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## THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE PHENOMENA OF FREEDOM AND DEPENDENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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**Abstract.** The rapid integration of digital technologies into modern society has fundamentally changed the ontological and epistemological foundations of human existence. This article investigates the dialectical relationship between freedom and dependence in the digital age. By applying the theoretical frameworks of Baruch Spinoza, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Michel Foucault to contemporary digital environments, the study explores how technological advancements both expand human agency and subject individuals to new, unseen forms of algorithmic control and surveillance. The methodological approach depends on a critical philosophical analysis of "digital governmentality" and the paradox of voluntary servitude in the information society.

**Keywords:** Digital Age, Philosophy of Freedom, Technological Dependence, Algorithmic Determinism, Panopticism, Existentialism, Artificial Intelligence.

**Introduction.** The shift to the digital age has reshaped the traditional philosophical ideas of freedom and dependence. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) were initially celebrated as the ultimate tools for human liberation, spreading knowledge freely and breaking down old hierarchies (Floridi, 2014). However, today's digital environment—marked by big data, algorithmic filtering, artificial intelligence (AI), and social media platforms—has created powerful new forms of dependence. The individual now exists in an "infosphere" where every digital activity leaves a record, turning the user into a measurable data point (Zuboff, 2019). This paper examines the philosophical and methodological foundations of this paradox, using both classical and modern theories to understand how digital freedom often leads to new forms of technological dependence.

**Methodology.** This research employs a qualitative, comparative philosophical methodology. It utilizes hermeneutic analysis to reinterpret classical philosophical theories of freedom and determinism within the context of contemporary digital phenomena. The theoretical foundation is triangulated through three primary philosophical lenses:

Baruch Spinoza's concept of determinism and rational freedom.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist framework of radical freedom and "bad faith."

Michel Foucault's structural analysis of power, surveillance, and the Panopticon.

**Results and Discussion.** The digital age presents a profound ontological paradox: technologies designed to maximize individual agency simultaneously construct unprecedented infrastructures of behavioral control. By applying the frameworks of Spinoza, Sartre, and Foucault, we can deconstruct the mechanisms by which digital freedom engenders new dependencies.

3.1. Algorithmic Determinism and the Hijacking of the Spinozist Conatus



Baruch Spinoza argued that humans are motivated by *conatus*—the innate drive to continue existing—and that true freedom comes not from uncaused spontaneous actions but through a rational understanding of the deterministic chains shaping the universe (Spinoza, 1677/1996). In today's digital landscape, algorithms serve as a new, opaque layer of deterministic law. Artificial intelligence and machine learning systems work by detecting patterns in massive datasets to predict and influence user behavior (Zuboff, 2019). From a Spinozist view, the illusion of digital freedom—the idea that one can freely navigate information—hides a deep dependence. When users engage with social media feeds or search engines, algorithms filter reality to reinforce existing biases, creating "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011). The user's *conatus* is essentially hijacked; their desires and emotional responses are externally controlled by algorithmic structures designed to maximize platform engagement. Digital dependence, therefore, stems from an epistemological gap. Users operate within what Spinoza called the "first kind of knowledge"—imagination and incomplete ideas—reacting blindly to digital stimuli. True emancipation involves ascending to the "second kind of understanding"—gaining digital literacy and recognizing the algorithmic forces shaping online environments.

3.2. Existential Alienation and the Digital "Look" in Sartre's Ontology Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism emphasizes that human consciousness is radically free, yet this freedom is accompanied by anguish. To escape the responsibility of authentic self-determination, individuals often fall into *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), treating themselves as objects rather than free subjects (Sartre, 1943/1992). The architecture of modern digital platforms systematically encourages this existential dependence. Social media offers pre-made templates for shaping identity. As users craft their online personas to gain measurable social approval (likes, followers, and shares), they absorb the "Look" of the digital Other. Sartre suggested that the gaze of the Other objectifies the person; online, this objectification is constant, recorded, and measured. As a result, users disconnect from their true freedom by adapting to the aesthetic and ideological expectations of the platform. Additionally, as Fuchs (2014) emphasizes in his political economy of social media, this voluntary self-presentation is also a form of unpaid digital labor. The user's pursuit of existential validation through digital freedom becomes the core of their economic and psychological reliance, supporting Byung-Chul Han's (2015) claim that digital society functions through voluntary self-exploitation rather than external force.

3.3. Algorithmic Governmentality and the Evolution of the Panopticon Michel Foucault's adaptation of Bentham's Panopticon exemplifies the classic model of disciplinary power—a system where the constant threat of surveillance causes individuals to internalize control (Foucault, 1975/1995). However, as Gilles Deleuze (1992) pointed out, the digital age shifts society from confined disciplinary institutions to open "societies of control." Digital dependence is marked by participatory and decentralized Panopticism. Unlike traditional prisons, where



surveillance is perceived as a threat, digital monitoring becomes a highly desirable service. People willingly share their data—location, communications, and biometric information—for the convenience and connectivity provided by digital services. This shift signifies the rise of "algorithmic governmentality" (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013). Power is no longer primarily exercised through repressing behavior but through predictive profiling of populations. The dependency is structural and all-encompassing; participating in this surveillance network is essential for social and economic existence today. Therefore, the digital subject exercises their freedom of expression within the very system that tracks, commodifies, and governs them.

**Conclusion.** The theoretical and methodological investigation of freedom and dependence in the digital age reveals a complex dialectical relationship. The proliferation of digital technologies has undoubtedly democratized information and expanded the horizons of individual agency. However, this study demonstrates that this newly acquired digital freedom is structurally tethered to sophisticated, often invisible, forms of dependence.

First, the Spinozist analysis illustrates that algorithmic determinism silently guides human decision-making, transforming autonomous choices into predictable data outputs. Second, the Sartrean perspective highlights the existential crisis of the digital era, where the pressure for virtual validation drives individuals into "bad faith," reducing authentic subjects to quantified digital objects. Finally, the Foucauldian approach exposes the transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control, where continuous, participatory surveillance operates under the guise of technological convenience. Ultimately, the phenomenon of digital dependence is unique because it is largely voluntary. It does not rely on physical coercion but on psychological engagement and structural necessity. Overcoming this dependence does not entail a regressive rejection of technology. Instead, it requires a philosophical and practical paradigm shift toward critical digital emancipation. This involves cultivating deep digital literacy, demanding algorithmic transparency, and establishing ethical frameworks that prioritize human agency over behavioral commodification. Only by rationally comprehending the invisible architectures of the digital world can individuals reclaim their autonomy and transform their relationship with technology from one of passive servitude to one of conscious, sovereign interaction.

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