From Classical Alienation to Algorithmic Alienation: A Brief Genealogy for the AI Era

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Self/Non-Self Methodology

Abstract

This essay is commentative on the intellectual genealogy of alienation for undergraduate readers and applies its central questions to algorithmic mediation in the AI era. The discussion follows changing accounts of autonomy, recognition, labour, desire, lived experience, situated existence, institutional power, and subject formation. Rather than presenting successive philosophers as contributors to one doctrine, it identifies disagreements about what a self is, what freedom requires, and which relationships can become alienating. Heidegger marks an important challenge to the picture of a detached individual subsequently influenced by an external world. The contemporary application asks whether predictive systems support judgment or acquire authority over the purposes and identities they represent. Historical concepts illuminate this question without demonstrating that algorithmic influence necessarily produces alienation. Qualitative research supplies limited evidence of reported tensions, not proof of constitutive dependence. The Systemised Self remains a speculative hypothesis rather than the inevitable endpoint of this genealogy. The conclusion therefore emphasises contestability, solidarity, and institutional alternatives. Meaningful freedom requires neither an untouched inner self nor independence from every tool, but practical opportunities to understand, challenge, and collectively reshape the conditions through which technological assistance operates.

Keywords: *Alienation; autonomy; recognition; subjectivity; algorithmic mediation; artificial intelligence.*

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LIMITATIONS

This essay is commentative only and not proof of concept, utilising a selective genealogy that is predominantly European, not universal. The AI applications are utilised as speculative analogy only. Compression of selected concepts sacrifices historical detail; shared questions do not establish agreement, direct influence, or chronological succession. Philosophical interpretation cannot establish technological effects. The systemised self is a speculative non operational hypothesis [12].

1. Alienation

Alienation concerns a problematic relationship to oneself, activity, others, or the social world, not simply loneliness. Its diagnosis requires a standard: what relationship should be possible, and why is its present form inadequate?

Algorithmic alienation [11] asks whether computational mediation contributes to such estrangement. A recommendation is not alienating merely because it influences someone. The issue is whether people can meaningfully understand, direct, and contest the arrangements shaping their lives.

2. Enlightenment and Romanticism — Reason and Freedom

Kant's Enlightenment ideal challenges intellectual tutelage: people should exercise judgment rather than accept directedness unquestioningly [13]. Romantic traditions complicate confidence in universal calculation by emphasising imagination, feeling, individuality, and historical belonging [1].

This is not a simple opposition between intelligence and emotion. It asks whether rational organisation adequately accommodates the richness of human purposes. Kant also requires freedom for public reasoning.

Algorithmic systems (transformer based large language models) or AI may extend reasoning through translation, explanation, and comparison. It may also encourage deference: an answer becomes acceptable because the system supplied it. The shift is from inherited authority towards self-government, accompanied by disagreement about what self-government requires.

3. Hegel — Recognition

Hegel challenges the isolated self: self-consciousness and freedom develop through relations with others and historically formed institutions. Recognition is not merely praise; it concerns how people acknowledge one another's standing. The question therefore changes from "Am I independent?" to "Which relationships make freedom possible?"

A platform can make someone visible without giving them meaningful standing in decisions about its rules. Conversely, mediated communities can enable genuine recognition and collective action.

4. Marx — Labour and Control

Marx redirects attention towards production, ownership, and labour. Workers can confront their own products and collective powers as forces controlled by others. Alienation is consequently not reducible to dissatisfaction: it can concern the organisation of activity itself [2]. The emphasis shifts from recognition towards the material conditions through which people reproduce their lives. Algorithmic management raises comparable questions: who determines performance targets, owns resulting data, and can revise the rules? Helpful scheduling software is not inherently alienating. The issue is whether productive cooperation occurs under conditions workers can influence.

5. Nietzsche and Freud — Uncertain Self-Knowledge

Nietzsche questions inherited values and the authority they retain after the erosion of religious foundations [3]. Freud investigates unconscious conflict, challenging the idea that conscious explanations exhaust motivation [14]. These distinct projects unsettle the transparent, rational subject. The difficulty is not only external constraint: people may misunderstand their own reasons.

Personalisation exploits patterns without necessarily understanding their human significance. An AI-generated explanation of someone's preferences can sound convincing while remaining mistaken. Equally, declaring a preference "authentic" does not establish its independence from social influence.

6. Bergson and Husserl — Lived Experience

Bergson distinguishes qualitative duration from time represented as interchangeable units. Husserl examines intentionality: experience is directed towards things that appear with meaning, within embodied and shared horizons [4, 5]. These are different inquiries, not equivalent theories. Both nevertheless complicate treating external measurement as an exhaustive account of life. Engagement minutes cannot alone reveal whether an encounter was absorbing, distressing, or meaningful. Behavioural records can inform inquiry without replacing it. A representation of experience is not its entirety.

7. Heidegger — Being-in-the-World

Heidegger makes the conceptual transition sharper: human existence is already being-in-the-world, practically involved with others, tools, and possibilities—not an isolated mind subsequently connected to external objects [3]. Everyday conventions help make life intelligible, although conformity can obscure responsibility for one's possibilities. Authenticity does not mean escaping all relationships or becoming morally virtuous.

For the AI era, the question extends beyond accepting recommendations: how does an environment organise what appears worth considering? Technology can shape the setting of judgment, not only its selected answers.

8. Sartre, Beauvoir, and Fanon — Situated Freedom

Sartre stresses responsibility without a predetermined human essence. Beauvoir investigates freedom exercised under unequal social conditions, including women's positioning as Other. Fanon examines how colonisation/assimilation can structure embodied experience and recognition [3, 6]. Their differences matter, but together they resist equating abstract choice with effective freedom. Fanon also transforms European inheritances through colonial experience rather than merely extending them. Digital classifications can constrain employment, credibility, and self-understanding. Historical oppression, however, cannot be equated with every computational category. Examine concrete institutions, harms, and opportunities for challenge. Freedom depends partly on what people are practically permitted to become.

9. Critical Theory and Arendt — Institutions and Public Life

Drawing on Marx and Freud, Frankfurt School thinkers question instrumental reason: efficient means can dominate discussion while human ends escape scrutiny. Their criticism of administered culture asks how apparent choice can coexist with restricted possibilities [7].

Arendt's distinct emphasis is plurality, judgment, and action among people sharing a world [8]. Neither consumption nor predictable behaviour exhausts political freedom.

Personalised information may help discovery while weakening common reference points. These perspectives ask whether systems serve contestable public purposes or define success through their own performance measures. Efficient personalisation cannot substitute for a shared political world.

10. Structuralism, Foucault, and Derrida — Subject Formation

Structuralism emphasises relations within systems of meaning. Foucault investigates how practices of knowledge and power form subjects and norms. Derrida questions conceptual hierarchies and the assumption that meaning possesses a final, self-sufficient foundation [9].

These approaches do not constitute one doctrine, prove that truth is irrelevant, or eliminate every possibility of agency. They challenge the picture of a completed self that systems merely describe. An AI label may influence how teachers, employers, and individuals interpret a person, thereby affecting future opportunities. Classification can participate in producing its apparent object. Categories can shape the lives they claim only to represent.

11. From Modernity to Postmodernity — Why It Matters for the AI era

The trajectory is contested, not inevitable: aspirations to grounded knowledge, progress, and self-government encounter repeated challenges concerning history, desire, experience, and power. Postmodern questioning develops within modernity; it does not simply replace reason with relativism [9]. These shifts overlap rather than forming a clean succession. Critics such as Habermas argue that challenges to reason can depend on the very standards they contest. The practical task is to justify criticism, not merely expose hidden influences.

The AI era makes the tension immediate by promising increasingly comprehensive accounts of people. Arkan et al's four focus groups, involving 20 participants, report perceived algorithmic steering, identity ambiguity, discomfort, and resistance [11]. These situated accounts do not establish universal effects or terminal absorption.

The Systemised Self proposes a stronger, speculative dependence on algorithms for identity and judgment [12]. This genealogy illuminates its questions without validating its conclusion.

Humanist praxis and Havelian dissent redirect attention towards action, solidarity, and alternatives [7, 10]. Resistance requires more than private resolve: affected people need effective means to dispute classifications and promote institutional change.

The answer is not an untouched self outside systems, but shared power to revise the systems through which we live. The 31 year trajectory of the internet, social media and now conversational large language models thus far has been institutionally sanctioned, commercially driven and relatively opaque to users, across most countries and populations: moving forward individuals might be compelled to more seriously consider their own personal responsibility and intentionality for their participation within this operating model, with respect to whether their perceived expression of autonomy is also alienating.

Glossary

Algorithmic mediation: Computational organisation of experience, thought and/or action.

Autonomy: Meaningful self-government.

Recognition: Acknowledgment of another's standing.

Instrumental reason: Reasoning about effective means.

Intentionality: Experience's directedness towards something.

Duration: Qualitative lived time.

Being-in-the-world: Existence as already involved.

Situated freedom: Agency within concrete conditions.

Subject formation: Processes shaping identities and capacities.

Praxis: Reflective, transformative activity.

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Numbered sources; SEP denotes *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

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