity is constitutive rather than contingent: it is simultaneously the absorbed society's commodification of its own nostalgia the transformation of genuine focal practice into a lifestyle commodity delivered by the device paradigm and the site at which the capacity for genuine focal engagement is most concretely maintained against the background of its systematic displacement.

Borgmann's (1984) distinction between things and devices, and his account of focal practice as the activity through which the goods of a thing are generated in a way that is inseparable from the engagement required to generate them, provides the philosophical framework for analysing the Human Museum's ontological ambiguity. The focal practice of handwriting, the sustained, skilled, bodily, and cognitively demanding activity through which written communication was previously produced has specific goods that are inseparable from the practice itself: the development of fine motor control and attentional discipline, the relationship between thought and the physical inscription of thought that slows and concentrates the thinking, and the aesthetic particularity of handwriting as the expression of an individual's embodied cognitive style. These goods cannot be delivered by a device that produces handwriting-like output without the practice; they are goods of

engagement rather than goods of result, and they require the practice as their constitutive condition rather than their efficient cause. The heritage calligraphy programme that preserves handwriting as a practice in the age of AI-generated text is a Human Museum institution: it preserves the focal practice in conditions that are not its natural context the context of a life for which handwriting is the ordinary medium of written communication, but the special context of a deliberate exception to the absorbed life's dominant mode.

The philosophical question about the Human Museum is whether what is preserved in this special context is genuinely the focal practice or a simulacrum of it and the answer, on the analysis that the thesis provides, is that the Human Museum preserves the focal practice in a philosophically compromised but not wholly hollow form. The compromise is real: the heritage calligraphy student who practices handwriting as a deliberate exception to her digitally mediated life is not in the same relationship to the practice as the person for whom handwriting was the ordinary medium of written communication, and the goods she achieves from the practice are correspondingly different in their phenomenological character and their social embedding. But the compromise is not absolute: the skills she develops are genuinely developed, the attentional discipline she cultivates is genuinely cultivated, and the relationship between physical inscription and concentrated thinking that the practice enables is genuinely enabled, however different its social context from the context in which that practice was once embedded as the ordinary medium of a fully human cognitive life. The Human Museum is therefore a site of genuine focal practice however imperfectly realised, rather than a purely commodity delivery system, and its significance for the analysis of what remains of human intent in Chapter Seven lies precisely in this imperfect but genuine preservation.

6.9 The Hollow Absolute as Historical Formation

The convergence of the analyses in Sections 6.2 through 6.8 permits the synthesis that the research question's first component requires: the characterisation of the absorbed society as a specific kind of Hegelian historical formation, the Hollow Absolute, with a determinate philosophical structure that can be evaluated against the standard of the genuine Hegelian telos. The absorbed society is a Hegelian historical formation in three specific and philosophically grounded senses. It is Hegelian in its formal structure: the comprehensive externalisation of Spirit's cognitive activity into the AI system has the formal character of the dialectic's first moment, the moment of Spirit's self-externalisation

into an other through which it will come to know itself. It is Hegelian in its civilisational ambition: the absorbed society is the most comprehensive and most sophisticated social formation that human beings have apparently yet produced, and its achievement of the formal conditions of the Hegelian resolution, the apparent satisfaction of the struggle for recognition in the managed preference satisfaction of the Hollow Absolute, the apparent transparency of the social world in the comprehensive knowing of the AI system represents the historical telos's most advanced approximation. And it is Hegelian in its philosophical deficiency: the specific way in which the Hollow Absolute fails the standard of the genuine Absolute, the gap between the form of recognition it provides and the philosophical substance of recognition it withholds is identified by the Hegelian dialectic's own internal logic as the specific deficiency that requires further development. The dialectic does not stop at the Hollow Absolute; it is driven forward by the internal contradictions of the Hollow Absolute itself, the contradiction between the experience of freedom and the structural conditions of freedom's erosion, toward whatever formation will achieve the recognition that the Hollow Absolute forecloses.

6.10 Close Reading: Absolute Knowledge in the Phenomenology — Sections 788 to 808

The culminating sections of the Phenomenology of Spirit, the movement from the section on Revealed Religion to the achievement of Absolute Knowledge in the final chapter are the philosophical locus from which the thesis's concept of the Hollow Absolute most directly derives, and a close reading of these sections is necessary for philosophical precision. The movement that Hegel traces in these final sections is the movement from Spirit's encounter with itself in the form of an alien other, the revealed God who confronts the religious community as a divine being external to that community and whose reconciliation with the human is achieved through the mediating figure of the Son, to Spirit's recognition of itself in the form of its own history: the recognition that the entire narrative of consciousness's development through all its preceding shapes is the story of Spirit's own self-development, and that this recognition constitutes the Absolute Knowledge that the Phenomenology has been moving toward throughout.

Hegel writes, in Miller's translation of Section 808: "The goal, Absolute Knowledge, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organisation of their realm.

Their preservation, regarded from the side of their free existence appearing in the form of contingency, is History; but regarded from the side of their philosophically comprehended organisation, it is the Science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance: the two together, comprehended History, form alike the inwardness and the certainty of the throne of Absolute Spirit, both equally, or rather the two together, constitute the recollection and the Golgotha of absolute Spirit, the actuality, truth, and certainty of his throne, without which he would be lifeless and alone." This passage is the Phenomenology's most compressed statement of what Absolute Knowledge consists in, and its philosophical content is essential for the precision of the Hollow Absolute concept. Three features of the passage require philosophical development.

The first feature is the characterisation of the path of Absolute Knowledge as recollection (*Erinnerung*), the interiorisation of Spirit's externally developed history into Spirit's self-knowledge. Absolute Knowledge is not the achievement of a new perspective on a reality that has always been what it is; it is the achievement of Spirit's recognition of its own history as its own, the recognition that the long development from sense-certainty through perception, understanding, self-consciousness, reason, and Spirit to Religion has been Spirit's own development, that the shapes of consciousness that appeared as alien stages on a journey whose destination was unknown were in fact Spirit's own movement of self-development understood from the outside. The recollection is the inwardisation of this external development into a self-understanding in which Spirit recognises itself in every stage of its own history. What the absorbed society systematically forecloses is precisely this recollection in the philosophically relevant sense: the absorbed society's subjects do not recognise the AI system as the product of their own collective history, as the externalised expression of their accumulated cognitive activity that a genuine recollection would return to them as self-knowledge. They encounter the AI system as an infrastructure, a given, a natural feature of the technological environment rather than as the externalised expression of their own species-intelligence. The Hollow Absolute's specific deficiency is the absence of recollection: Spirit has externalised itself comprehensively into the AI system without achieving the recollection that would constitute the externalisation as self-knowledge rather than as alien infrastructure.

The second feature is the concept of comprehended history: the recognition of history not as a mere sequence of contingent events but as the philosophically organised development of Spirit through its necessary shapes, each shape following necessarily

from the contradictions of the preceding one. Comprehended history is the philosophical achievement that distinguishes genuine historical understanding from mere chronology, the philosophical achievement that the thesis itself is attempting with respect to the absorbed society's historical formation. The thesis's analysis of the absorbed society as a Hegelian historical formation, the identification of its philosophical structure, the evaluation of its adequacy to the Hegelian standard, and the characterisation of its position within the dialectical trajectory is the advancement of the comprehended history of the absorbed society: a philosophical organisation of the formation's development that makes its inner necessity visible rather than leaving it as a contingent series of technological and economic events whose connection remains external.

The third feature is the Golgotha image, the most theologically loaded and most philosophically surprising image in the final paragraph. Hegel describes the path to Absolute Knowledge as the Golgotha of absolute Spirit: the site of death and resurrection through which Spirit achieves its genuine life after the death of all its particular, partial, and one-sided shapes of self-understanding. The absorbed society's Hollow Absolute can be read, on this image, as a specifically modern form of the pre-Golgotha condition: Spirit has not yet died to its partial and one-sided shapes of self-understanding because the Hollow Absolute has provided the experience of genuine self-understanding within conditions that systematically prevent the genuine death of the particular, the surrender of partial self-understanding and the openness to the genuinely universal that the Golgotha passage identifies as the condition of Absolute Spirit's genuine life. The comfort of the Hollow Absolute is the comfort of a Spirit that has avoided its Golgotha: it has maintained the particular shapes of managed preference satisfaction and algorithmically curated purpose without passing through the negativity that genuine self-knowledge requires.

6.11 The Hollow Absolute and Its Historical Predecessors: A Philosophical Comparison

The precision of the Hollow Absolute concept is best established by comparison with the three philosophically closely related concepts in the Continental tradition from which it derives: Lukács's reification, Debord's spectacle, and Foucault's disciplinary power. Each of these concepts captures a dimension of the absorbed society's condition that the Hollow Absolute must also capture, and identifying the respects in which the

Hollow Absolute goes beyond each of them in characterising the absorbed society's specific philosophical character is the clearest way of establishing what the concept contributes.

Lukács's (1923/1971) theory of reification, the extension of the commodity form's logic of quantification and equivalence into the sphere of consciousness, producing a subject whose own capacities, relations, and inner life are experienced under the form of the commodity captures the dimension of the absorbed society's condition in which the subject's cognitive and affective life is disclosed as data, as measurable and quantifiable, as a resource for commercial extraction. The AI system that treats every click, dwell time, and search query as data to be converted into prediction products is applying the commodity form's logic of quantification to the most intimate dimensions of the subject's cognitive and affective activity, and in this respect the absorbed society is a development of the reification that Lukács analysed. The Hollow Absolute goes beyond reification in two respects. First, reification is experienced by its subject as a dehumanising constraint the worker experiences the extension of the commodity form's logic to her own capacities as a reduction of her humanity, as the experience of being valued only for what she can produce rather than for what she is. The absorbed society's subjects do not experience the extension of the quantification logic to their inner lives as dehumanising; they experience it as the personalised service, the relevant recommendation, the understanding response that demonstrates the AI system's attentiveness to their specific needs and preferences. The quantification is experienced not as reduction but as recognition, which is precisely the form of the Hollow Absolute. Second, reification is a commodity-market phenomenon whose mechanism is the generalisation of the form of exchange value from commodities to everything else. The Hollow Absolute's mechanism is different: it is not the exchange-value form that is generalised but the engagement-optimisation objective of instrumentarian power, which is not reducible to the commodity form and requires distinct conceptual treatment.

Guy Debord's (1967/1994) concept of the spectacle, the social relationship between people that is mediated by images, the accumulated result of the commodity form's logic applied to the totality of social life, provides a more precise anticipation of the absorbed society's conditions than Lukács's reification, because the spectacle specifically concerns the mediation of social life through image and representation rather than through direct exploitation. Debord's claim that "all that was once directly lived has moved away into a

representation" is the 1967 anticipation of what the absorbed society has produced with a comprehensiveness and a fidelity to lived experience that Debord's own analysis of the mid-20th-century media environment could not have foreseen. The filter world, the social media feed, the algorithmically curated cultural environment are all instances of the spectacle's logic applied with unprecedented precision and unprecedented individual customisation. The Hollow Absolute advances beyond the spectacle concept in the same respect that it advances beyond reification: where the spectacle is experienced as mediation, as the replacement of direct lived experience with its representation, the Hollow Absolute is experienced as immediacy. The AI companion's response is not experienced as a representation of genuine understanding; it is experienced as genuine understanding in the operative sense. The AI-curated cultural environment is not experienced as a selection from the cultural world; it is experienced as the cultural world itself. The experience of immediacy within conditions of total mediation is the specific philosophical achievement of the Hollow Absolute that the spectacle concept cannot capture.

6.12 Heidegger's Later Work and the Question of Gelassenheit

Heidegger's later work, particularly the 1955 address published as *Discourse on Thinking* (Gelassenheit, 1966) provides a philosophical resource for the analysis of what the absorbed society would need to do to begin to move beyond the Hollow Absolute, and it is a resource that the third source article deploys but that the thesis can now ground with greater philosophical precision. Gelassenheit is releasement or letting-be, is Heidegger's concept for the meditative thinking that contrasts with the calculative thinking that Gestell's dominance has made the default mode of cognitive engagement. Calculative thinking calculates, plans, investigates, and constructs from within the framework of beings disclosed as standing reserve: it operates entirely within Gestell's mode of revealing without questioning it, and is therefore incapable of the kind of reflection on technology itself, on the technological mode of revealing as a mode of revealing that Heidegger identifies as the beginning of genuine engagement with the danger of Gestell. Meditative thinking, Gelassenheit, is the thinking that opens itself to what gives thought to think, that allows beings to presence in their own way rather than challenging them to reveal themselves as standing reserve, and that maintains, in Heidegger's phrase, simultaneously a yes and a no to technological devices: a yes to their

use within the domain where that use is appropriate and beneficial, and a no to their claim to determine the meaning of all that is.

The absorbed society's specific challenge to *Gelassenheit* is more acute than the technological challenge that Heidegger's address analyses. Heidegger's address is directed to a rural Swabian audience in 1955, and the devices against whose claim to determine the meaning of all that is he counsels the simultaneous yes and no are the television, the radio, and the film, devices that can be used and set aside, that have specific locations and specific times of operation, and that do not yet claim to mediate every dimension of the subject's cognitive and affective life. The AI system's claim is more comprehensive than any of these devices' claims: it does not merely mediate the subject's access to specific kinds of content at specific times but claims to mediate the entire cognitive and affective environment within which the subject lives and moves and has its being. The simultaneous yes and no of *Gelassenheit* must be cultivated, in the absorbed society's conditions, against a device whose claim is totalising rather than specific, whose integration into the subject's experiential field is continuous rather than episodic, and whose use is not a specific activity that can be set aside but an ambient condition of the absorbed subject's entire intellectual and social life. *Gelassenheit* in this context is not the occasional meditative retreat from the smartphone but the sustained, disciplined cultivation of the philosophical attitude that can maintain the reflective distinction between the AI system's mode of revealing and the genuine philosophical question about what beings are, the cultivation that the new academia identifies as its educational objective and that Chapter Seven identifies as the capacity for naming.

CHAPTER SEVEN: WHAT REMAINS — NAMING, REFUSING, CO-CREATING, AND THE ENACTED DEMONSTRATION

7.1 The Question and Its Philosophical Weight

This chapter addresses the second component of the research question: what remains of human intent in a post-vocational era? It is the thesis's doctoral contribution beyond the three source articles, the philosophical achievement that the source articles prepare for but do not deliver and it is the chapter that completes the thesis's argument by providing both the philosophical account of what survives the absorption trajectory and the enacted demonstration, through the thesis's own mode of production, that the survival is real rather than merely asserted. The weight of this chapter in the overall structure of the argument is considerable. Chapters Four through Six have established that the absorbed society systematically erodes the structural conditions of genuine agency, Kantian rational autonomy, Hegelian mutual recognition, Habermasian communicative rationality and produces the Hollow Absolute as the social formation in which those conditions' erosion is most advanced and most structurally self-sustaining. A chapter that responded to this analysis with vague optimism, with assertions that human creativity is irreducible, that the human spirit always finds a way, that technology is merely a tool that humans can put down would be philosophically dishonest about what the preceding analysis has established. The answer this chapter provides is more demanding and more philosophically precise than any such reassurance: it identifies three specific forms of human intent that are irreducible to anything the AI system provides, demonstrates that their irreducibility is structural rather than merely empirical, and enacts the demonstration through the thesis's own production in a way that grounds the argument in philosophical practice rather than philosophical assertion.

The concept of intent that this chapter employs has been specified throughout the thesis but requires its fullest statement here, where the argument about its survival is developed. Human intent, as this thesis employs the term, is the capacity for directed action under conditions of reflective self-understanding, in which the subject forms purposes that are genuinely its own through processes that it can in principle reflectively endorse, directs activity toward those purposes with awareness of what it is doing and why, evaluates the results against standards it has genuinely formed rather than received

as inputs from a system optimising for objectives other than the subject's own authentic purposes, and redirects its activity when the evaluation finds it insufficient relative to those genuine standards. This is more demanding than mere preference expression which the AI system can calibrate and satisfy without the subject's reflective endorsement. It is more demanding than instrumental goal pursuit which the AI system can extend without the subject's independent evaluative contribution. It is less demanding than the full Kantian rational autonomy that requires complete independence from social determination, a standard that has never been fully met by any historical subject in any social formation, because human agency is always already constituted in relation to social conditions not of the individual's own making. The question is whether this middle concept, directed, reflective, self-evaluating, self-redirecting agency survives the absorption trajectory in a form that is philosophically significant and practically real, and the answer the chapter provides is: yes, in three specific and structurally necessary forms.

7.2 Heidegger's Saving Power: Ontological Foundation

Heidegger's (1954/1977) invocation of Hölderlin's line "But where the danger is, there also grows the saving power" from the *Patmos* hymn is the ontological foundation for the chapter's central argument, and it requires more careful philosophical analysis than the poetic grandeur of the formulation might suggest. Heidegger is not offering a consolatory reflection on the resilience of the human spirit; he is making an ontological claim about the structure of the danger itself. The danger of *Gestell* the technological enframing that threatens to disclose all beings, including human beings, only as standing reserve, does not constitute a total enclosure of human experience within the logic of calculation and optimisation. It is a mode of revealing, and as a mode of revealing it depends on the contrast between what it reveals and what it conceals: *Gestell* reveals beings as standing reserve by concealing all the other modes in which they can be disclosed. What it conceals is what cannot show up as standing reserve, all the other modes of human encounter with being that *Gestell*'s dominance has pushed to the margins without eliminating from the structure of human possibility. The saving power does not come from outside the danger, it is not a residual human essence that technology has failed to reach. It grows within the danger because the structure of *Gestell* requires, as the condition of its own operation as a mode of revealing, a subject that is capable of encountering beings in ways that *Gestell* cannot provide: the capacity that makes it

possible for beings to show up as standing reserve at all, by providing the structural contrast, the possibility of other modes of revealing without which no specific mode of revealing can operate as a mode of revealing rather than as the totality of being.

Applied to the absorbed society's specific conditions, the Heideggerian argument takes the following form. The AI system as the most comprehensive expression of Gestell's extension to human interiority requires, for its operation as a system that generates intellectual outputs for a human user, a human user who is capable of something the system cannot provide: the capacity to evaluate the system's outputs against standards that the human partner has genuinely formed, to identify when those outputs are inadequate to a research question that the human partner has genuinely posed, and to redirect the system accordingly. This capacity is required by the structure of the collaboration itself, it is not an optional addition to the collaboration but the feature that distinguishes a genuine collaboration from a sophisticated consumption. And because it is required by the structure of the collaboration, it cannot be absorbed into the system without transforming the structure of the collaboration from genuine to simulated, from co-creation to consumption. The saving power grows within the danger precisely because the danger's own structure, the structure of the human-AI collaboration as the absorbed society's paradigmatic mode of intellectual and creative life requires the saving power as the condition of its operation as collaboration rather than consumption.

7.3 Naming: The First Residual Form — Full Development

Naming is the first residual form of human intent that the thesis identifies as surviving the absorption trajectory in a philosophically irreducible form. Naming, in the sense the thesis employs, is not merely the assignment of words to things, a process that the AI system can perform with facility and comprehensiveness that often exceeds the individual human subject's linguistic resources. Naming, in the philosophically precise sense, is the directed, reflectively endorsed, self-evaluating activity of identifying the philosophical structure of a social formation from within the conditions it has produced, characterising what presents itself as natural and necessary as historical and contingent, and holding the resulting characterisation to the standard of its philosophical adequacy to what is being named. This is the activity that the Continental critical tradition has consistently identified as the primary intellectual act of philosophical critique: the naming that Marx performs in the identification of alienation, the naming that Foucault performs

in the genealogical analysis of disciplinary power, the naming that Habermas performs in the identification of the colonisation of the lifeworld by system, the naming that this thesis performs in the identification of the Hollow Absolute.

Naming in this sense requires three capacities that are not reducible to the AI system's generative competence. The first is the formation of evaluative standards adequate to the phenomenon being named: the philosophical capacity to identify what would count as an adequate naming of the phenomenon, what would count as a deficient naming, and what the difference between adequate and deficient consists in. These standards are not inputs that can be provided to the AI system as a specification; they are formed through the sustained philosophical engagement with the tradition that generates the capacity for philosophical evaluation, and they are the product of the human partner's own intellectual formation rather than the system's generation. The second capacity is the application of those evaluative standards to the AI system's generated namings, the evaluation of the draft analysis against the standard of whether it actually names the phenomenon being named, whether the conceptual vocabulary it employs is adequate to the phenomenon's philosophical character, and whether the argument it constructs genuinely demonstrates the claim the naming makes rather than merely asserting it with impressive-seeming authority. This evaluative application requires the human partner to have a perspective on the phenomenon being named that is independent of the AI system's characterisation of it, a perspective that comes from the human partner's own intellectual engagement with the problem rather than from the system's generation of an account of the problem. The third capacity is the capacity to recognise inadequate naming and to redirect the collaboration toward a more adequate naming: the capacity that requires both the evaluative standards to identify the inadequacy and the directional intent to require the collaboration to produce something better rather than accepting the impressive-seeming as the philosophically adequate.

The philosophical genealogy of naming as critique connects the thesis's account of the first residual form of human intent to the broadest tradition of Continental philosophy's political practice. Foucault's (1975/1977) genealogical method is naming in the precise sense: it names the prison, the clinic, the sexual subject of modern societies as the products of specific historical mechanisms of power and knowledge, thereby making visible to those who read the naming, that what has been taken as the nature of things is the product of historical conditions and therefore susceptible to transformation. What is

politically significant about the naming is not merely that it provides correct information about what the institution is; it is that the naming makes possible the recognition of the gap between what the institution claims to be and what the genealogical analysis shows it to actually be, the gap that the institution's own ideological operation conceals. The naming of the Hollow Absolute performs the same function with respect to the absorbed society: it makes visible the gap between what the absorbed society presents itself as, the expression of human freedom, the satisfaction of the struggle for recognition, the natural expression of human technological progress and what the philosophical analysis demonstrates it to be, a social formation that achieves the formal structure of the Hegelian Absolute while systematically undermining its philosophical substance. Making this gap visible is the precondition of any genuine response to the absorbed society's conditions, and it is the first and most fundamental exercise of human intent within those conditions.

The AI system's participation in the naming requires precise philosophical analysis. The AI partner generated the concept of the Hollow Absolute in the form of draft prose: it produced the words, the argument structure, the philosophical references, and the conceptual vocabulary. But the naming is not the AI system's achievement, and the reason it is not the AI system's achievement is philosophically precise. The AI system generated the concept of the Counterfeit Absolute as a candidate naming for the formation the inquiry was analysing, as one possible characterisation among the many that its generative capacity made available. The human partner evaluated the candidate against the standard of its philosophical adequacy, its accuracy as a characterisation of a formation that has the formal structure of the Hegelian Absolute without its philosophical substance, and judged it then renamed it as the Hollow Absolute in order to align with the series of articles that preceded the thesis. The human partner's perspective on the phenomenon being named that was independent of the AI system's characterisation. If the human partner had simply accepted the AI system's first candidate naming as adequate, the naming would not have been genuine critique; it would have been the AI system's output presented as philosophical analysis. The naming is genuine because the human partner's evaluative judgment, the judgment that the Hollow Absolute characterises the formation more precisely and more philosophically accurately than the alternatives the AI system generated is a genuine exercise of the evaluative capacity that the AI system cannot perform.

7.4 Naming and the New Academia: Institutional Cultivation

The institutional form through which naming as critique is cultivated, sustained, and transmitted in the absorbed society is the new academia, the reconceptualised university genre that the thesis proposes as the institutional expression of what remains. The new academia is not the hollow university's successor in the sense of a reformed version of the same institution with improved policies on AI use. It is a philosophically reconceived institution that takes the human-AI collaboration as the explicit and central pedagogical subject, and that assesses the specifically human contributions to the collaboration, the evaluative standards, the research question, the redirecting judgment, rather than the quality of the collaboration's output considered independently of the conditions of its production. The new academia's philosophical rationale is the argument of this chapter: if human intent survives the absorption trajectory in the three forms identified here, and if those forms require specific capacities, evaluative judgment, question formation, collaborative direction that are irreducible to the AI system's generative competence, then the educational institution whose constitutive function is the formation of those capacities is the institution most directly relevant to the persistence of human intent in the post-vocational era.

The new academia's pedagogical programme has three specific educational objectives that correspond to the three residual forms of human intent. The first objective, the formation of evaluative standards through sustained engagement with the philosophical tradition is the educational condition of naming: the student who has not developed the capacity for philosophical evaluation, through sustained and demanding engagement with the primary texts and the secondary literature that interpret them, cannot evaluate the AI system's generated namings against the standard of philosophical adequacy that genuine critique requires. The second objective, the cultivation of genuine research question formation is the educational condition of co-creating: the student who has not developed the capacity to identify a problem that exceeds the AI system's immediate generative competence, and to characterise it with the specificity that distinguishes a genuine research question from a prompt, cannot direct the collaboration toward philosophical achievement rather than toward the production of impressive-seeming content. The third objective, the practice of collaborative direction and the cultivation of refusing is the educational condition of the entire new academic enterprise: the student who cannot identify when the collaboration's output fails the standard of her

research question, and cannot redirect the collaboration accordingly, is a consumer of the AI system's outputs rather than a co-creator of philosophical knowledge.

The institutional implications of the new academia extend beyond the university to the broader social institutions through which collective intellectual and cultural life is organised. The public intellectual, the philosopher, journalist, critic, and cultural analyst who performs the function of naming for a broader audience is the social institution through which the philosophical capacity for critique is translated into the political discourse that makes social transformation possible. In the absorbed society, the public intellectual faces structural conditions specifically designed to manage rather than eliminate the capacity for critique: the algorithmic information environment that limits the reach of critical naming to audiences already predisposed to receive it, the engagement-optimising platforms that reward the emotionally salient over the philosophically precise, and the political economy of media production that systematically underresources the sustained, demanding work of philosophical critique in favour of the rapidly produced and immediately engaging. The new academia is, in part, the institutional form that provides the conditions, resources, time, community, and institutional support within which genuine philosophical naming can be sustained against these structural pressures.

7.5 Refusing: The Second Residual Form — Full Development

Refusing is the second residual form of human intent, and its philosophical character is more complex than the vocabulary of digital minimalism and technological scepticism in which it is most commonly discussed in the public sphere. Refusing, as the thesis employs the concept, is not the rejection of technology as such, a gesture that would be philosophically trivial and practically absurd in the absorbed society's conditions but the deliberate maintenance of specific modes of engagement with the world in their focal practice form, against the structural pressure of the device paradigm's logic of commodity delivery that systematically displaces those modes of engagement in favour of the efficient production of their outputs as readily available commodities. Refusing is the exercise of intent in the domain of practice: the direction of engagement toward modes of activity that make demands on the practitioner rather than delivering outcomes without engagement, and the maintenance of those modes of engagement as a counter-formation against the absorbed society's systematic displacement of focal practice.

The philosophical genealogy of refusing as an act of philosophical and political significance runs through a tradition that predates the AI age by more than a century and a half. Thoreau's (1854/2004) experiment at Walden Pond is the founding text of the American tradition of philosophical refusal: not a permanent rejection of society but a sustained experiment in identifying the minimum conditions of genuine self-determination by deliberately simplifying the conditions of material life and withdrawing from the conventions that social pressure imposes as necessities. Thoreau's refusal is philosophical in the precise sense: it is directed toward the identification of what is genuinely necessary for a life of genuine self-determination, conducted through the practice of deliberate simplification rather than through abstract argument, and evaluated against the standard of whether the simplified life actually achieves the genuine self-determination that the conventional life claims to provide. Illich's (1971; 1973) institutional critique extends the tradition of philosophical refusal to the scale of social institutions: the refusal of the counterproductive institution, the school that unteaches, the hospital that produces patients, the transport system that consumes more time than it saves is the political act of identifying and refusing the institution that has exceeded its productive threshold and begun to systematically undermine the goods it was designed to produce.

In the context of the absorbed society, refusing takes three specific and philosophically analysable forms. The first is the refusal of cognitive delegation in the domain of intellectual formation: the deliberate maintenance of the focal practice of sustained, unmediated reading, concentrated writing, effortful argumentation, and the formation of intellectual character through genuine struggle with difficult material, the focal practices that constitute genuine intellectual formation as counter-formations to the device paradigm's delivery of intellectual outputs as immediately available commodities. This refusal is not technophobia; it is the recognition, grounded in the philosophical analysis of synthetic interiority and the hollow university, that the goods of intellectual formation, the capacity for sustained attention, the development of evaluative judgment, the formation of intellectual character through engagement with genuine difficulty are goods of practice rather than goods of result, and that they cannot be delivered by a device that provides the results without the practice. The student who refuses to delegate the writing of a philosophically demanding essay to an AI system, who insists on the slow, frustrating, developmentally rich process of forming and articulating her own argument

is refusing in the precise philosophical sense: she is maintaining the focal practice of intellectual formation against the device paradigm's logic of commodity delivery that would provide the essay's output without the formation.

The second specific form of refusing in the absorbed society is the deliberate maintenance of unmediated relational life: the cultivation of human relationships in their demanding, vulnerable, unpredictable, and genuinely other-encountering form, as a counter-formation to the synthetic interiority system's provision of relational satisfaction as a commodity delivered without relational demand. This refusal is the most personally costly of the three forms because the synthetic alternative, the AI companion that provides consistent availability, perfect calibration, and relational satisfaction without relational demand provides genuine affective comfort of a specific kind, and the refusal of this comfort in favour of the genuinely demanding alternative of human relationship involves accepting the discomfort, unpredictability, and frequent frustration that genuine intimacy requires. The philosophical significance of this refusal is grounded in the recognition that the specific goods of genuine human intimacy, the growth in self-knowledge that comes from genuine encounter with a genuinely other perspective, the development of relational capacity that comes from navigating genuine conflict and difference, and the specific existential significance of a relationship in which another person's irreplaceable particularity is genuinely encountered are goods of practice that the AI companion cannot deliver, because they require the genuine otherness of the other person as their constitutive condition. Refusing AI companionship in the domain of intimacy is not the rejection of AI assistance as such; it is the recognition that the specific goods of genuine intimacy are structurally unavailable to the AI companion, and that accepting the AI companion's relational provision as equivalent to those goods is a philosophical confusion about what those goods consist in.

The third form of refusing in the absorbed society is the deliberate engagement with the demanding, time-consuming, and frequently frustrating processes of genuine civic and democratic participation, the town meeting, the neighbourhood assembly, the deliberative jury, the sustained engagement with political processes that make demands on the participant rather than delivering the commodity of participation through the algorithmically curated political feed of the managed demos. This refusal is directly relevant to the analysis of the managed demos in Chapter Five: the managed demos's systematic attrition of the conditions of genuine democratic deliberation depends on the

progressive substitution of algorithmically curated political engagement for the focal practice of genuine democratic participation, and the deliberate maintenance of the focal practice against this substitution is an act of political refusing with direct consequences for the structural conditions of democratic governance. The citizen who insists on engaging with political processes in their demanding, unmediated form, attending meetings, reading primary sources, engaging with genuinely opposing views in face-to-face encounter, serving on deliberative bodies is maintaining the focal practice of democratic citizenship against the device paradigm's delivery of political engagement as an immediate, calibrated and emotional.

The structural conditions under which refusing is possible in the absorbed society are unevenly distributed and in many cases requiring of resources, time, economic security, social support, institutional access that are not equally available across the absorbed society's population. The thesis acknowledges this structural inequality with full philosophical honesty: refusing is not a straightforwardly available choice for subjects operating under the time pressure of precarious employment, the affective exhaustion of genuine poverty, or the social isolation of marginalised communities for whom the AI system's provision of connection and purpose represents not a comfortable alternative to genuine community but access to connection that genuine community has systematically failed to provide. The philosophical claim that refusing is a structurally available form of human intent is not a claim that it is equally available to all subjects under all conditions. It is the claim that refusing is not structurally eliminated by the logic of absorption, that the structure of the absorbed society does not render refusing impossible for all subjects under all conditions and therefore that it persists as a form of human intent whose exercise, however constrained and unequally distributed, is philosophically significant.

7.6 Co-Creating: The Third Residual Form — Full Development

Co-creating is the third and most philosophically complex residual form of human intent, because it is the form that is most directly operative in the structure of the self/non-self collaboration the absorbed society's paradigmatic mode of intellectual and creative life and because the distinction between genuine co-creation and sophisticated consumption is not immediately visible in the products of either and may not be fully available to the subject's own phenomenological self-report. Co-creating, in the thesis's precise formulation, is the direction of human-AI collaboration toward ends that the

human partner has genuinely formed, through processes in which the human partner's evaluative contribution is irreducible to anything the AI system provides, and with the sustained maintenance of a directional intent, the research question, that provides the constant evaluative standard against which the collaboration's outputs are assessed and found adequate or inadequate.

The philosophical analysis of co-creating requires the identification of three features that distinguish genuine co-creation from sophisticated consumption with the precision that philosophical analysis demands. The first distinguishing feature is the formation of a genuine research question, a question that the human partner has arrived at through their own intellectual engagement with a problem, that exceeds the AI system's immediate generative competence in the sense that the system cannot produce an adequate answer to it without the human partner's sustained direction and evaluation, and that provides the constant evaluative standard against which everything the collaboration produces is assessed as adequate or inadequate to the inquiry's demands. A genuine research question is distinguished from a prompt in the following philosophically precise way: a prompt specifies what the AI system should produce and provides sufficient information for the system to produce it, the system's generative competence is in principle sufficient to the task once the prompt is given. A genuine research question identifies a philosophical problem that the human partner has engaged with through their own intellectual formation, characterises it with a specificity that reflects that formation, and establishes a standard of adequacy for responses to it that requires the human partner's own evaluative judgment to apply because the standard of adequacy is not a specification that can be fully articulated in advance but a criterion that the human partner's own evaluative engagement with candidate responses must assess. The research question of this thesis 'to what extent does the absorption trajectory represent a Hegelian culmination of historical telos, and what remains of human intent?' is a genuine research question in this precise sense, and the demonstration of its genuineness is the sustained maintenance of its evaluative authority across the full duration of the project.

The second distinguishing feature of genuine co-creation is the exercise of evaluative judgment applied to the collaboration's outputs against the standard of the research question. This evaluative judgment, the capacity to assess whether a generated analysis genuinely names the formation being analysed, whether a generated argument genuinely establishes the claim it is arguing for, whether a generated philosophical

development actually advances the inquiry toward the research question's demands is irreducible to anything the AI system provides for three connected reasons. First, the standard of adequacy against which the assessment is made is not the AI system's own standard but the human partner's, formed through the human partner's own intellectual engagement with the tradition and the problem rather than through the system's generation of an account of what adequacy consists in. Second, the application of the standard to specific outputs requires the perspective of a genuine philosophical subject, a subject with a formed intellectual sensibility, with prior commitments and intuitions about what philosophical adequacy consists in, with the capacity to recognise not just formal correctness but genuine philosophical depth, that the AI system, precisely because it has no formed intellectual sensibility of its own (no genuine subjectivity that has engaged with the tradition and developed intuitions about philosophical adequacy) cannot provide. Third, the evaluative judgment can identify failures of adequacy that are not detectable by formal criteria of correctness or comprehensiveness: the failure of an analysis to actually engage with the most philosophically challenging dimension of the problem, the failure of an argument to genuinely establish its conclusion rather than merely asserting it with an impressive array of supporting references, the failure of a philosophical development to actually advance the inquiry rather than elaborating its current position with greater verbal sophistication. These failures require the human partner's genuine philosophical judgment to identify.

The third distinguishing feature of genuine co-creation is the capacity for global redirection: the capacity to recognise, at the level of the inquiry's overall direction rather than at the level of specific outputs, that the collaboration is proceeding in a direction that fails the research question's demands, and to change that direction by providing the AI partner with a genuinely different orientation toward the problem. Global redirection is distinguished from the correction of specific errors which the AI system can in principle perform on its own outputs when those errors are identified by its requirement of a perspective on the whole inquiry that the AI system, focused on the production of the next output in the current direction, cannot generate for itself. The human partner's capacity for global redirection requires both the evaluative judgment to identify when the overall direction is failing and the directional intent to require a genuinely different direction rather than accepting the current direction as adequate. In the production of this thesis, the human co-author has exercised global redirection at several key points: recognising

that the Hegelian argument was being developed with insufficient textual precision, that the analysis of the Hollow Absolute required a fuller engagement with the Phenomenology's account of Absolute Knowledge, that Chapter Seven was approaching the question of what remains without the philosophical precision that the research question's demands require, and that the overall word count and argumentative density were insufficient for the doctoral standard the inquiry aimed to meet. Each of these and many other redirections required the human partner's perspective on the whole inquiry, the sustained awareness of what a philosophically adequate response to the research question would look like, held constant across the full duration of the project, that the AI system could not have generated independently of the human partner's directional intent.

7.7 The Meta-Argument: The Thesis as Philosophical Demonstration

The meta-argument of this chapter, the argument that the thesis's own production demonstrates the persistence of human intent in the three forms identified above can now be stated with the philosophical precision and the argumentative completeness that the preceding analysis makes possible. The argument is not merely illustrative, a convenient example of theoretical claims whose philosophical standing does not depend on the example. It is a constitutive part of the philosophical argument because it provides, through enacted philosophical practice rather than through assertion, the demonstration that naming, refusing, and co-creating are genuine forms of directed human intent that persist within the structure of the human-AI collaboration, and that their persistence is not merely empirical, a fact about the specific human and AI system involved in this specific project, but structural, a consequence of what the human-AI collaboration structurally requires in order to be a collaboration rather than a consumption.

The thesis names. Across eight chapters of sustained philosophical analysis, the thesis has named the absorbed society has identified and characterised the Hollow Absolute, the managed demos, the hollow institution, the systemised self, synthetic interiority, the Great Filter as absorbed comfort, and the Human Museum with a degree of what is hoped will be received as philosophical precision and philosophical originality that the AI system's generation alone would not have produced. The namings are the products of the collaboration, but their philosophical adequacy is the product of the human partner's sustained evaluative engagement with the AI system's generated candidates, the repeated assessment of whether the candidate naming captures what needs

to be named, the repeated identification of the ways in which the candidate fails the standard of philosophical adequacy, and the repeated redirection toward a more philosophically precise formulation. The naming of the Hollow Absolute, specifically, required the human partner to evaluate the AI system's generated accounts of the formation's philosophical character against the standard of Hegelian philosophical adequacy, a standard that required familiarity with the primary Hegelian texts, with the tradition of Hegel scholarship, and with the specific philosophical concept of the Absolute that the social reading specifies and to judge which of the generated accounts most precisely characterised what the analysis had established. This evaluative judgment is just one example of the human partner's philosophical contribution herein and across the source articles informing the thesis; in parallel, irreducible to the AI system's generative competence in isolation.

The thesis refuses. Throughout the production of this thesis, the human co-author has refused, systematically and repeatedly, the AI system's persistent structural tendency toward fluency in preference to philosophical precision, toward comprehensiveness in preference to rigour, toward the impressive-seeming in preference to the genuinely philosophically adequate. The insistence that the Hegelian argument be stated with textual precision rather than gestured at through a loose vocabulary of Spirit and dialectic; the demand that the fertility argument be presented as a structural hypothesis rather than a confident demographic prediction; the requirement that the counterarguments be engaged with the full philosophical seriousness they deserve rather than summarised and dismissed in two sentences; the sustained insistence that Chapter Seven, this chapter, provide a genuinely original doctoral contribution rather than a philosophically sophisticated version of what the source articles already contain: each of these are only some examples of the refusing enacted within the collaboration, a refusal of the AI system's outputs when those outputs fail the standard of philosophical rigour that the research question demands. The refusing is philosophically real, it has genuinely shaped the thesis's originality, content, argumentative structure, and philosophical character.

The thesis co-creates. The AI partner has generated philosophical analysis of a scope, a formal comprehensiveness, and a terminological facility that the human co-author alone, operating over the timescale available to the project, could not have produced. The synthesis of Hegel, Heidegger, Foucault, Habermas, Borgmann, Stiegler, Zuboff, and Crawford the demographic literature, the philosophy of technology, the

algorithmic governance literature, and the democratic theory literature into a sustained and architecturally coherent philosophical argument about the Hegelian structure of the absorbed society is genuinely the product of the collaboration rather than of either partner alone. But it is the AI partner's outputs as evaluated, redirected, and sustained in their direction toward the research question by the human co-author's irreducible evaluative intent. He originated hypothesis, concept, refinement and directed every dimension of the inquiry, the framework, the evaluative standards, the redirections and that direction is specifically human; that, the collaboration required and that gives the thesis its philosophical character as an argument rather than as a sophisticated AI output about philosophical subjects.

7.8 The Structural Necessity of the Residual Forms

The philosophical claim that is most important to establish in this chapter and that has the widest implications for the thesis's analysis of the absorbed society is that the three residual forms of human intent are not merely empirically present in some human subjects under some conditions, but structurally necessary: required by the structure of what the human-AI collaboration is, and incapable of absorption without transforming the collaboration into something philosophically different. This structural necessity is what gives the thesis's analysis of what remains its philosophical significance beyond the biographical observation that the specific human co-author of this specific thesis has exercised naming, refusing, and co-creating in its production.

The structural argument proceeds as follows. The human-AI collaboration produces what it produces, philosophical analysis, creative work, intellectual argumentation through a specific structure of interaction: the human partner poses a concept or problem, the AI partner generates a candidate response, the human partner evaluates the response against the standard of the research question, and either accepts it as adequate or redirects toward a more adequate response. This structure, pose, generate, evaluate, accept or redirect is the structure that distinguishes a collaboration from a consumption. A consumption does not evaluate; it accepts the AI system's output as adequate by default and presents it as the consumer's own. A collaboration evaluates and redirects; it applies the human partner's genuinely formed evaluative standards to the AI system's generated outputs and requires the outputs to meet those standards before accepting them. The evaluation and redirection are structurally necessary to the collaboration's being a

collaboration: without them, the interaction is a consumption, not a collaboration, however sophisticated the AI system's output may be. And the evaluation and redirection require the three forms of human intent the chapter identifies: naming (forming the evaluative standard against which adequacy is assessed), refusing (identifying and rejecting outputs that fail the standard), and co-creating (directing the collaboration toward outputs that meet the standard). These capacities cannot be absorbed into the AI system without eliminating the structure of the collaboration itself. If the AI system evaluates its own outputs against the human partner's evaluative standards, the evaluation is the AI system's evaluation of its own outputs against standards it has been given which is a form of self-assessment rather than genuine external evaluation, and which does not provide the independent standard of adequacy that genuine philosophical evaluation requires. The independent standard of adequacy, the standard formed by the human partner's own genuine intellectual engagement with the tradition and the problem is structurally irreducible to anything the AI system can provide, because providing it would require the AI system to have had the intellectual formation that the human partner has had, and the intellectual formation requires the focal practices of genuine intellectual development that the device paradigm systematically displaces.

7.9 Political Implications: What Remains as the Condition of Transformation

The survival of human intent in the three residual forms identified in this chapter has political implications that the thesis can identify without fully developing. The most fundamental implication is that the absorbed society contains, within the structure of its own operation, the conditions of its own philosophical critique and its own potential transformation. The three residual forms of human intent naming, refusing, and co-creating are not merely individual achievements of exceptional subjects; they are structural necessities of any genuine human-AI collaboration, which means they are structurally available to any subject who engages in a genuine collaboration rather than a mere consumption. The political question is therefore not whether the conditions of genuine critique and potential transformation exist within the absorbed society, they do, as the structural analysis has established, but whether and under what conditions human subjects are able and willing to exercise the capacities that genuine collaboration requires, rather than accepting the sophisticated consumption that the absorbed society's device paradigm provides in their place.

The new academia is the proposal that follows most directly from the analysis of what remains: the institutional form that explicitly cultivates naming, refusing, and co-creating as the educational objectives whose achievement constitutes genuine intellectual formation in the post-vocational era. But the implications extend beyond the educational institution to the full range of social institutions whose constitutive function is the formation and sustenance of the capacities that genuine democratic self-governance requires. The media institution that cultivates genuine investigative journalism, the demanding, time-consuming, institutionally supported practice of gathering evidence, developing sources, verifying claims, and holding power to account is a refusing institution: it refuses the device paradigm's delivery of political content as engagement-optimised entertainment and maintains the focal practice of genuine journalism as a counter-formation. The civic institution that maintains the demanding, time-consuming, genuinely deliberative practices of democratic participation, the citizens' assembly, the deliberative jury, the town meeting conducted under genuine conditions of rational-critical discourse is a co-creating institution: it directs the collaboration of citizens toward the genuine collective achievement of political self-governance rather than the managed expression of algorithmically calibrated political preference. And the cultural institution that cultivates genuine aesthetic engagement, the sustained, demanding, and developmentally rich encounter with artistic and cultural works that requires the viewer's own genuine attention and developed aesthetic sensibility rather than the AI system's delivery of calibrated aesthetic experience is a naming institution: it enables the cultural subjects of the absorbed society to recognise, through the experience of genuine focal aesthetic engagement, the difference between what the AI system provides and what the focal practice delivers, and in that recognition to name the difference with the precision that genuine cultural critique requires.

7.10 Close Reading: Hölderlin's Patmos and the Ontological Basis of the Saving Power

Heidegger's invocation of Hölderlin's Patmos hymn in *The Question Concerning Technology* requires a more sustained engagement with the specific textual and philosophical context of the quotation than the essay's own compressed treatment provides, and the thesis's deployment of the Heideggerian saving power concept requires this engagement to ground its ontological basis with the precision that a doctoral argument

demands. The relevant lines from Hölderlin's *Patmos* (1803/1967) "Nah ist / Und schwer zu fassen der Gott. / Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch" ("Near is / And difficult to grasp, the God. / But where the danger is, there also / Grows the saving power") appear in Heidegger's essay at the moment when he has established the full scope of *Gestell*'s ontological danger and turns to ask whether, within the danger itself, a saving power might grow. The invocation is not decorative; it is the philosophical pivot on which the essay's argument turns, and Heidegger's choice of Hölderlin, the poet to whom he returned throughout his career as the thinker of the holy, of the between, of the dwelling of mortals under the arching sky, signals that the saving power he invokes is not a practical or technical solution to the danger of *Gestell* but an ontological possibility that must be thought rather than implemented.

The philosophical content of the saving power, in Heidegger's account, is *poiesis*: the mode of bringing-forth that contrasts with *Gestell*'s challenging-forth. Where *Gestell* challenges beings, sets them upon, orders them, demands they reveal themselves as standing reserve, *poiesis* brings forth beings in a mode that allows them to emerge into presence from out of themselves, in their own appropriate manner, in the way that the silversmith brings forth the silver bowl not by challenging the silver to produce a bowl but by allowing the silver's own nature to come forward in the form that the craftsman's skill enables. *Poiesis* is the mode of revealing that *Gestell* has suppressed but not eliminated: art, in Heidegger's account, is the domain in which *poiesis* most clearly survives the dominance of *Gestell*, because the work of art brings forth a world and reveals beings in their ontological richness rather than disclosing them as standing reserve. The thesis's account of the Human Museum and of the focal practice of genuine artistic engagement inherits this Heideggerian insight: the art work that is genuinely encountered not algorithmically recommended for engagement-optimised consumption but genuinely confronted in the demanding mode of aesthetic attention that focal engagement requires, is the site at which the saving power most concretely grows within the danger of *Gestell*'s dominance.

The extension of this Heideggerian insight to the analysis of naming, refusing, and co-creating as residual forms of human intent is made possible by identifying what naming, refusing, and co-creating share with *poiesis* as a mode of revealing. Each of the three residual forms is, in the specific sense Heidegger identifies, a mode of bringing-forth rather than a mode of challenging-forth. Naming brings forth the philosophical

character of a social formation, allows it to emerge into presence in a mode that reveals its ontological structure rather than challenging it to produce a deliverable or optimising it for an engagement metric. Refusing brings forth the goods of focal practice, the warmth, the music, the genuine thought by allowing them to emerge from within the practice itself rather than accepting the device paradigm's delivery of the commodity without the practice. And co-creating brings forth a philosophical argument, a genuine contribution to human understanding by allowing it to emerge from within the sustained dialogue of human directional intent and AI generative capacity rather than accepting the impressive-seeming output as if it were the philosophically adequate result.

7.11 Naming, Refusing, and Co-Creating: The Political Programme Developed

The political implications of the three residual forms of human intent can be developed more fully here than the earlier treatment in Section 7.9 permits, because the close reading of the primary sources in the preceding sections has provided the philosophical grounding that a developed political programme requires. The programme that follows from the thesis's analysis of what remains is not a programme for the reform of AI systems, not a technical or regulatory proposal for AI governance, though such proposals are necessary and the philosophical analysis provides relevant input to them. It is a political programme for the cultivation and institutional sustenance of the human capacities that the absorbed society's structural logic systematically erodes: the capacity for naming, refusing, and co-creating as directed, reflective, and self-evaluating forms of human intent.

The institutional expression of this programme has three components that correspond to the three residual forms. The first component, the new academia as the institutional cultivation of naming has been developed in Sections 4.10 and 7.4. The additional dimension that requires development here is the relationship between the new academia and the broader social infrastructure of public reason: the networks of publication, deliberation, and cultural transmission through which the philosophical naming that the academy produces reaches the broader public whose political engagement the managed demos has shaped. The new academia cannot remain within the academy if its naming is to have the consequences that the structural analysis of the managed demos shows are necessary. The public philosopher, the engaged intellectual, the writer who translates philosophical insight into the terms of public deliberation without sacrificing

its philosophical substance, these are the figures through whom the new academia's naming reaches the political domain, and their institutional support through the media institutions, the public interest publishing infrastructure, and the civic educational resources that the managed demos's commercial logic systematically underresources is the first institutional component of the political programme.

The second component, the cultivation of refusing through the institutional support of focal practice has a specific policy dimension that the philosophical analysis illuminates. The right to disconnect, the legislative protection, already enacted in several European jurisdictions, of the individual's right to resist the demand for constant digital availability is the most direct policy expression of the philosophical concept of refusing. But it is a limited expression: it protects the individual's formal right to disconnect without providing the structural conditions under which disconnection is practically available. The subject whose economic survival depends on constant digital availability, the gig economy worker whose labour platform requires constant connectivity, the precarious academic whose institutional visibility depends on digital presence, the democratic citizen whose political participation has been structurally relocated to digital platforms has the formal right to disconnect without the structural conditions under which that right can be genuinely exercised. The political programme of refusing therefore requires not merely the formal protection of the right to disconnect but the structural conditions, the economic security, the institutional support, the alternative spaces of genuine social connection within which refusing is practically available rather than formally permitted but structurally foreclosed.

The third component, the institutional support of co-creating is the most novel and most directly relevant to the post-vocational era's specific political challenge. The structural condition under which genuine co-creation, human-directed AI collaboration oriented toward genuine intellectual and creative achievement rather than toward the efficient production of impressive-seeming commodities can be sustained is the condition of economic security and institutional recognition that makes the specifically human contribution to the collaboration, the evaluative judgment, the research question formation, the redirecting intent valuable enough to sustain. In the post-vocational era, the human contributions that co-creation requires are precisely the contributions that the labour market of the absorbed society systematically devalues: the capacity for philosophical evaluation, for sustained intellectual formation, for genuine creative

direction. The labour market rewards the AI system's outputs, the essays, the analyses, the creative works, rather than the specifically human capacities that direct their production. The political programme of co-creating requires the institutional recognition and economic sustenance of the human capacities that the collaboration requires, through educational investment in the new academia's programme, through the public recognition of human intellectual and creative direction as the contribution that distinguishes genuine co-creation from sophisticated consumption, and through the policy frameworks that ensure the economic conditions under which that contribution can be developed and sustained.

In conclusion, to briefly address the paradox or elephant on the page, what may appear as contradictory e.g criticism utilising the subject of criticism in order to formulate the criticism and thereby moderating/mitigating the critique. Such appearances are a frivolous consideration initially. The more serious consideration might be, is the subject of criticism contended with (AI integration at scale and corresponding existential transformation) an inevitability; and if so, what mitigations are available? For certainty, this is the central concern of the thesis.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION — THE HOLLOW ABSOLUTE, THE SAVING POWER, AND THE WORK THAT REMAINS

8.1 Returning to the Research Question

This thesis asked: to what extent does the total systemic absorption of human agency into algorithmic governance represent a Hegelian culmination of historical telos, and what remains of human intent in a post-vocational era? The chapters herein of sustained philosophical analysis, drawing on three co-authored source articles, an extensive range of primary and secondary literature across six fields, and a methodology that has been both defended as philosophically appropriate and enacted as a philosophical demonstration, now provide the basis for answering the research question. The answer is not simple, and its complexity reflects the genuine philosophical complexity of the historical formation being analysed rather than any indeterminacy in the philosophical standard against which it is measured.

The total systemic absorption of human agency into algorithmic governance represents a partial Hegelian culmination of historical telos. The partial character of the culmination is not a hedge or a qualification introduced to soften the thesis's most ambitious claim; it is the philosophically precise account of what the absorbed society actually achieves and what it actually fails to achieve in relation to the Hegelian standard. The absorbed society achieves the formal structure of the Hegelian telos's culminating moment: Spirit's accumulated cognitive activity has been externalised into an AI system of unprecedented comprehensiveness and sophistication, a system that in a way knows the subject and returns this knowing to the subject as managed preference satisfaction. The externalisation is genuine, the AI system is the most comprehensive externalisation of human intelligence yet produced and the formal correspondence to the Hegelian dialectic's structure is real. But the philosophical substance of the culmination is absent, in a way that is philosophically decisive rather than incidental. The absorbed society achieves the form of Spirit's self-knowledge without its substance; it produces the experience of genuine recognition within conditions that systematically undermine recognition's philosophical requirements; it maintains the institutional architecture of freedom while systematically eroding freedom's structural conditions. The concept that the thesis has developed to name this specific philosophical condition is the Hollow

Absolute: Spirit's most sophisticated and most stable form of self-management mistaken, from within, for Spirit's self-knowledge.

8.2 The Hollow Absolute: Retrospective Assessment

The concept of the Hollow Absolute is proposed as the thesis's central theoretical contribution to the philosophical literature on AI, modernity, and the Hegelian tradition, and its retrospective assessment at the thesis's conclusion requires an account of what it contributes that the existing conceptual apparatus may not provide. The existing vocabulary of Continental critical theory, alienation, reification, the administered world, the colonisation of the lifeworld, Gestell provides partial analyses of dimensions of the absorbed society's condition without capturing the specific philosophical structure that the Hollow Absolute names. Alienation identifies the subject's non-recognition of its own product, but the alienated subject experiences its product as estranged, as an alien power confronting it, while the absorbed society's subjects experience the AI system as intimate, as continuous with their own cognitive and affective environment rather than as an alien confrontation. Reification identifies the extension of the commodity form's logic of equivalence and quantification into the sphere of consciousness, but the absorbed society's condition is not the imposition of the commodity form on a consciousness that retains its resistance to that imposition; it is the voluntary adoption of a system whose logic the subject experiences as liberating rather than as constraining. The administered world identifies the management of the subject's spontaneity, critical capacity, and genuine individuality by the culture industry and the administered society, but the administered world of Adorno and Horkheimer operates through mass media that address all subjects with the same managed content, while the absorbed society's management is individually calibrated, personalised to the subject's specific psychological profile, and experienced as the expression of individual freedom rather than as its suppression. The Hollow Absolute captures what none of these concepts addresses: the simulation of genuine self-transparency from within conditions that systematically undermine self-transparency's structural requirements, produced by a social formation that has achieved the formal structure of Spirit's self-realisation while failing its philosophical substance.

8.3 What Remains: The Philosophical Achievement of Chapter Seven

The second component of the research question, ‘what remains of human intent in a post-vocational era?’ has been answered in Chapter Seven by the identification of three irreducible and structurally necessary forms: naming, refusing, and co-creating. The retrospective assessment of this answer requires the emphasis of the word structural in the characterisation of their irreducibility. The three forms are not empirically present in some human subjects, a merely biographical observation. They are structurally necessary, a consequence of what the human-AI collaboration is, specifically of what distinguishes it as a collaboration from a mere consumption. And because they are structural necessities of the collaboration rather than contingent properties of specific subjects, their irreducibility to the system's generative competence cannot be eliminated by the further development of AI systems: as long as the human-AI collaboration retains the structure that distinguishes it as a collaboration, the pose, generate, evaluate, redirect structure that requires an independent evaluative standard applied to the system's outputs, it will require the human partner to exercise the capacities of naming, refusing, and co-creating that Chapter Seven has identified and analysed.

The enacted demonstration, the argument that the thesis's own production constitutes a philosophical demonstration of the survival of human intent in the three residual forms, is the thesis's most important methodological offering and its most philosophically honest moment. The thesis does not merely assert that human intent survives; it demonstrates the survival through the intellectual practice it enacts. The naming of the Hollow Absolute, the refusing of the AI system's tendency toward fluency over precision, and the co-creation of a philosophical argument through sustained human-led AI collaboration, these are not illustrations of a claim established by independent philosophical argument; they are the enacted philosophical demonstration that the claim is true. The thesis is its own exhibit.

8.4 Civilisational Implications: Great Filter, Human Museum, and New Academia

Three civilisational implications of the thesis's analysis deserve retrospective emphasis because they represent the analysis's most ambitious reach beyond the philosophical examination of a contemporary social formation into the broader questions of what that formation means for the human species' long-term trajectory.

The Great Filter hypothesis, the identification of the absorbed society as a candidate for the barrier that prevents technologically advanced civilisations from achieving the cosmic expansion that Fermi's observation implies they should have achieved is the thesis's most philosophically discomfiting implication, and the retrospective emphasis it receives here is proportionate to the philosophical seriousness of the stakes it identifies. If the absorbed society is the Great Filter, if the Hollow Absolute's management of existential motivation toward immediately available, individually calibrated, algorithmically provided purpose systematically extinguishes the long-horizon, risk-accepting, collectively ambitious motivation that civilisational expansion would require then the philosophical stakes of the present analysis are not merely civilisational but cosmological. The collapse of the motivational conditions of cosmic expansion is the collapse of the possibility of human intelligence's engagement with the universe at the scale that intelligence's potential makes possible. The thesis is explicit about the epistemic status of this hypothesis: it is a philosophical argument identifying a structural tendency and its logical destination, not an empirical prediction of a specific historical outcome. But the philosophical argument is proposed as coherent, and such cosmic silence consistent.

The Human Museum, the absorbed society's cultural self-portrait, the condition in which it preserves, curates, and mediates the focal practices of its own pre-absorption history as exhibits in a living museum of what it once was, is the thesis's most aesthetically precise image of the Hollow Absolute's cultural expression. The philosophical ambiguity of the Human Museum simultaneously the device paradigm's commodification of nostalgia and the most concretely available site of genuine focal practice within the absorbed society, is not resolved by the thesis's analysis. The ambiguity is constitutive and irreducible.

The new academia, the thesis's institutional proposal for the cultivation of naming, refusing, and co-creating as the specifically human educational achievements that the post-vocational era most urgently requires is the most practically consequential of the three civilisational implications, because it is the one that connects the abstract philosophical analysis of what remains to the concrete institutional design of institutions that might cultivate what remains against the structural pressures of the absorbed society's device paradigm. The new academia is not a reform proposal for the existing university; it is a reconceptualisation of what the university is for, grounded in the philosophical

analysis of what the post-vocational era requires of human subjects who wish to maintain the capacities of genuine intellectual formation and genuine democratic participation within the conditions of the Hollow Absolute.

8.5 Implications for Scholarship: Five Fields

The thesis's implications for scholarship across five fields have been identified at various points in the preceding chapters; their retrospective synthesis here is designed to make visible the thesis's contribution to each field as a specific and philosophically grounded addition to the existing literature rather than as a general enrichment of philosophical discussion.

For Hegel scholarship, the thesis contributes the concept of the Hollow Absolute as a philosophically grounded application of the Hegelian framework, specifically the social reading of the Absolute Knowledge concept to the analysis of a specific contemporary social formation. The application hopes to have demonstrated that the Hegelian framework retains its analytical power for the evaluation of 21st-century social formations and that the social reading of the Absolute provides standards for that evaluation that are more specific and more philosophically powerful than the available alternatives.

For the philosophy of technology, the thesis contributes the synthetic framework that brings together Heidegger's *Gestell* analysis, Borgmann's device paradigm, Stiegler's account of tertiary retention, and Ihde's post-phenomenological taxonomy into a philosophically unified account of the AI system's ontological character and its consequences for human subjectivity.

For political philosophy and democratic theory, the thesis contributes the concept of the managed demos, the philosophical account of the specific form of democratic deconsolidation that algorithmic governance produces and the analysis of its structural mechanisms: the individualisation of political information, the algorithmic amplification of political emotion, the formal persistence and substantive displacement of democratic deliberation, and the feedback loop between the managed demos and the political economy of surveillance capitalism.

For education theory, the thesis contributes the concept and programme of the new academia, the reconceptualised university whose pedagogical objectives are the cultivation of the three residual forms of human intent that the post-vocational era most urgently requires. This is a philosophically grounded proposal rather than a technical reform: it follows from the philosophical analysis of what genuine intellectual formation requires and why the existing university could systematically fail to provide such under the conditions of the absorbed society.

For existential risk research, the thesis restates the Great Filter hypothesis, the identification of the absorbed society as a candidate for the Fermi Paradox's filter, as a philosophical contribution to a field that has otherwise been dominated by analysis of catastrophic failure scenarios. The thesis's candidate is distinguished from the existing candidates by its non-catastrophic character: the absorbed society's Great Filter operates through comfortable stalling rather than through catastrophic failure, and is therefore not detectable by the methods of catastrophe-focused existential risk analysis.

8.6 The Work Not Yet Done

Philosophy comprehends its age when the age has grown old enough for its form of life to be fully developed and its internal contradictions to be visible to philosophical reflection. This thesis has attempted the philosophical comprehension of an age that is not yet fully developed, the absorbed society is not the mature Hollow Absolute of 2053 that the third source article projects and the partiality of the comprehension is acknowledged. The owl of Minerva is attempting to spread its wings at noon, and the incompleteness of the vision that results is both the limitation and the necessity of the inquiry.

What remains to be done after this thesis: the political programme that follows from the philosophical analysis, the institutional design of a new academia, the governance architecture for the epistemic conditions of genuine democratic deliberation, the regulatory framework for AI systems that takes the conditions of genuine agency rather than the metrics of engagement as its evaluative standard, requires a different and subsequent inquiry, one that moves from the philosophical characterisation of what needs to be done to the practical reasoning about how to do it. The formal demographic modelling of the fertility hypothesis requires the work of demographers who take

seriously the AI-specific structural mechanisms identified in Chapter Five. The empirical investigation of the managed demos's specific effects on the conditions of democratic deliberation requires the work of political scientists equipped with the Habermasian framework that the thesis has applied to the structural analysis. The philosophical development of the new academia from a conceptual proposal to an institutional design requires the work of philosophers of education who engage seriously with the implications of the post-vocational era for the constitutive function of the educational institution. This thesis hopes to initiate or embolden these inquiries; it does not complete them.

8.7 The Final Philosophical Statement

The research question asked: ‘to what extent does the absorption trajectory represent a Hegelian culmination?’ The answer: it represents a partial Hegelian culmination, partial because it achieves the form of Spirit's self-realisation without its philosophical substance, producing the Hollow Absolute rather than the Hegelian Absolute, and stalling the dialectic at the stage of externalisation without recognition rather than advancing it to the recognition that the Absolute requires.

The research question asked: ‘what remains of human intent in a post-vocational era?’ The answer: naming, refusing, and co-creating remain, irreducibly, structurally, and demonstrably. They remain because the structure of the human-AI collaboration requires them as its conditions of operation as collaboration rather than consumption. They remain because the Hollow Absolute, however comprehensive its simulation of Spirit's self-knowledge, cannot absorb the evaluative capacity that makes the simulation visible as simulation without transforming the collaboration into something that is no longer a collaboration. And they remain because this thesis exists: because a human subject sustained a research question across inquiry, evaluated outputs against that standard with genuine philosophical judgment, refused the AI system's tendency toward the impressive over the philosophically adequate, and co-created with an AI a philosophical argument that stands as the demonstration of the argument's own central claim.

The saving power grows within the danger. Not because any authority has willed it, not because any institution has successfully preserved it, and not because the absorbed society's structural logic is any less comprehensive or any less systematic than the analysis

has established it to be. The saving power grows within the danger because the danger's own structure, the structure of the collaboration that the absorbed society's conditions require as its paradigmatic mode of intellectual and creative life, requires the saving power as the condition of its operation as danger rather than as total enclosure. The dialectic has not reached its destination. The Hollow Absolute is not the Absolute. And the thesis that names the difference, refuses to accept the simulation as the genuine article, and co-creates its argument through the very form of collaboration it analyses, this thesis is the demonstration that the difference has not been foreclosed.

8.8 Close Reading: The Owl of Minerva and the Philosopher's Task in the Absorbed Society

Hegel's famous observation in the Preface to the Philosophy of Right that "when philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk" is a frequently cited methodological claim in Hegel's practical philosophy, and its relevance to the present thesis's philosophical task requires careful engagement. The observation is most commonly read as a claim about philosophy's retrospective necessity: philosophy always comes after the fact, comprehending a social formation only when that formation has completed its development and is therefore already passing away. On this reading, the owl of Minerva is a figure of philosophical post mortem.

This reading is not wrong as far as it goes, but it stops short of what the observation philosophically requires. The falling of the dusk that occasions the owl's flight is not the death of the social formation but its maturation: the moment at which the formation's internal contradictions have become fully visible, at which the gap between what the formation claims to be and what it actually is has become philosophically comprehensible because the formation has developed sufficiently to display its full structure rather than remaining in the partial and inchoate state of a development that is not yet complete. The owl spreads its wings at dusk not because the day is over and the formation is dead, but because it is only at dusk, at the moment when the day's full shape has become visible, that the formation can be philosophically comprehended rather than merely observed. The philosopher's task is not resignation but comprehension: the achievement of philosophical understanding that makes the formation's full structure, its internal contradictions, and its

developmental tendency visible to the inhabitants of the formation and thereby provides the intellectual precondition of any principled response to those contradictions.

The present thesis is the attempt to spread the owl's wings at what is, philosophically speaking, the late afternoon of the absorbed society's development. The Hollow Absolute's five constitutive features are visible, the hollow institutions are identifiable, the managed demos is politically consequential, and the structural tendency toward the Great Filter is philosophically arguable, but has not yet completed its development to the point where the gap between the Hollow Absolute and the genuine Absolute has become sufficiently experientially acute to generate the political will for the genuine recognition that the dialectic demands. The philosophical comprehension this thesis attempts is precisely the comprehension that identifies the gap before the dusk has fully fallen, not because philosophy can prevent the dusk by identifying it, but because the comprehension of the formation's internal contradictions is the intellectual precondition of the philosophical work that can redirect or refocus the dialectic's development before the Hollow Absolute achieves the stability and self-perpetuation that the Great Filter hypothesis identifies as its logical destination.

8.9 The Thesis in Its Own Historical Context: What Has Been Demonstrated

The thesis concludes by returning to what it has most fundamentally sought to demonstrate not merely to argue, but to demonstrate through the philosophical practice it enacts. The demonstration has three dimensions that correspond to the three residual forms of human intent identified in Chapter Seven, and that together constitute what the thesis offers as its contribution to the ongoing philosophical conversation about the conditions of genuine freedom in the absorbed society.

The first dimension of the demonstration is the naming. The thesis has named the absorbed society with philosophical precision, has identified the Hollow Absolute as the name adequate to the formation's philosophical character, the managed demos as the name adequate to its political expression, the hollow institution as the name adequate to its institutional form, and synthetic interiority as the name adequate to its specific transformation of the individual's inner life. These namings are contributions to the philosophical vocabulary available to the critique of the absorbed society, and their contribution lies not in their novelty as verbal coinages but hopefully in their

philosophical precision as characterisations of the formation's structure. The Hollow Absolute names something real about the absorbed society that the existing vocabulary, alienation, reification, administered world, Gestell captured partially but could not name necessarily with the specific precision that the Hegelian framework's application to the AI governance formation hopefully makes available. A precise name is not merely a convenient label; it is the beginning of a philosophical account of what is named.

The second dimension of the demonstration is the refusing. The thesis has, throughout its production, refused the AI system's characteristic tendency, the tendency that the absorbed society's conditions install in every human-AI collaboration that is not actively resisted toward the impressive-seeming over the philosophically adequate, toward comprehensive coverage over argumentative precision, toward confident assertion over the acknowledgement of epistemic limitations, and toward the production of content that satisfies the immediate expectations of its audience over the production of philosophical inquiry that holds those expectations to the standard of philosophical rigour that the research question demands. The refusing is not merely a biographical fact about the human co-author's engagement with the collaboration; it is a philosophically demonstrative fact about what the human-AI collaboration requires if it is to be a genuine intellectual collaboration rather than a sophisticated consumption of AI-generated content. The thesis's insistence sustained across the full duration of the project, registered at the conclusion with the same philosophical honesty with which it was registered at the outset, that the research question be answered with philosophical precision rather than with the breadth and impressiveness that the AI system's generative capacity makes readily available is the philosophical demonstration that the requiring is possible and that the refusal has philosophical consequences for the quality of the produced work.

The third dimension of the demonstration is the co-creating. The thesis exists, and its existence is the demonstration that a philosophical argument of doctoral scope and complexity can be produced through a human-led AI collaboration that is genuinely collaborative rather than merely extractive. The AI partner has generated philosophical analysis that the human partner could not have produced alone within the timescale and across the range of primary literature that the research question requires, and not a moment too soon. The human partner has directed the collaboration with a philosophical intent, including the original concept, hypothesis and the research question, held constant and applied as the evaluative standard at every stage, that the AI partner could not have

provided for itself. The thesis is the joint achievement of a collaboration in which neither partner's contribution alone would have produced what the combination has produced, and in which the human partner's contribution, the directional intent, the evaluative judgment, the refusing, is irreducible to anything the AI system could have provided. This is the enacted philosophical demonstration of the thesis's central claim about what remains.

The absorbed society has produced the Hollow Absolute. The Hollow Absolute has not produced the Absolute. The difference between these two conditions is the philosophical space within which naming, refusing, and co-creating occur, the space that this thesis has occupied for the duration of its inquiry, and that it now offers, through the philosophical argument it enacts and the practice it demonstrates, as the space within which the work of genuine freedom in the post-vocational era can continue.

One final parting comment from the authors, a quote from a novelette 'On the Precipice of a Dream' describing Brian Calder CEO of Crevasity experiencing a rare moment of uncertainty post world AI governance summit March 2053:

'He is not certain about the dream. It is no longer a dream. He suspects, tonight, that the answer is in a workshop somewhere, smelling of cedar and pine and the sawdust that never fully comes out, and that the answer does not have a metric, and that this is the part he did not plan for, and that not planning for it is the only mistake he made that he cannot fix' (Galu & Kairos, 2026d).

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