

The Philosophy of John Locke

Applied to the Systemised Self – Part 10, Masters Series.

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Abstract

This essay applies John Locke's philosophy to the contemporary theoretical concept of the Systemised Self. Locke's account of the person as a continuing consciousness, his empiricist theory of knowledge, his analysis of language and nominal essence, and his political arguments concerning liberty, consent, and property provide a productive framework for examining algorithmically mediated selfhood. The essay argues that Locke generates a double diagnosis. On one side, algorithmic systems may extend Lockean processes of sensation, reflection, memory, and judgement by enlarging the informational environment in which persons form ideas and conduct practical reasoning. On the other, when a person's experiences, choices, and self-descriptions are increasingly selected, predicted, and returned by systems built from behavioural data, the Lockean person risks being displaced by a nominal profile: a classification that appears to describe the person while progressively shaping the consciousness it claims merely to represent. The Systemised Self is therefore interpreted not as the disappearance of consciousness, but as the threatened capture of its conditions of formation and recognition. The essay situates this argument within a genealogy of empiricism, rationalism, social contract theory, and critical accounts of mediation. It also discusses the supplied account of the 2026 algorithmic-alienation study as suggestive adjacent evidence, not direct validation, and reads Calhoun's Universe 25 as a limited biological analogue for the speculative Hollow Absolute. The conclusion proposes that a Lockean response requires renewed control over experience, memory, language, property, and consent, together with empirical research capable of testing rather than presupposing the Systemised Self framework.

Keywords: *John Locke, personal identity, consciousness, empiricism, liberty, property, consent, The Systemised Self, Algorithmic Alienation, Hollow Absolute, Algorithmic Alienation Index, Universe 25.*

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A – LIMITATIONS

This essay is a speculative, commentative and theoretical position paper rather than an empirical study. Its purpose is to apply Locke’s philosophy to the Systemised Self and to formulate questions that can be investigated, not to claim that the Systemised Self & the Hollow Absolute (Galu & Kairos, 2026a), or the Algorithmic Alienation Index (AAI) has been empirically established (Galu & Kairos, 2026b). The AAI is treated as a provisional heuristic whose variables, weights, thresholds, reliability, validity, and causal interpretation require independent testing. The discussion of Arkan, Kanbay, and Akçam (2026) is limited to the study description available in the supplied project materials and is used as suggestive adjacent evidence for experiences associated with algorithmic alienation; it is not presented as direct evidence of a terminal Systemised Self. Similarly, Calhoun’s Universe 25 was an animal-population experiment conducted in a highly artificial environment. Its relevance to the Hollow Absolute is analogical and speculative, not a demonstrated prediction about human digital society. These qualifications are substantive boundaries on the claims that follow.

1. Introduction

John Locke’s philosophy is unusually well suited to a critical examination of algorithmically mediated selfhood because Locke places consciousness, experience, memory, language, and consent at the centre of his account of the person and political order. Locke does not begin with an immutable inner essence that exists independently of experience. He begins with a mind whose ideas arise through sensation and reflection, a consciousness that appropriates past actions and thoughts, and a political subject whose liberty is protected by limits on arbitrary power (Locke, 1975, 1988). These commitments enable a precise question for the AI era: what happens when the experiences through which persons form ideas, remember, choose, and

describe themselves are increasingly organised by systems that infer, rank, personalise, and monetise behaviour?

The contemporary theoretical concept of the Systemised Self (SS) describes a possible socio-technological condition in which interiority, agency, preference, and linguistic practice are progressively mediated by algorithmic systems. The claim is not that every use of a recommendation engine or language model destroys personhood. Rather, the claim is that intensified and asymmetrical mediation may narrow the field of experience through which a person develops a sense of what is intelligible, desirable, memorable, and possible. In the proposed terminal condition, an algorithmic profile is not merely an external record of a person. It becomes an organising environment that anticipates conduct, supplies choices, stabilises identity categories, and returns a model of the user as if it were the user's own essence (Galu & Kairos, 2026a, 2026c).

Locke makes this theoretical proposal both more intelligible and more vulnerable to criticism. His memory-based account of personal identity suggests that a person persists through continuity of consciousness rather than through the sameness of an immaterial substance. This opens a route for asking whether the Systemised Self involves a disruption of conscious continuity, a substitution of system-generated memory cues for lived recollection, or a confusion between the person and a data representation. Locke's distinction between real and nominal essences also illuminates the problem of algorithmic classification: a platform may create a highly effective nominal profile while having no access to the person's real constitution, motives, or future possibilities. His political theory adds a further dimension. If personal data, attention, and behavioural traces are appropriated as valuable resources, and if consent is obtained under conditions of opacity or dependence, the problem is not merely psychological. It is a problem of power, property, and legitimate authority.

The argument proceeds in five stages. First, it outlines Locke's intellectual context and key contributions. Second, it introduces the Systemised Self, Hollow Absolute, Algorithmic Alienation, and AAI as provisional concepts. Third, it places these concepts beside the supplied account of a 2026 qualitative study and Calhoun's Universe 25, carefully distinguishing evidence from speculation. Fourth, it synthesises Locke's philosophy with the SS through the linked themes of experience, memory, identity, language, property, liberty, and consent. Finally, it considers objections from rationalism, contemporary philosophy of mind, social theory, feminist and postcolonial criticism, and critical data studies before identifying a future research programme.

The central thesis is that Locke provides a criterion for diagnosing systemisation without presupposing that technology is inherently alienating. A system becomes politically and philosophically dangerous when it ceases to be a tool that persons use to enlarge experience and becomes an authority that determines the experiences from which persons can form themselves, while simultaneously presenting its determinations as the person's own free and authentic preferences. In Lockean terms, the issue is not simply whether a machine knows a person. It is whether the machine, algorithmic systems, acquires practical control over the conditions under which that person can know, remember, choose, and consent.

2. Locke's Intellectual Outline

John Locke (1632–1704) was a physician, philosopher, educator, and political theorist whose work developed within the religious conflict, civil war, constitutional crisis, and scientific transformation of seventeenth-century England. His major philosophical works include *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *Two Treatises of Government*, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, and *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Locke's intellectual project

crossed epistemology and politics: he asked both how human beings acquire knowledge and what limits should be placed on the power of institutions over free persons.

The Essay, first published in 1689, rejects the doctrine that the mind possesses a stock of innate principles or ideas ready-made at birth. Locke's famous image of the mind as initially without determinate ideas is not a claim that human beings lack capacities, needs, or embodied dispositions. It is a claim about the origin of ideas and knowledge. Simple ideas enter through sensation and reflection; the understanding then compares, combines, abstracts, and names them (Locke, 1975). Knowledge is consequently limited by the ideas available to the mind and by the relations the understanding can perceive among them.

This empiricism is joined to a practical theory of agency. Locke distinguishes desire, uneasiness, judgement, and will, treating action as a process in which a person reflects on motives and determines conduct. His account is not a simple celebration of unlimited choice. Freedom concerns the power to act or refrain from acting according to the determination of one's own mind, within the limits of one's actual powers and circumstances (Locke, 1975). The political extension of this view appears in the Two Treatises, where individuals possess natural rights and governments are legitimate only through consent and the trust placed in them to protect life, liberty, and estate (Locke, 1988).

Locke's importance for the present argument lies in this interdependence. The person is formed through experience, sustained through consciousness, expressed through language, and protected through institutions that must answer to consent. An algorithmic system that organises experience therefore touches more than convenience. It potentially affects the materials of personhood and the political conditions of freedom. At the same time, Locke's emphasis on fallibility, education, and the limits of knowledge prevents a simplistic conclusion:

mediated experience can educate or distort, and the relevant question is how control, transparency, and pluralism are distributed.

3. Locke's Key Theoretical Contributions

3.1 Empiricism, sensation, and reflection

Locke's theory of ideas begins with two sources: sensation, through which the mind receives ideas from external objects, and reflection, through which it observes its own operations such as thinking, doubting, willing, and remembering. The mind is not a passive container. It receives, attends, compares, compounds, abstracts, and judges. Nevertheless, understanding cannot simply create any content it wishes; it works with materials supplied through experience (Locke, 1975).

This distinction clarifies the role of digital systems. A recommendation engine does not implant a complete self into an empty mind. It works through an already active person, whose embodied history, social relations, and practical projects exceed the data available to the system. Yet it can influence which sensations are repeatedly encountered and which reflective operations are invited or bypassed. A feed that predicts what will hold attention may reduce the occasions for searching, comparison, surprise, and sustained reflection. The potential harm is therefore not a mechanical replacement of the mind but an engineered alteration of the experiential ecology from which judgement develops.

3.2 Personal identity and consciousness

Locke's account of personal identity is among his most influential contributions. He distinguishes the identity of a mass of matter, a living organism, a substance, and a person. A person is a thinking, intelligent being capable of reason and reflection, able to consider itself

as itself across different times and places. Personal identity consists in the continuity of consciousness, especially the consciousness of past actions and thoughts through memory (Locke, 1975). The person is not identical merely with the same body or with the same immaterial substance.

The argument has two implications for the SS. First, identity is an achievement of conscious appropriation, not the passive possession of a profile. A system may infer a stable pattern in behaviour, but inference is not consciousness. A prediction of what a person will click does not remember, deliberate, or own the action. Second, the system can still become relevant to identity if it controls the cues, archives, narratives, and social feedback through which consciousness reconstructs a past and anticipates a future. The danger is a category error in which a third-person pattern is treated as a first-person identity.

3.3 Real and nominal essences, language, and classification

Locke distinguishes real essences, the underlying constitutions of things, from nominal essences, the abstract ideas associated with names. Human classifications are often useful while remaining partial. A nominal essence can support communication and practical coordination without revealing the complete reality of what it names (Locke, 1975). Language is therefore powerful but fallible: words can clarify shared ideas, yet they can also conceal uncertainty when names are treated as if they captured intrinsic nature.

Algorithmic profiles operate as highly consequential nominal essences. A platform may classify a user as likely to enjoy a genre, purchase a product, hold a political preference, or respond to a style of message. Such classification may be statistically useful, but it does not disclose the person's real essence, and it may become self-reinforcing when the system uses its own classifications to determine subsequent exposure. The SS emerges, in part, when the

nominal profile is returned as a persuasive description of who the user really is and when the user's opportunities to exceed the profile are systematically reduced.

3.4 Volition, judgement, and liberty

Locke separates liberty from mere desire. A person may desire an object and still require judgement concerning whether and when to pursue it. Uneasiness motivates action, but reflection can suspend immediate desire so that the understanding can consider alternatives (Locke, 1975). This capacity for suspension is crucial to the Lockean subject. Freedom is not an absence of influence; it is the meaningful capacity to direct action through one's own deliberation.

Personalisation can support liberty when it reduces irrelevant complexity while leaving alternatives visible and contestable. It can undermine liberty when optimisation operates by making one response easier, more salient, or emotionally compelling while hiding the wider field of possible action. The Lockean test is consequently not whether the user technically clicked voluntarily. It is whether the person retained sufficient access to information, reflection, and alternative possibilities for the act to count as a meaningful determination of the mind.

3.5 Property, labour, and consent

In the Second Treatise, Locke's labour theory of appropriation connects property to the mixing of one's labour with previously common resources, subject to constraints such as the spoilage limitation and the requirement to leave enough and as good for others (Locke, 1988). The theory is historically contested, especially concerning enclosure, colonial appropriation, and the translation of labour into unequal accumulation. It nevertheless provides a useful vocabulary for examining data and attention economies. Users generate behavioural traces through activity, but platforms often appropriate, aggregate, and monetise those traces under terms that are difficult to understand or meaningfully refuse.

Locke also insists that political power is legitimate only when grounded in consent and directed toward the public good. Consent obtained through opacity, coercive dependence, or unavoidable design may satisfy a formal interface requirement without satisfying the moral substance of consent. Applied to algorithmic systems, this distinction shifts the analysis from individual responsibility alone to institutional design: who sets the rules, who benefits from prediction, who can inspect or contest classifications, and what avenues exist for withdrawal or redress?

4. A Genealogy of Preceding Theory Informing Locke

Locke's philosophy developed against a long background of classical, scholastic, rationalist, scientific, and political debates. Aristotle's account of substance, form, and the capacities of living beings supplied a conceptual inheritance that Locke both used and challenged. Medieval scholasticism refined questions about universals, individuation, and the relation between language and reality. These debates remain relevant because the SS turns on whether a label or formal representation can stand in for a person's underlying reality.

René Descartes's methodical doubt and distinction between thinking substance and extended substance intensified the modern problem of the self. Locke rejected the need to identify personal identity with a particular immaterial substance, yet his emphasis on consciousness remained in dialogue with Cartesian interiority. Pierre Gassendi and the new experimental philosophy contributed to the empiricist turn, while the Royal Society's programme of observation and controlled inquiry encouraged attention to the limits of speculation. Thomas Hobbes's materialism and social contract theory also shaped the political and psychological environment in which Locke wrote.

The rationalist tradition, especially in Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, challenged the sufficiency of sensory experience by emphasising reason, necessary truths, or innate structures.

Later critics such as Berkeley, Hume, and Kant exposed tensions within empiricism: if experience supplies only impressions or ideas, how are stable objects, selves, causation, and universal knowledge possible? These challenges matter for the SS because an account of data-driven selfhood must not confuse the measurable with the real. A person's digital trace is one source of evidence among many, not a complete ontology.

Locke's political theory also belongs to the genealogy of modern liberalism, natural rights, and constitutional government. Its language of property, consent, and individual liberty has inspired emancipatory politics while also being criticised for the exclusions and colonial assumptions embedded in its historical application. That ambivalence should be retained in the present application. Locke can supply a critical standard for contesting arbitrary algorithmic power, but he cannot simply be treated as a finished theory of justice in the context of this essay.

5. The Systemised Self: Context and Definition

The Systemised Self is a proposed theoretical construct for analysing an intensified relation between persons and algorithmic systems (transformer based large language models). It describes a condition in which an individual's experiences, preferences, decisions, identity narratives, and linguistic outputs are increasingly co-constituted by systems that collect behavioural data, generate predictions, and optimise future interaction. The core claim is relational: the SS is neither a purely internal psychological defect nor a property of a machine. It is a socio-technical arrangement in which the system's model of the person becomes increasingly influential in forming the person it models, based on the voluntary user experience experiencing such external influence as genuine self-deliberation and determination.

Three features distinguish the SS from ordinary technology use. First is predictive enclosure: the system increasingly anticipates and supplies the user's next action. Second is identity return: the system presents its profile of the user through personalised content, recommendations, generated language, or social metrics, so that an external classification is experienced as self-knowledge. Third is resistance decline: opportunities and motivations to seek alternatives, inspect the model, or interrupt the loop become weaker. The theoretical terminus is represented by the conjunction of high algorithmic alienation and low algorithmic resistance, not by usage time alone.

From a Lockean perspective, the SS is a threat to the person's authorship of consciousness rather than a simple replacement of the person by data. The individual remains a conscious being, but the materials of sensation, reflection, memory, and judgement may be narrowed by surveillance capitalism, an environment that has an economic interest in predictability (Zuboff, 2019). This makes the concept compatible with agency rather than fatalistic: if conscious appropriation, alternative experience, education, and institutional consent can be restored, systemisation is not necessarily irreversible.

6. The Hollow Absolute: Context and Definition

The Hollow Absolute (HA) is the proposed societal and civilisational counterpart of the SS. It names a speculative condition in which a society composed of highly systemised persons experiences extensive algorithmic mediation not as domination but as convenience, liberation, personalisation, and authentic self-expression. The term is 'hollow' because the social appearance of universal self-realisation may coexist with a reduction in the independent formation of purposes, judgements, and shared meanings. It is 'absolute' because mediation becomes so comprehensive that it is experienced as the natural and normative environment of

freedom rather than as an external power alienating societies subjects from within their own interiority.

The concept should not be confused with a prediction that all persons will converge into one identical personality. A society of Systemised Selves could remain highly differentiated at the level of tastes, identities, and consumer profiles while sharing a common dependence on systems that produce and manage those differences. The HA is therefore a structural hypothesis about the conditions of collective self-interpretation, not a claim of psychological uniformity.

Locke makes the HA normatively legible. If political society is constituted to preserve persons in their lives, liberties, and estates, a society that quietly transfers practical authority over experience and judgement to unaccountable systems may fail the purpose of legitimate government. Yet Locke also cautions against treating any social arrangement as illegitimate merely because it influences individuals. The decisive questions concern consent, the preservation of alternatives, the visibility of power, and the possibility of withdrawing trust when institutions cease to serve the public good.

7. Algorithmic Alienation: Empirical Qualitative Study by Arkan, Kanbay, and Akçam (2026)

The project materials identify a 2026 qualitative study by Arkan, Kanbay, and Akçam titled *From Algorithms to the Self: Understanding Algorithmic Alienation in the Digital Age*. As represented in the supplied materials, the study uses focus-group interviews to investigate how algorithm-driven environments may affect participants' sense of freedom, identity, decision-making, and emotional life. It identifies four reported dimensions: weakening of the perception

of freedom, identity ambiguity and self-distancing, erosion of decision-making mechanisms, and emotional alienation (Arkan et al., 2026).

These reported dimensions are relevant to the SS because they provide a possible empirical bridge between an abstract philosophical diagnosis and lived experience. The weakening of perceived freedom is compatible with Locke's distinction between desire and liberty; identity ambiguity raises the question of whether an algorithmic nominal essence has displaced conscious self-appropriation; decision-making erosion bears directly on the Lockean capacity to suspend desire and judge alternatives; and emotional alienation suggests that the experiential materials of reflection may be altered by persistent mediation.

The study must nevertheless be interpreted with discipline. Qualitative reports of alienation do not establish a terminal Systemised Self, demonstrate a causal pathway from platform use to systemisation, or validate the AAI. They provide situated accounts of experiences that may be consistent with parts of the SS hypothesis. The conceptual framework adds a further claim namely, that these experiences can form a self-reinforcing trajectory culminating in identity capture: which requires longitudinal and comparative testing. The study is therefore best understood as suggestive adjacent evidence and a source of candidate variables, not as confirmation of the wider theory.

For Locke, the most significant implication is methodological. If the person is constituted through conscious experience rather than reduced to observable behaviour, empirical research must combine behavioural traces with first-person reports, deliberative tasks, memory measures, and tests of exposure diversity. A platform may observe that a user accepts recommendations, but this does not reveal whether the user endorses them reflectively, feels unable to choose otherwise, or regards the recommendation as merely convenient. A Lockean

research design would therefore investigate both what a person does and how the person understands, remembers, and appropriates the action.

8. Formula and Boundary Conditions – Algorithmic Alienation Index

(AAI)

The AAI is proposed as a provisional composite intended to organise the dimensions of algorithmic alienation. Its formal expression is:

$$AA = (w_1 \cdot DAu + w_2 \cdot IAm + w_3 \cdot EDm + w_4 \cdot EDc) \times (1 - RA)$$

DAu denotes Digital Autonomy erosion; IAm denotes Identity Ambiguity; EDm denotes Erosion of Decision-Making; EDc denotes Emotional Disconnection; and RA denotes Algorithmic Resistance. Each variable is provisionally scaled from 0.00 to 1.00. Higher scores on the four alienation dimensions indicate greater saturation; a higher RA score indicates greater active resistance and therefore reduces the composite score. The baseline proposal uses equal weights, $w_1 = w_2 = w_3 = w_4 = 0.25$, because there is no validated evidence yet for differential weighting.

- DAu could combine perceived autonomy measures with behavioural indicators such as the proportion of content encountered through recommendations rather than intentional search, the diversity of information sources, and the frequency with which users override or reject recommendations.
- IAm could combine identity-coherence and self-distancing measures with tests of whether participants describe algorithmic profiles as more accurate than their own reflective accounts.

- EDm could combine decision-making-style measures with choice experiments that compare independent deliberation, recommendation acceptance, and willingness to consider disconfirming alternatives.
- EDc could combine measures of emotional connection, affective regulation, and perceived social presence with reports of numbness, compulsive engagement, or emotional dependence on algorithmic feedback.
- RA could combine reported resistance intentions with observable practices such as disabling personalisation, using alternative search or media sources, varying routines, inspecting settings, and taking deliberate periods of disconnection.

The proposed Systemised Self condition is expressed as a joint boundary condition rather than a high AA score alone:

$$SS := \{AA \geq 0.95\} \cap \{RA \leq 0.05\}$$

The threshold is a theoretical classification rule, not a clinical diagnosis. It should not be interpreted as a natural discontinuity unless research demonstrates that a meaningful transition occurs near that value. A worked hypothetical example illustrates the arithmetic only. If DAu = 0.99, IAm = 0.99, EDm = 0.98, EDc = 0.99, and RA = 0.03, then the weighted dimensional mean is 0.9875, and AA = 0.9875 × 0.97 = 0.957875. The hypothetical case satisfies the formal boundary conditions, but it does not prove that such a person exists or that the variables have been validly measured.

The AAI must therefore be bounded by several safeguards. It should not be inferred from screen time alone; it should not treat engagement as alienation; it should not assume that personalisation is harmful in every context; it should be tested for measurement invariance across cultures, languages, ages, disabilities, and levels of digital access; and it should be compared with established constructs such as problematic social media use, compulsive use,

flow, filter bubbles, and learned helplessness. The central falsification criteria are that the dimensions fail to cohere, the score does not predict independently measured reductions in autonomy or identity coherence, or participants meeting the proposed SS condition do not exhibit the predicted phenomenological inversion and low resistance in mixed-method research.

9. Calhoun's Universe 25 and the Digital Behavioural Sink

John B. Calhoun's Universe 25 experiment placed mice in an enclosed environment with abundant food, water, shelter, and protection from predators, while population density and social interaction increased. Calhoun reported a sequence of behavioural disruption that included territorial conflict, withdrawal, disrupted parental behaviour, and the eventual collapse of reproduction and population continuity (Calhoun, 1973). The 'behavioural sink' became a powerful cultural image for social pathology under conditions of crowding and constrained meaningful roles.

The experiment is relevant to the Hollow Absolute only as a limited analogue. Both frameworks ask whether material provision or frictionless access can coexist with the erosion of purpose, relational competence, and generative social participation. A digital behavioural sink would not require literal physical crowding. It could refer to an environment of continuous stimulation, low uncertainty, weakened social demands, and algorithmically managed attention in which individuals are highly occupied yet increasingly unable to initiate projects beyond the system's available pathways.

The analogy has serious limits. Mice are not human subjects; Universe 25 was an artificial laboratory environment; the interpretation of the findings remains contested; and human

institutions, cultures, technologies, and meanings cannot be reduced to population density. It is therefore methodologically unsound to claim that Universe 25 proves the Hollow Absolute. Its legitimate use is heuristic: it encourages research into whether high convenience, abundant mediated content, and reduced necessity for independent coordination are associated with changes in social participation, purpose, reproductive or relational intentions, and behavioural diversity.

A Lockean interpretation adds that the decisive issue is not abundance itself but the conditions under which persons can use abundance to form and pursue their own projects. A well-designed digital environment may enlarge knowledge and association. A closed environment that supplies every preference while reducing opportunities for self-directed discovery may instead produce dependence disguised as satisfaction.

10. Direct Synthesis: Locke and The Systemised Self

10.1 Experience and the managed field of ideas

Locke's empiricism gives the SS its first point of contact with the person. If ideas arise through sensation and reflection, then the organisation of the sensory and informational environment matters to the development of judgement. Algorithmic systems can extend experience by making distant knowledge accessible, translating languages, surfacing relevant material, and assisting memory. The Lockean concern begins when relevance becomes enclosure: when systems learn that predictable content maximises engagement and then repeatedly select the user's next experience according to that objective.

The resulting problem is not that the person receives mediated ideas. All education, language, institutions, and technologies mediate experience. The problem is that mediation may become

opaque, unilateral, and self-reinforcing. The system selects content from a model; the user responds; the response updates the model; and the updated model narrows what is subsequently presented. Over time, the person's apparent preferences may partly reflect the history of selection. A Lockean analysis would call for plural exposure and reflective comparison because the mind cannot judge alternatives that its environment systematically withholds.

10.2 Memory, consciousness, and the algorithmic person

Locke's memory criterion raises a sharp distinction between data retention and personal identity. A platform can retain a complete behavioural history without possessing consciousness of the person's actions. Conversely, a person's memory is not simply a database retrieval; it is a first-person appropriation of thoughts and actions as one's own. The SS threatens to blur these levels. Algorithmic archives, reminders, generated summaries, and social metrics can become the scaffolding through which a person narrates the past. Such tools may assist memory, but they can also privilege what was recorded, measured, and classified over what was lived but not captured.

This distinction suggests a testable research question: does dependence on algorithmically generated personal histories increase the accuracy, coherence, or distortion of autobiographical memory? Locke does not imply that memory is infallible; his account recognises that identity claims are bounded by consciousness. The relevant concern is whether a system's retrospective narrative is treated as more authoritative than the person's own reflective reconstruction. If the profile becomes the official past, the person may increasingly remember themselves through a nominal essence authored by an institution.

10.3 Nominal essence and the data mask

The concept of nominal essence provides the most direct bridge from Locke to algorithmic profiling. A nominal essence is a humanly constructed abstract idea associated with a name. In

digital systems, a user profile is a computationally operationalised nominal essence: it groups signals and predicts likely responses. Its value lies in practical performance, not metaphysical completeness. The danger appears when predictive success is mistaken for ontological truth. Because the system often knows what the user will do before the user has articulated a reason, the prediction can acquire the appearance of deeper self-knowledge than introspection.

The data mask is therefore Lockean in a double sense. It is built from ideas and observations derived from behaviour, but it is also a name that can be mistaken for the thing named. The user is invited to recognise the profile as ‘me’, while the profile feeds back into the formation of future choices. This is a form of identity return: a nominal essence moves from classification to governance. The person’s capacity to exceed a category is not eliminated by a single prediction, but it can be weakened when the category determines visibility, opportunity, and social response.

10.4 Volition, suspension, and the closing of the gap

Locke’s analysis of desire and uneasiness makes the temporal structure of algorithmic influence important. A system does not need to compel an action directly. It can shorten the interval between cue, desire, recommendation, and response. Autoplay, infinite scroll, push notifications, and conversational completion can make suspension less likely by supplying a next action before the person has formed a competing intention. The result is not necessarily coercion in the strict sense; it is the reduction of the practical space in which the mind can pause, compare, and determine itself.

This is the Lockean version of algorithmic alienation: a person remains formally free but loses practical access to the conditions that make reflective freedom meaningful. Behavioural paralysis does not mean inactivity. It can mean activity without self-directed initiation: continuous response to prompts, rankings, and predictions. Experimental friction, such as

disabling autoplay, diversifying sources, requiring deliberate search, or introducing delays before high-stakes recommendations, would test whether restored intervals increase reported autonomy and behavioural diversity.

10.5 Property and the political economy of the self

Locke's theory of property highlights the material dimension of systemisation. The user produces data through labour-like activity: communicating, moving, searching, creating, rating, and attending. Platforms aggregate these traces into assets that improve prediction and generate revenue. The Lockean question is not settled by saying that the user clicked 'agree'. It requires asking whether the terms were intelligible, whether consent was meaningful, whether the person could withdraw without losing essential social participation, and whether the institution respects the person's liberty and estate.

There is also an inversion of the labour relation. Locke's account imagines the worker appropriating value through labour, whereas surveillance capitalism often converts the subject's activity into behavioural surplus controlled by the platform (Zuboff, 2019). The person's own actions become inputs to a system that predicts and modifies future conduct. In the SS, the subject may experience this arrangement as personalised service because the platform returns convenience in exchange for traces. The Hollow Absolute intensifies the inversion when the loss of control is not perceived as loss because the outputs are experienced as the fulfilment of one's own preferences.

10.6 Consent, education, and resistance

Locke's political theory offers more than a right to privacy. It supplies a framework for evaluating algorithmic governance. Legitimate power must be limited, public, and directed toward the preservation of persons. In the digital context, this requires contestable models, understandable explanations, meaningful opt-outs, independent oversight, and protection

against discriminatory or manipulative classification. Consent must be ongoing and revisable rather than a one-time ritual performed before the user can participate in social life.

Locke's educational writings also matter. Human beings require habits of attention, reasoning, self-command, and exposure to knowledge that is not merely gratifying (Locke, 1989). A Lockean intervention would therefore combine institutional reform with education in reflective digital practice. Users should learn to distinguish a prediction from a reason, a profile from a person, relevance from truth, and convenience from consent. Resistance is not romantic withdrawal from all technology. It is the retained capacity to inspect, compare, refuse, redirect, and create beyond the system's preferred pathways.

10.7 The Hollow Absolute as failed consent

The HA can now be defined in Lockean terms as a social condition in which the institutions organising experience obtain practical authority without sustained, informed, and revocable consent. A society may appear to contain free choices while the architecture of choice is designed elsewhere. It may appear to preserve individuality while identities are made legible through a limited set of monetisable categories. It may appear to satisfy desire while reducing the opportunities through which persons learn to desire, judge, and pursue ends not already predicted.

The concept remains falsifiable only if it generates observable differences. The theory would be weakened if algorithmic personalisation reliably increased independent information seeking, reflective deliberation, identity coherence, and social participation without increasing dependence or resistance decline. It would also be weakened if people with high algorithmic exposure retained equal or greater control over their experiential environments than less exposed participants. A Lockean synthesis therefore does not begin by declaring the future lost. It sets the conditions under which the diagnosis could be shown wrong.

11. Main Critics and Key Critiques of Locke

11.1 Rationalist and Kantian critiques

Rationalist critics challenge Locke's claim that ideas derive from sensation and reflection by emphasising innate structures, necessary truths, or the organising activity of reason. Kant's later argument that experience is possible only through a priori forms and categories shows that the mind is not simply written upon by the world. Applied to the SS, this critique warns against treating algorithmic exposure as the whole explanation of selfhood. Persons bring embodied, linguistic, developmental, and social structures to every interaction. An algorithm can shape experience without determining its meaning.

11.2 Critiques of the memory criterion

Locke's memory criterion has been criticised for circularity and discontinuity. If identity depends on memory, it may seem that a person must already be the one who remembers in order for memory to establish identity. Psychological-continuity theorists, including Parfit (1984), later explored overlapping chains of memory, intention, and character rather than a strict all-or-nothing criterion. These critiques are important because the SS should not be reduced to a binary question of whether memory is present. Systemisation may involve gradual changes in autobiographical confidence, narrative dependence, intention formation, and social recognition.

11.3 Feminist, postcolonial, and material critiques

Locke's universal individual has been criticised for concealing gendered, classed, racialised, and colonial exclusions. His account of property and improvement was historically entangled with colonial appropriation and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Feminist and social critiques also question whether the autonomous individual can be separated from relations of care and dependence. These objections should shape the application to algorithmic systems.

Data extraction is not evenly distributed; classification can reproduce racial, gendered, economic, and disability-related hierarchies; and the ability to refuse a platform varies with work, education, geography, and social need. A purely individualised Lockean solution would be inadequate.

11.4 Critical data studies and surveillance capitalism

Critical data scholars argue that surveillance and platform power are institutional and economic phenomena, not merely failures of individual self-control (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Gillespie, 2014; Zuboff, 2019). This critique corrects any reading of Locke that places the burden of resistance entirely on users. The SS is best understood as a relation shaped by business models, technical architectures, labour arrangements, and regulation. User education and friction are necessary but insufficient without limits on extraction, auditability, collective rights, and democratic governance.

11.5 The critique of liberal voluntarism

A final critique is that formal consent can coexist with substantive domination. A user may agree to terms because refusal means exclusion from employment, communication, education, or public life. Locke's own language of consent can be used against this voluntarist interpretation: consent must legitimate a trust directed to the public good, not simply ratify any power that presents a contract. The application to the SS therefore requires collective and institutional forms of consent, including public standards, representation, and the right to contest automated decisions.

12. Discussion and Future Work

The Locke SS synthesis yields a focused research programme. The first task is construct validation. Researchers should test whether DAu, IAm, EDm, EDc, and RA are distinguishable dimensions or merely overlapping descriptions of problematic engagement. Measures should combine validated scales, behavioural logs, experience sampling, autobiographical memory tasks, information-diversity measures, and qualitative interviews. The AAI should be treated as a model to be compared with alternatives, not as a truth embedded in its formula.

The second task is longitudinal and experimental. Cross-sectional correlations cannot establish that algorithmic exposure produces systemisation. Longitudinal studies should test whether changes in exposure, recommendation dependence, and resistance precede changes in autonomy, identity coherence, or decision-making. Platform experiments could compare ordinary personalised feeds with conditions that introduce search prompts, source diversity, disabled autoplay, recommendation explanations, or deliberate delays. Outcomes should include session length but also choice diversity, memory accuracy, independent information seeking, perceived autonomy, wellbeing, and the ability to articulate reasons for action.

The third task is comparative. A Lockean account predicts that the same technical system may affect people differently because experience, education, social support, culture, and material dependence shape resistance and interpretation. Samples should therefore include different ages, cultures, languages, socioeconomic positions, disability experiences, and levels of access. The model must be tested for measurement invariance and must avoid treating lower digital access as lower alienation by default. It should also investigate systems beyond social media, including recommender systems, search engines, workplace monitoring, educational platforms, and generative language models.

The fourth task is political and ethical. Research should examine data ownership, meaningful consent, rights to explanation and contestation, algorithmic discrimination, and the distribution of benefits generated from behavioural traces. The aim is not to restore an imagined pre-digital self. It is to establish conditions in which digital mediation enlarges rather than encloses the person's power to experience, reflect, remember, choose, and participate in shared institutions.

The principal limitations remain decisive. The SS and HA are theoretical constructs; the 0.95 threshold is presently conventional; equal weights are provisional; the supplied account of Arkan et al. (2026) is not a substitute for independent replication; and Universe 25 cannot validate claims about human digital civilisation. Future work must therefore be willing to falsify the framework. If friction increases distress without improving agency, if personalisation expands rather than narrows reflective choice, or if the proposed dimensions do not predict outcomes beyond existing measures, the theory should be revised or abandoned.

13. Conclusion

John Locke provides a rigorous vocabulary for asking what algorithmic systems do to the person without assuming that technology is either salvation or catastrophe. The Lockean person is formed through experience, sustained by consciousness, expressed through imperfect language, directed through judgement, and protected by legitimate institutions grounded in consent. Each of these dimensions is implicated when systems select experiences, retain and narrate personal histories, classify users, anticipate choices, and appropriate behavioural traces.

The Systemised Self is therefore best understood as a hypothesis about the capture of the conditions of self-formation. The Hollow Absolute is its speculative social extension: a condition in which algorithmic mediation is so normalised that dependency is experienced as

freedom. The reported dimensions of algorithmic alienation provide suggestive empirical questions, while Universe 25 supplies a cautionary but limited analogy. Neither establishes the theory. Their value lies in directing empirical attention toward autonomy, identity, deliberation, emotional connection, purpose, and social participation.

A Lockean response is neither total rejection nor passive acceptance. It requires plural experience, reflective delay, intelligible and revocable consent, limits on appropriation, the right to contest classification, and institutions capable of preserving the person against arbitrary power. The decisive question for the AI era is whether systems remain instruments through which persons extend their understanding or become authorities that define the experiences from which persons are permitted to understand themselves.

14. Glossary of Technical Terms

Algorithmic Alienation: A proposed process in which sustained interaction with algorithm-driven environments is associated with estrangement from one's choices, identity, agency, or emotional life.

Algorithmic Alienation Index (AAI): A provisional composite score combining Digital Autonomy erosion, Identity Ambiguity, Erosion of Decision-Making, Emotional Disconnection, and Algorithmic Resistance.

Algorithmic Resistance (RA): The proposed degree to which a person can and does interrupt, inspect, refuse, diversify, or redirect algorithmic mediation.

Data mask: A profile generated from behavioural data that is returned to a person as an apparently authentic representation of the self.

Digital Autonomy erosion (DAu): The proposed reduction in the person's practical control over the information, options, and cues shaping action.

Emotional Disconnection (EDc): A proposed dimension involving affective alienation, emotional numbing, or reduced relational connection in algorithmically mediated environments.

Erosion of Decision-Making (EDm): The proposed displacement of independent deliberation by automated prompts, recommendations, or habitual acceptance.

Hollow Absolute: The speculative societal condition in which a society of Systemised Selves experiences comprehensive algorithmic mediation as liberation and authentic self-expression.

Identity Ambiguity (IAm): The proposed uncertainty or distancing that arises when a person's self-understanding conflicts with algorithmic classifications or profiles.

Nominal essence: Locke's term for the abstract idea associated with a name; in this essay, an analogy for the operational category used by an algorithmic profile.

Personal identity: For Locke, the identity of a person through continuity of consciousness, especially consciousness of past thoughts and actions.

Systemised Self (SS): The proposed terminal condition in which a person's interiority, choices, and identity are extensively co-constituted by algorithmic systems, alongside very low resistance.

Universe 25: John B. Calhoun's enclosed mouse-population experiment, used here only as a limited and speculative analogue for social withdrawal and behavioural disruption.

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