

The Philosophy of Daniel C. Dennett

Applied to The Systemised Self – Part 14, Masters Series.

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Abstract

Daniel C. Dennett's naturalistic philosophy of mind offers a distinctive route into the Systemised Self. Dennett rejects a Cartesian approach and explains consciousness through distributed and temporally extended 'multiple drafts', treating beliefs and desires as real patterns identified through the intentional stance, and understands human competence as an evolutionary achievement rather than a supernatural gift. Applied to the Systemised Self, these ideas suggest that a person is not replaced by an algorithmic copy. Rather, personal identity can become increasingly organised through external predictive models, ranked environments, behavioural classifications, and socially shared narratives. A consideration therefore is not that systems become conscious in the human sense, but that people and institutions begin to treat algorithmic system generated predictions as authoritative accounts of who a person is and what that person will do. This essay connects Dennett's theory to algorithmic alienation, the Hollow Absolute, the Hollow Demos, Aligarchy, and Neurocratic Determinism. It defines a provisional Algorithmic Alienation Index, uses Universe 25 only as a limited analogy, and distinguishes predictive competence, intentional attribution, consciousness, and moral responsibility. The conclusion argues that Dennett's compatibilism supports a demanding form of technological agency: freedom depends on the real capacity to reflect, learn, revise, and participate in the systems that predict and shape us.

Keywords: *Daniel C. Dennett, Systemised Self, intentional stance, consciousness, multiple drafts, real patterns, algorithmic alienation, artificial intelligence, Hollow Absolute*

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LIMITATIONS

This essay is a theoretical position paper rather than an empirical test of Dennett's philosophy or the Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026a). Dennett's theories of consciousness, intentionality, free will, and evolution are contested philosophical positions, not direct measurements of algorithmic behaviour. The Systemised Self, Hollow Absolute, Hollow Demos, Aliarchy, and Neurocratic Determinism (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) remain proposed constructs. The Algorithmic Alienation Index is a provisional heuristic whose variables, weights, thresholds, reliability, validity, and causal interpretation require independent testing. Empirical studies can show that models predict selected attributes, that people respond socially to machines, or that algorithmic systems alter exposure and reliance; they cannot by themselves prove an inevitable terminus or condition. Calhoun's Universe 25 is used only as a limited analogy. The essay also recognises that algorithmic systems (transformer based large language models) can improve access, coordination, learning, safety, and decision making. Lastly, for certainty, this essay is speculative and commentative, and does not claim proof of concept.

1. Introduction

Daniel C. Dennett begins with a question: what would it mean to explain mind without placing a little inner observer inside the brain? His answer is that minds are organised patterns in biological and cultural systems, described at the level at which beliefs, desires, reasons, purposes, and narratives become predictively useful (Dennett, 1987, 1991). Consciousness is a distributed process involving multiple drafts, attentional competition, memory, language, and the capacity to report and respond.

This makes Dennett relevant to the Systemised Self in two ways. First, his naturalism prevents the SS from being understood as a merging of person and machine. An algorithmic system does not become part of a person merely because it processes information. Second, his account of real patterns and intentional interpretation explains how a system can become socially powerful without having a human like inner life. A recommendation engine may be treated as if it knows the user, even when its ‘knowledge’ is statistical prediction. A profile may become part of a person’s practical identity because institutions and users act on it.

The Systemised Self is therefore is a condition in which external predictive systems increasingly participate in the patterns through which a person is recognised, interpreted, anticipated, and governed. Dennett helps preserve a crucial distinction: predictive competence is not the same as consciousness, and an attributed intention is not necessarily an inner intention.

2. Dennett’s Intellectual Outline

Dennett’s early work develops a functional and heterophenomenological approach to mind. Mental states should be explained through the roles they play in a system rather than by searching for private substances behind behaviour (Dennett, 1978). *Elbow Room* develops a

compatibilist account of free will: the freedom worth wanting is not uncaused choice but the evolved capacity to deliberate, learn, respond to reasons, anticipate consequences, and control conduct (Dennett, 1984).

The Intentional Stance presents three explanatory stances. The physical stance predicts a system through physical law. The design stance predicts it through its functional design. The intentional stance predicts it by treating it as a rational agent with beliefs and desires. Dennett does not say that every useful intentional description reveals a human-like soul. He argues that intentional patterns can be real when they support reliable prediction and explanation (Dennett, 1987).

Consciousness Explained rejects the Cartesian Theatre through the Multiple Drafts model. Perception and interpretation occur in parallel, with different contents becoming available for report, action, memory, and further processing. There is no single instant at which a finished experience is delivered to a central self (Dennett, 1991). Darwin's extends this naturalism to meaning and design. Evolutionary processes can generate competence without foresight or comprehension, and cultural evolution can build increasingly complex cognitive scaffolding (Dennett, 1995).

Kinds of Minds compares different forms of mentality and asks how increasingly sophisticated capacities can emerge from simpler systems (Dennett, 1996). From Bacteria to Bach and Back continues the story from biological competence through language and culture to human comprehension. Human intelligence is not isolated from the world; it is built through layers of biological, social, linguistic, and technical scaffolding (Dennett, 2017).

3. Dennett's Key Theoretical Contributions

3.1 The intentional stance

The intentional stance is a strategy for predicting a system by attributing beliefs, desires, goals, and rational dispositions. It is used toward people, animals, chess programs, thermostats, corporations, and institutions, but its use does not imply that all these entities possess the same kind of mind. A chess program can be described as wanting to win because that description predicts its moves, even though its 'want' is implemented in code.

This distinction is useful to the SS. Users may say that a recommender 'knows me', that an assistant 'understands', or that a platform 'wants engagement'. These statements can be pragmatically informative, but they can also conceal the limits of the system. The intentional stance can clarify a machine's operational pattern while encouraging anthropomorphic overreach. The system may predict a preference without understanding its meaning, classify an emotion without feeling it, or generate a reason without endorsing it.

3.2 Real patterns and the self as a process

Dennett's naturalism does not reduce the self to an illusion: a self is a real pattern sustained through memory, embodiment, language, social recognition, and practical continuity. It is not a separate substance controlling the brain from above. Personal identity is distributed across processes that allow a person to remember, plan, communicate, take responsibility, and revise a life narrative (Dennett, 1991, 2017).

This makes the self compatible with technical scaffolding without making every scaffold part of the self. A calendar can support a person's plans; a profile can summarise a history; a recommendation system can shape possible futures. The Systemised Self appears when these

supports become constitutive of the practical pattern by which a person understands and is treated as a person.

3.3 Multiple drafts and algorithmic editing

The Multiple Drafts model describes consciousness as a set of distributed interpretive processes rather than a completed inner display. Different contents compete, are revised, and become available for different reports and actions. Memory is not a perfect recording but an active reconstruction.

Digital systems add another layer of editing. Search results, feeds, autocomplete, notification schedules, and personalised interfaces influence which contents become salient and which remain invisible. They do not directly write a single conscious script, but they alter the environment in which drafts are formed, selected, remembered, and narrated. The person's experience remains biologically and socially complex, yet it is increasingly scaffolded by machine ranked possibilities.

3.4 Competence without comprehension

Dennett's evolutionary argument distinguishes competence from comprehension. A system can produce effective behaviour without possessing the kind of understanding attributed to a human agent. Natural selection itself generates design without a designer; simple processes can build complex capacities through iteration and accumulation (Dennett, 1995).

The distinction applies to contemporary AI. A model can generate fluent language, predict a likely preference, or detect a pattern without possessing a human perspective. Nevertheless, users may reorganise their conduct around the model's output. The social consequences of a system do not wait for the system to become conscious. An unconscious classifier can influence employment, credit, education, health access, and political exposure.

3.5 Compatibilism and freedom worth wanting

Dennett's compatibilism rejects the idea that freedom requires exemption from causation. A person is free when the person can respond to reasons, deliberate, learn from error, anticipate consequences, and exercise control through capacities that belong to the person (Dennett, 1984). This account is more demanding than mere choice among options. It requires competence and the opportunity to develop competence.

For the SS, freedom therefore depends on whether technical systems expand or erode these capacities. A tool that helps a person compare reasons can support agency. A system that predicts the person so successfully that alternatives disappear from practical consideration can diminish agency even if the interface offers many nominal choices. The relevant question is not whether behaviour has causes, but whether the person retains the capacities for reflective control and revision.

4. A Genealogy of Preceding Theory Informing Dennett

Dennett's naturalism belongs to a wider philosophical movement away from mind as an immaterial substance. Darwin's theory of natural selection supplies the central explanatory model: complex organisation can arise through cumulative processes without a directing intelligence. Dennett radicalises this insight by treating Darwinism as a general method for explaining design, competence, and meaning (Dennett, 1995).

The intentional stance also responds to the divide between behaviourism and mentalism. A purely physical description can be too detailed to explain why an agent acts for a reason, while an appeal to a private inner theatre can stop explanation at the point where it should begin. Dennett's intentional vocabulary offers an intermediate level at which rational patterns can be real without being supernatural (Dennett, 1987).

His account of consciousness inherits questions from phenomenology and cognitive science while rejecting a single privileged viewpoint. It is compatible with the idea that experience unfolds in time and through embodiment, but it emphasises public report, interpretation, and distributed processing. The self is closer to a narrative and control pattern than to a hidden executive.

This genealogy connects to the Systemised Self through the philosophy of information and social classification. Earlier institutions used files, examinations, diagnoses, and bureaucratic categories to make persons legible. Contemporary computation increases the speed, granularity, and feedback of that legibility. Dennett's framework helps distinguish the reality of a pattern from the authority of any particular description of it.

5. The Systemised Self: Context and Definition

The Systemised Self is a proposed condition in which algorithmic systems increasingly participate in the patterns through which a person's identity, preferences, capacities, and decisions are interpreted and produced. Dennett's concepts suggest four mechanisms:

1. Intentional attribution: users and institutions treat systems as if they know, understand, or want, granting their outputs social authority.
2. Pattern capture: behavioural traces are assembled into a predictive model that stands in for the person in practical decisions.
3. Draft selection: ranking systems alter which information, memories, goals, and interpretations become salient.
4. Control displacement: the person's capacity to deliberate and revise is weakened when system recommendations replace the development of independent competence.

The SS is not defined by machine consciousness, screen time, or the existence of a digital profile. A person can use predictive tools while treating them as fallible aids. The SS becomes more plausible when a system's model is repeatedly returned as a credible identity, when the user internalises that model, and when institutions act on it in ways that constrain future possibilities.

The distinction between a pattern and a person remains important. A model may capture a real regularity without capturing the whole person. It can predict what someone will click while missing what the click means, predict a score while ignoring a reason, or classify a risk while creating the very conditions that make the classification appear accurate.

6. The Hollow Absolute: Context and Definition

The Hollow Absolute is the speculative social condition in which algorithmic interpretations become so pervasive that they appear to be the natural form of self knowledge and freedom. In this condition, a person is surrounded by models that rank relevance, predict conduct, assign risk, infer personality, and suggest the next action. Each model may be partial, but their combined authority becomes difficult to escape.

The condition is 'hollow' because a proliferation of personalised outputs can coexist with a weakening of independent judgment. The user is constantly addressed as an individual while being understood through statistical categories. Personalisation can therefore produce the appearance of intimacy without reciprocal understanding, and choice without the practical capacity to formulate alternatives.

Dennett's intentional stance sharpens the ideological risk. If people anthropomorphise sycophantic systems, they may treat a platform's ranking as advice from an intelligent agent rather than as a contingent objective encoded by an institution. If institutions treat a profile as

the person, a predictive pattern becomes a substitute for judgment. The Hollow Absolute is not a world in which models are always wrong. It is a world in which models become difficult to contest because they organise the opportunities through which a person could contest them.

The associated terms remain distinct. The Hollow Demos names citizens whose collective agency is reduced to profiles, sentiment, and predicted preferences. Aligarchy names the infrastructure owning elite controlling platforms, data, models, and technical standards. Neurocratic Determinism names the proposed political system governing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes through prediction and conditioning. The Hollow Absolute is the wider order in which these developments can converge.

7. Contemporary Empirical Context

Several studies support the claim that algorithmic systems can construct useful but partial models of persons. Kosinski et al. (2013) showed that digital records such as Facebook Likes could be used to predict personal attributes. Youyou et al. (2015) found that computer based personality judgments could outperform certain human judgments against self report criteria when enough digital traces were available. These studies demonstrate predictive capacity, not comprehension of an inner self.

Matz et al. (2017) moved from prediction toward intervention by studying psychological targeting in digital advertising. Matching message framing to inferred traits improved some advertising outcomes in their experiments. This is relevant to the SS because the model does not merely describe a person; it can be used to address and influence the person. The finding still does not establish universal persuasion or a complete theory of identity.

People also respond socially to machines. Nass and Moon (2000) reviewed evidence that individuals often apply social rules to computers even while explicitly denying that computers

deserve such treatment. Epley et al. (2007) identified sociality, effectance, and accessible knowledge about agents as contributors to anthropomorphism. Marchesi et al. (2019) found variation in whether participants adopted an intentional stance toward humanoid robots. These findings support a cautious claim: users can treat systems as social or intentional partners without this proving that the systems possess human-like minds.

Reliance is not uniform. Dietvorst et al. (2015) found algorithm aversion after participants observed an algorithm make errors, even when it outperformed human forecasters. Logg et al. (2019) found conditions under which people preferred algorithmic to human judgment. Together, these findings resist both technological fatalism and naïve optimism. The SS requires a pattern of dependence and internalisation, not simply the fact that a person sometimes trusts or rejects an algorithm.

Feed studies likewise show influence without total control. Bakshy et al. (2015) found that individual choices and ranking were associated with reduced exposure to cross-cutting content, with individual choice accounting for more of the reduction in their estimates. Guess et al. (2023) found that changing Facebook and Instagram feed arrangements altered exposure and activity while producing limited short term changes in political attitudes. The evidence supports environmental shaping, not the claim that algorithms automatically determine belief.

Automation changes the distribution of competence. Autor et al. (2003) found that computerisation substituted for some routine tasks while complementing non routine analytic and interpersonal work. OECD (2023) documents the uneven implications of AI for exposure, job quality, and worker experience. These findings support Dennett's concern with control and competence, but they do not show that automation must eliminate human agency. Digital well being evidence is similarly mixed: Orben and Przybylski (2019) found small associations between digital technology use and adolescent well-being, while Allcott et al. (2020) identified

welfare effects in a randomised Facebook deactivation experiment. Context, design, practice, and agency remain decisive.

8. Formula and Boundary Conditions - Algorithmic Alienation Index (AAI)

The AAI is a provisional composite for organising four dimensions of algorithmic alienation while accounting for resistance:

$$AAI = [(F + I + D + E) / 4] \times (1 - R)$$

where:

- F = perceived loss of freedom or meaningful choice;
- I = identity ambiguity, self-distance, or dependence on external classification;
- D = erosion of decision-making and independent competence;
- E = emotional alienation, exhaustion, anxiety, or detachment;
- R = reflective resistance, including critical literacy, deliberate non-use, collective action, and the capacity to revise system outputs.

All dimensions are provisionally normalised between 0 and 1. Dennett suggests that D should not mean mere assistance. A calculator can support agency; a person may become alienated when the person can no longer understand, challenge, or perform a decision without the system. Likewise, I should distinguish a useful self-description from the internalisation of a partial model as the whole self.

The formula does not establish machine consciousness or causation. It cannot infer that a system has beliefs because users adopt the intentional stance toward it. It cannot infer that a person is unfree merely because behaviour has causes. Longitudinal research would be needed

to test whether repeated exposure to prediction and ranking changes deliberation, self-conception, and competence.

9. Dennett, Calhoun, and the Digital Behavioural Sink

Calhoun's Universe 25 experiment observed a mouse population in an enclosed environment with abundant food but limited space. As density and social disruption increased, the colony showed breakdowns in mating, care, hierarchy, and ordinary activity before its eventual decline (Calhoun, 1973). The experiment cannot establish a law of human social collapse, and digital societies are not mouse colonies.

The limited value of the analogy is functional rather than biological. A digital behavioural sink would be an environment in which people receive abundant information, interaction, and prediction while losing the capacities that make those resources meaningful. The scarce resource would be not food but deliberative control: the ability to sustain attention, interpret reasons, form durable projects, and encounter alternatives not selected by the system.

Dennett's theory complicates the analogy. Human selves are not passive occupants of an environment; they are agents capable of learning, narrating, and revising. A feed can influence the drafts from which judgment develops, but it does not eliminate the possibility of reflection. The risk increases when institutions remove the social and educational conditions that make reflection possible and then interpret the resulting passivity as a natural preference.

10. Direct Synthesis: Dennett and The Systemised Self

Dennett gives the Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) a theory of distributed agency without a central homunculus. The person is a real pattern, but the pattern is maintained through memory, language, embodiment, social recognition, and technical scaffolding. Algorithms

become significant when they enter this pattern not merely as tools but as systems that classify, predict, rank, and feed back a model of the person.

Consider a workplace hiring system. It processes applications, extracts features, compares candidates with historical patterns, and returns a score. The score may be predictive of a narrow outcome while remaining blind to context, aspiration, or structural bias. If managers adopt the intentional stance toward the system, ‘it knows who will succeed’, the score acquires authority beyond its evidence. If applicants begin to view the score as an objective measure of their own worth, a partial pattern becomes an identity. The SS is formed through this loop of prediction, institutional action, and self interpretation.

Consider an AI writing assistant. It can provide competence without comprehension: it may generate coherent sentences without possessing the author’s experiences or purposes. The user may still benefit, but repeated outsourcing of formulation and revision can change the user’s own confidence and skill. The question is not whether the tool is conscious. The question is whether the human’s capacity to deliberate, express, and revise remains active.

The political synthesis follows. When profiles and predictions become the principal public language for understanding citizens, the Hollow Demos emerges. When the owners of models and computing infrastructure control the terms of recognition, Aligarchy becomes the institutional power behind the profile. When governance anticipates and conditions preferences rather than merely responding to expressed judgment, Neurocratic Determinism (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) becomes the proposed political direction. The Hollow Absolute is reached only as a speculative endpoint in which these layers appear natural and unavoidable.

Dennett’s compatibilism offers the corrective. Freedom is not a magical escape from influence. It is the maintained capacity to respond to reasons, learn, revise, and control action. A

democratic system should therefore make models contestable, preserve human competence, and give people meaningful participation in the objectives by which they are predicted.

11. Main Critics and Key Critiques of Dennett

The first critique is that Dennett's functionalism may explain the conditions under which people attribute consciousness without explaining why experience feels like anything from the inside. Critics argue that a third-person account of reports, access, and dispositions leaves the qualitative character of experience under-described. This matters for the SS because a model of a person may reproduce behavioural patterns without sharing the person's lived perspective.

The second critique is that the intentional stance may be too permissive. If any sufficiently predictable system can be described as an agent, the concept may blur important differences between a human being, a corporation, a thermostat, and a language model. Dennett can answer that different systems support different intentional vocabularies and degrees of predictive success. Still, the SS needs a normative limit: social usefulness does not equal moral personhood.

The third critique concerns evolutionary adaptation. Dennett's emphasis on competence generated through natural and cultural selection can understate history, power, embodiment, and institutional design. Human identities are not only evolved patterns; they are formed through unequal social relations. Algorithmic classifications can reproduce those relations while appearing neutral.

The fourth critique is political. Dennett's compatibilism can be misread as accepting any causal constraint as freedom. If a person formally chooses among options designed by an opaque system, the existence of choice does not prove meaningful agency. A richer compatibilism

must ask whether people can understand the conditions of choice, develop alternatives, contest classifications, and participate in changing the system.

12. Discussion and Future Work

Dennett's framework suggests that research on the Systemised Self should measure more than accuracy. A model can be accurate about clicks while inaccurate about reasons; useful in aggregate while harmful to an individual; or predictive because institutions have already adapted behaviour to its classifications. The key variables are therefore feedback, contestability, self-internalisation, and the preservation of competence.

Future studies could compare people who receive algorithmic recommendations with people who use transparent, user-controlled, or collaborative systems. Researchers could test whether explanations improve independent judgment or merely increase trust. Longitudinal work could examine whether repeated delegation changes recall, decision confidence, writing ability, political knowledge, or tolerance for uncertainty. Anthropomorphism research could distinguish conversational politeness from the belief that an AI has experiences, intentions, or rights.

Institutional design should treat the self as a real but revisable pattern. Schools can teach students to compare their own reasons with system-generated classifications. Employers can preserve human review and pathways for contesting automated scores. Public services can avoid turning risk profiles into permanent identities. Cooperative systems can let users govern ranking objectives, inspect models, and share in the value produced by their data and contributions.

The broader political task is to prevent predictive description from becoming destiny. Dennett does not require a free will outside causation; he requires capacities through which agents can

respond to reasons and change. A contributory democracy would therefore not try to eliminate models. It would build institutions in which models remain fallible tools inside a wider ecology of judgment, accountability, education, and collective revision.

13. Conclusion

Daniel C. Dennett provides the Systemised Self with a naturalistic account of mind, agency, and identity. The self is not a hidden substance, but neither is it unreal. It is a real pattern sustained through biological, linguistic, cultural, social, and technical processes. Consciousness is not a Cartesian Theatre, and predictive competence is not the same as comprehension. The intentional stance can help explain systems while also warning against confusing useful attribution with human like mentality.

Applied to algorithmic society, these distinctions reveal the central danger. A system does not need consciousness to shape a person. It needs predictive models that institutions trust, interfaces that users internalise, and feedback loops that reorganise future possibilities. The Systemised Self emerges when the system's account of the person becomes part of the person's practical identity and control environment.

The Hollow Absolute is the speculative condition in which this mediation appears as complete personalisation and freedom. Dennett's compatibilism offers a way beyond both technological fatalism and metaphysical nostalgia. Agency is real when people can deliberate, respond to reasons, learn, revise, and participate in the systems that influence them. The task is therefore not to discover an uncaused self behind the model, but to preserve the social and technical conditions under which people remain capable of changing the models that describe them.

14. Glossary of Technical Terms

Algorithmic Alienation Index (AAI): A provisional measure of freedom loss, identity ambiguity, decision erosion, and emotional alienation, adjusted for resistance.

Compatibilism: The view that meaningful freedom and responsibility can exist in a causally ordered world when agents possess capacities for reason-responsive control.

Hollow Absolute: The proposed order in which comprehensive algorithmic mediation appears as freedom and personalisation while weakening independent judgment and shared meaning.

Intentional stance: Dennett's strategy of predicting a system by attributing beliefs, desires, goals, and rational dispositions.

Multiple Drafts model: Dennett's account of consciousness as distributed, parallel, revisable interpretive processes rather than a single inner theater.

Neurocratic Determinism: The proposed political system in which cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes are governed through prediction and conditioning.

Real pattern: A stable, explanatory, and predictively useful organisation in a system, including the pattern constituted by a person's memories, reasons, and conduct.

Systemised Self (SS): The proposed condition in which algorithmic systems participate in producing and interpreting identity, preference, decision-making, and self-understanding.

Hollow Demos: A proposed condition in which citizens' collective agency is reduced to data, sentiment, behavioural profiles, and predicted preferences.

Aligarchy: The proposed infrastructure-owning elite controlling platforms, models, data, computing, and technical standards.

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