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# A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF FREE WILL AND THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE UNDER THE CONDITIONS OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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### Abstract

This article subjects to philosophical analysis the problem of free will and the illusion of choice under the conditions of digital transformation. On the basis of an analysis of international scholarly sources from the period 2020–2025, the study examines the extent to which a person’s genuine freedom of will is preserved within the contemporary environment of algorithmic recommender systems, predictive artificial intelligence, and surveillance capitalism. The article comparatively engages R. Sapolsky’s position of hard determinism, Sh. Zuboff’s theory of “behavior modification,” M. Coeckelbergh’s notion of epistemic agency, and the compatibilist approach. The investigation advances “digital heteronomy” as a new philosophical concept: the situation in which the individual regards his or her own choice as free while it has, in fact, been shaped in advance by an algorithmic architecture.

**Keywords:** Free will, illusion of choice, digital transformation, surveillance capitalism, algorithmic curation, epistemic agency, predictive AI, determinism, compatibilism, digital heteronomy.

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### Introduction

The problem of free will has been considered, throughout the history of philosophy, as one of the most ancient and the most delicate. From Aristotle to St. Augustine, from Kant to Sartre, all the great philosophers have endeavored to comprehend the genuine essence of human choice. Yet by the second quarter of the twenty-first century, the scope and character of this problem have been fundamentally transformed. The question is no longer confined to the inner determinism of the person (genes, upbringing, neurons); it has been augmented by the question of the person's being governed by an external digital architecture (algorithms, predictive systems, databases).

In approaching this question, a philosophical truth must be registered at the outset: free will is not merely a metaphysical concept but the very foundation of ethics, law, and political theory. If the person is found to be incapable of free choice, then the entire institution of moral responsibility, the system of punishment, and democratic relations as a whole would have to be reconsidered. In *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will*, published by Stanford University professor Robert Sapolsky in October 2023, the position of hard determinism is defended, and it is asserted that “we are nothing more or less than the sum of that which we could not control — our biology, our environments, their interactions” [1]. This claim rests upon neurobiological evidence — in particular, on the experiments conducted by B. Libet in the 1980s, which showed that brain activity related to motor action emerges some 300 milliseconds before the conscious intent to act.

Yet the digital transformation of the twenty-first century has added a new layer to this problem. It is no longer only inner neurobiological determinism but also an external algorithmic architecture that shapes the choices of the individual. As N. Ismail wrote in Medium in 2025, what is taking place is “the slow, steady erosion of our autonomy in a world where algorithms know us better than we know ourselves” [2]. The aim of the present study is, therefore, to investigate the

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problem of free will and the illusion of choice under the conditions of digital transformation, on the basis of a philosophical-analytical approach. The investigation seeks answers to the following questions. First, in what manner does the digital architecture redefine the very concept of free will? Second, in what does the difference between neurobiological determinism and algorithmic determinism consist? Third, under such conditions, how is human autonomy to be defended and strengthened?

### Materials and Methods

**Research methodology:** The article employs the methods of phenomenological analysis, the hermeneutic approach, comparative-conceptual analysis, and a systematic literature review. The principal methodological approach is critical document analysis, which proceeds through the comparative study of scholarly articles, monographs, and academic analyses published in internationally peer-reviewed journals. As the philosophical framework, an analysis of the dialogue between compatibilism (D. Dennett and C. List) and determinism (R. Sapolsky) was selected. This approach makes it possible to evaluate the phenomenon of digital transformation from a normative-philosophical standpoint.

**Literature review.** Wide use was made of works by Western and Eastern scholars published from 2020 onward: R. Sapolsky (Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will. – Penguin, 2023), Sh. Zuboff (The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. – PublicAffairs, 2019), M. Coeckelbergh (Why AI Undermines Democracy and What to Do About It. – Polity, 2024), C. List and D. Dennett (The Compatibility of Free Will and Determinism. – Cambridge University Press, 2021), R. Kane (The Complex Tapestry of Free Will. – Oxford University Press, 2024), A. Seth (Being You: A New Science of Consciousness. – Faber, 2021), P. Nokhiz and A.K. Ruwanpathirana (Consumer Autonomy or Illusion. – arXiv, 2025), N. Ismail (The Illusion of Free Will in the Digital Age. – Medium, 2025),

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and T. Ramsøy (The Illusion of Free Will in the Age of Predictive AI. – 2024), among others.

### Discussion and Results

**The classical contours of the problem of free will and its contemporary interpretation.** Within the history of philosophy, the problem of free will is articulated through three principal positions: hard determinism, libertarianism (incompatibilist free will), and compatibilism. Hard determinism asserts that the person is incapable of free choice, that every act is the product of a chain of antecedent causes. Libertarianism, by contrast, defends the possibility of preserving a domain of free choice for the person extending beyond the influence of physical laws. Compatibilism, finally, has been recognized as the most flexible and philosophically rigorous approach: it demonstrates that free will is not in opposition to determinism but that the two may be mutually consistent.

In *The Compatibility of Free Will and Determinism*, published by C. List and D. Dennett in 2021, an important philosophical intuition is advanced: the problem of free will cannot be resolved on the abstract metaphysical plane but must be examined at the concrete practical-axiological level [3]. According to this approach, free will is not freedom from physical laws but rather the capacity of the person to act in accordance with his or her own values and to grasp the consequences of his or her choices. It is for this reason that the philosopher A. Seth, in his book *Being You* (2021), writes: “We are not passive observers of our predetermined fate. We are active participants in a process of becoming” [4]. This formulation confirms the displacement of the problem of free will from the dichotomy of “existence/non-existence” toward the level of “a matter of degree.”

### **Surveillance capitalism and the global architecture of behavior modification.**

The concept of “surveillance capitalism” advanced by Sh. Zuboff in 2019 has become the central category through which the philosophical essence of digital

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transformation may be disclosed. As Zuboff defines it, “surveillance capitalism is a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales” [5]. Within this order, human experience and conduct are systematically converted into data and traded within commercial networks termed “behavioral futures markets.”

Analyzing the operation of this system, Zuboff distinguishes three types of technique: “tuning,” “herding,” and “conditioning” [6]. “Tuning” directs the choices of the person through nudge mechanisms without his or her awareness; “herding” removes items from the menu of available options; “conditioning,” in keeping with the principle of B. F. Skinner’s behaviorist psychology, shapes conduct through reward and punishment. Taken together, these three techniques constitute “the global architecture of behavior modification,” which, in Zuboff’s words, represents a threat that emerges “not from the totalitarian Big Brother state, but from a ubiquitous digital architecture, that is, from the Big Other” [5]. This new threat, considered from a philosophical standpoint, signifies the gradual erosion of the very concept of free will through a material infrastructure.

### **Predictive AI and the neurobiological foundations of the illusion of choice.**

In an analytical article published in March 2024, T. Ramsøy examines in depth the impact of predictive artificial intelligence upon the phenomenon of free will. In his view, “in a world increasingly deciphered by algorithms, understanding the true drivers behind our choices becomes more crucial than ever” [7]. The most acute aspect of this question lies in the fact that predictive AI not only forecasts the choices of the person but is capable of actively shaping them. The Netflix recommendation algorithm selects the film one will watch this evening; Google Maps determines by which route one will return home; dating applications regulate the order of the persons who appear on one’s screen.

The philosophical essence of this process has been formulated with precision by N. Ismail: “Every day, you make countless decisions you believe are your own.

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What news to read. What music to stream. Which route to take home. But behind each choice lies an invisible architecture of influence” [2]. This observation strikes a serious blow against our classical philosophical intuitions. According to classical ethics, in order for a choice to be “one’s own,” it must proceed from the rational will of the person. Yet within the contemporary digital environment, the boundary between “one’s own” and “that of others” is itself dissolving: the choice is realized through the person, but the source of its origin is situated outside the person.

**Epistemic agency and digital heteronomy.** M. Coeckelbergh and other contemporary theorists of digital ethics analyze this problem through the concept of “epistemic agency.” In Coeckelbergh’s view, “algorithmic recommender systems and manipulative techniques violate epistemic agency by interfering with our ability to form and revise our own beliefs without interference” [8]. This approach asserts that the problem of free will must be resolved not only at the level of action but also at the level of epistemic formation. The person makes decisions on the basis of his or her beliefs; if alien forces interfere with the very process by which beliefs are formed, then the genuine status of the authorship of decisions is itself called into question.

It is precisely at this point that we propose to introduce, as a philosophical category, the concept of “digital heteronomy.” Heteronomy, in the Kantian tradition, is the opposite of autonomy: the activity of the person proceeds not under his or her own law but under an external one. Classical heteronomy is shaped under the influence of external authorities (religion, tradition, community), and the person is able to recognize it as such. Digital heteronomy, however, possesses a fundamentally different character: it arises under the influence of an algorithmic authority that is invisible, ungraspable, and incapable of being contested. The person feels free, yet the “choice” set before him or her

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has already been narrowed and pre-filtered. This is the most delicate problem confronting contemporary philosophical anthropology.

**Consumer autonomy and financial consequences.** In their study published on the arXiv platform in 2025, P. Nokhiz and A. K. Ruwanpathirana investigate the problem of consumer autonomy within digital ecosystems by means of mathematical modeling. The authors arrive at the following conclusion: “even rational, utility-maximizing agents can experience early financial ruin when agency is limited across structural, behavioral, or temporal dimensions” [9]. This conclusion possesses considerable philosophical significance: it indicates that the illusion of choice is not a merely theoretical phenomenon but an empirical reality bearing measurable financial and social consequences.

As the researchers emphasize, within digital ecosystems “obligatory consumption” (hidden fees), algorithmic persuasion (impulsive purchases by way of personalized recommendations), and unstable work schedules erode financial autonomy [9]. As a result, “consumer agency must be treated as a value (not a given) requiring active cultivation.” This conclusion stands in concord with the compatibilist position: free will is not an initial condition but a capacity that is preserved and reinforced through the active conduct of the person.

**Eastern moral heritage in dialogue with digital autonomy.** The problems set forth above are not confined to the approaches of Western philosophy. The Eastern moral heritage — in particular, al-Farabi’s theory of “The Inhabitants of the Virtuous City” and the ideas of personal autonomy expounded in Yusuf Khash Hajib’s *Qutadghu Bilig* — can offer distinctive solutions to the problems of contemporary digital ethics. According to the Eastern tradition, genuine freedom of will is constituted not only by liberation from external constraint but also by mastery over inner appetitive tendencies. Translated into the digital context, this approach indicates that the overcoming of digital heteronomy requires action

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along two lines: externally, through securing algorithmic transparency and the ethics of platform design; internally, through the cultivation of digital literacy and a culture of self-governance.

### Conclusion

The present analysis has shown that, under the conditions of digital transformation, the problem of free will has acquired a new and unprecedented scope. Whereas in the classical philosophical debate free will was discussed primarily within the context of inner determinism (genetics, neurobiology, social environment), in the contemporary digital condition a further layer has been added: that of an external algorithmic determinism — a system enacted by the infrastructure of surveillance capitalism. The investigation has yielded the following conclusion: “digital heteronomy” — the situation in which the individual regards himself or herself as autonomous while in fact acting within a domain of choice that has been pre-filtered by an algorithmic architecture — has become the central problem of contemporary philosophical anthropology.

From a philosophical standpoint, the compatibilist approach offers the most productive direction for addressing this problem. Free will is not freedom from physical laws but the capacity of the person to act in accordance with his or her own values and to grasp the consequences of his or her choices. This approach mitigates the antagonism between determinism and autonomy and opens a practical path for the preservation of human agency. The final conclusion is that the overcoming of digital heteronomy demands a twofold approach: first, at the institutional level, the securing of algorithmic transparency, the rights of users, and the ethics of platform design; second, at the personal level, the strengthening of digital literacy, critical thought, and a culture of self-reflection. Only through the joint operation of these two directions can we preserve genuine human autonomy in the digital age as well.

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