Outsourcing the Self: Corporate Control and Existential Responsibility in the Digital Age

Ander Petri-Hidalgo

Abstract: In an era where the targeted advertising industry generates a yearly 270 billion dollars in the United States alone, tracking has become ubiquitous yet largely invisible. This paper analyzes how modern self-tracking technologies, primarily controlled by mega-corporations, facilitate an escape from existential responsibility while creating new forms of alienation. Drawing from Marx's theory of alienation, Sartre's concept of bad faith, and Russell's critique of passive leisure, I argue that the technological conquest of the epistemic self undermines authentic decision-making. It also contributes to a profound power imbalance between individuals and corporations, and incentivizes broader societal passivity.

Introduction

In this paper, we will consider the epistemic self as the collection of knowledge relating to the individual. We will see how individuals in the modern world are constantly engaged in the production and self-extraction of such knowledge even if they are not aware of its contents. The vast majority of data collected on and by the individual is in fact hidden from said individual. Our analysis of self-tracking will therefore focus on this hidden epistemic self. The majority of this self-data is used by mega-corporations to make choices for you and influence your environment, behavior and beliefs. The result is that we become ever less in control of ourselves.

The aim of this paper is to apply three critical philosophical frameworks—Marxist, existentialist, and Russellian—to analyze how self-tracking technologies in their modern form facilitate, incentivize and manufacture bad faith, alienation and passivity with major detriment to both the individual and society. We will start by analyzing the nature of self-data, providing the necessary conceptual groundwork, and then dive into the philosophical frameworks.

The Nature of Self-Data

Let us analyze the current realities of self-tracking. While we live in the most quantified era of human history where big data reigns supreme, the self-tracking most people consciously engage in is fairly limited. This is especially clear when one contrasts it with the wealth of hidden data that is collected on individuals in the contemporary world. While a typical individual might think they only self-track fitness, sleep and other metrics, they in fact track much more. Data generated by and on the individual includes location tracking, browsing history, online behavior, clicking tendencies, device type, time tracking, attention spans, hobbies and interests, restaurant reservations and more.

According to Elea Feit, "Most companies are collecting data . . . on all the places that they touch customers in the normal course of doing business."[1] This data is either hidden or presented in a form far better suited to large statistical inference models than to human analysis. This is to say that much of the surveillance data pertaining to marketing preferences, time spent on webpages and more is not open to the user. Additionally, the data that is available—through services like Google's takeout and other "download your data" schemes—is not easily decipherable because of its scale. A human cannot read gigabytes of data, but a machine will churn through it with the end goal of optimization and growth. It is in the interest of companies to gather as much data as possible as they are much better equipped to analyze it. For the consumer, limited resources and time ensure that she will not be able to independently glean meaningful insights from most data that has been collected on her. Tracking of the self in its modern ubiquitous form is then not created for the benefit of the consumer, as she is neither privy to its contents nor active in its analysis.

Moreover, this self-tracking infrastructure creates a profound power imbalance between individuals and corporations. The accumulation of vast quantities of personal data in corporate hands represents not just an information asymmetry but a genuine power differential. Large technology companies leverage this data to predict and influence behavior, effectively exercising a form of control that individuals cannot meaningfully resist on their own. As this data accumulation accelerates, corporate power grows exponentially while individual agency diminishes proportionally. This dynamic bears a striking resemblance to what Marx observed in industrial capitalism where the means of production were concentrated in even fewer hands. Except now, it is the means of prediction and influence that are being consolidated.

Conceptual Groundwork

Let us begin by defining some relevant existential terms. One aspect of existentialism is the critique of the tendency to let "others decide our lives for us."[2] For an existentialist, this need to conform constitutes "a manifestation of inauthenticity or self-deception because it shows how we are unwilling or unable to face up to the freedom and contingency of our condition."[3] We are often inclined to deny either the real constraints of physics, society and ability that make us feel powerless, or our ultimate, radical freedom to choose our actions. This freedom can be seen as a so-called burden of responsibility, as it means that we are ultimately responsible (perhaps even to blame) for our actions. To have bad faith from an existentialist point of view is to deny this reality. In this paper, I focus on bad faith as the series of "strategies by which we deny our existential freedom and our moral responsibility."[4] By this definition, anything that leads us to become ever more subordinate to external agents is an instrument of bad faith. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains:

> When the existentialist refers to feelings of "nausea" (Sartre), "absurdity" (Camus), "anxiety" (Kierkegaard), "guilt" (Heidegger), or "mystery" (Marcel) they are describing uncanny affects that have the power to shake us out of our complacency, where the secure and familiar world breaks apart and collapses, and we are forced to confront the question of existence.[5]

Thus the strategies of bad faith are strategies to avoid feelings of nausea, mystery and absurdity brought on by the uncomfortable nature of reality. We will see that tracking of the epistemic self provides us with refuge to offload our decision-making in order to absolve ourselves of this burden of responsibility. Furthermore, we will see that this inauthenticity and passivity is liable to create a world with reduced critical thinking and diminished social, political and economic engagement. Therefore, the blind march towards inauthenticity is negative from an existentialist individualist perspective and a societal one.

From a Marxist perspective, alienation occurs when individuals become estranged from aspects of their humanity that should rightfully belong to them. Marx identified several forms of alienation under capitalism, but two are particularly relevant to our analysis. First, "immediate producers are separated from the product of their labour; they create a product that they neither own nor control, indeed, which comes to dominate them."[6] Second, "immediate producers are separated from their own human nature; for instance, the human capacities for community and for free, conscious, and creative work, are both frustrated by contemporary capitalist relations."[7] These forms of alienation involve a problematic separation between a subject and object that fundamentally belong

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1 Wharton, "Your Data Is Shared and Sold... What's Being Done About It?" Knowledge at Wharton, 2019, https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/data-shared-sold-whats-done/.

2 Kevin Aho, "Existentialism," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Summer 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/existentialism/.

3 Aho, "Existentialism."

4 Debra Bergoffen and Megan Burke, "Simone de Beauvoir," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Fall 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/beauvoir/.

5 Aho, "Existentialism."

6 Jonathan Wolff and David Leopold, "Karl Marx," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, last modified December 21, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/.

7 Wolff and Leopold, "Karl Marx."

together.

Russell's critique of passivity provides our third theoretical pillar. In "In Praise of Idleness," Russell challenges the moralization of work, arguing that "a great deal of harm is being done in the modern world by belief in the virtuousness of work."[8] He observes that technological advances should have liberated humanity from excessive toil, allowing leisure to be "evenly distributed throughout the community" rather than "the prerogative of small privileged classes." Yet instead, we find ourselves trapped between overwork and passive consumption. For Russell, the increasing passivity of leisure—"seeing cinemas, watching football matches, listening to the radio, and so on"—represents a troubling social development. Within this framework, the tracking of the epistemic self can be understood as an intensification of the passive tendencies Russell identified. For Russell, active, creative, and socially engaged use of leisure forms the basis for genuine individuality and democratic participation.

Authenticity Analysis: Two Types of Burden Relinquishing

There are two main ways in which self-tracking enables technologies to allow us to relinquish the burden of our existentialist responsibility. The first is by reducing the need for self-knowledge. The second is by allowing us to offload value judgment determination—freeing us from the burden of constructing our own moral values. Though we will restrict ourselves to an analysis of inauthenticity and the resulting impacts on the individual and society, there are interesting models of cognition and selfhood. For example, the Extended Mind Theory or Daniel Dennet's theory of the self as a center of narrative gravity, where the delegation of cognition can be seen as a process of cyborgification. Though we do not have the space in this paper, these models offer a powerful direction for further analysis by revealing how the offloading of cognition may not only lead to inauthenticity, but could also have major implications for the philosophical self.

The first way that self-tracking enables technologies to facilitate bad faith is by reducing the need for self-reflection and self-awareness. Though self-tracking could theoretically have great positive effects on self-knowledge, in reality most self-tracking data is being used to reduce the amount of self-knowledge that one actually needs in day to day life. Since an app can take over understanding one's sleep patterns, or fitness levels, it is possible to forgo the challenging work of genuine self-understanding. Moreover, algorithmic recommendation systems like those deployed by amazon and tiktok relieve us of the burden of reflecting on what we want to buy or what we are interested in seeing. In some cases, the algorithm can be said to know the person better than they know themselves. In effect, when external agents keep track of self-metrics for us, we do not need to know ourselves intimately. Furthermore, since these algorithmic nudges predispose us to certain choices and incentivize impulsive decisions over reflective ones, we spend less and less time on each decision. In combination, these two effects allow us to run away from the realities of our condition. Thus, we effectively observe our pre-processed data rather than engage in active becoming – we are shielded from actively engaging in life and from feeling nausea and absurdity.

Through the passivity and self-alienation that comes from viewing ourselves through

8 Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (Routledge, 2004), 3.

quantification, we are never forced to "confront the question of existence" and as such, can continue living in bad faith.

The second major way that self-tracking technologies lead to bad faith is through removing the need to construct our own moral values and make authentic ethical judgments. In every prescription and decision lies an inherent normative judgment. When we are prescribed the content that we interact with, the routes we take to travel and what we spend our time on, we no longer have to come to our own moral and ethical stances. The question of why we do things, what we should do and what is important is outsourced and ignored. The difficult work of self-determination is replaced by technological prescriptions that present themselves as objective, neutral guidelines. This gives substantial power to the companies that can make use of self-data, leading to the proliferation and entrenchment of the very neoliberal values that brought these companies to the top. In this way, self-tracking technology can allow the corporatocracy to take over the complex normative task of defining a "good" life, what bodies should look like, how productivity should be measured, and what constitutes personal wellness. This technological mediation of value judgments represents a profound abdication of personal responsibility. By increasingly allowing algorithms to determine the parameters of our ethical and personal choices, we distance ourselves from the fundamental existential task of creating meaning. We trade the difficult process of authentic self-determination for the comfort of pre-processed guidance, effectively neutralizing the transformative potential of ethical reflection.

Marxist Self-Alienation

Let us focus on the alienation that occurs when individuals become estranged from the products of their labor and from their fundamental human nature. In the context of self-tracking, this theory takes on new dimensions. Our digital activities constitute a form of unwaged labor that generates valuable data commodities. When we browse websites, use apps, or wear tracking devices, we produce data that is harvested by corporations without compensation. This is alienation from the product of one's labor—we create the data but cannot access, understand, or control it. The goods we construct are thus estranged from us. This extraction of self-data through hidden labor is de facto mandatory—it is the price of entry to the digital world and occurs within a profound power asymmetry. To avoid this dynamic is only possible by refusal to participate in the digital world.

This power imbalance creates a vicious cycle: tech companies start with advantages that let them collect our data, then use that data to cement more control. As they gather more of our information, we become more dependent on their services, steadily widening the gap between their growing power and our diminishing ability to resist this extraction. This is further complicated by our last Marxist concern. The alienation is not just from labor but from our epistemic self—our self-knowledge becomes expropriated, transformed into proprietary algorithms and predictive models that reflect us back to ourselves in fragmented, commodified forms. We experience a profound ontological reversal where part of our "self" is taken outside of us and housed in data centers.

Further, the vast accumulation of self-tracking data greatly widens the power imbalance between consumers and corporations. Companies like Google, Amazon, and Meta not only collect detailed data about our lives but use this information to actively shape

our choices, desires, and even our conception of the "good life." The corporate entities that control our self-tracking infrastructure are not neutral custodians of information but active shapers of social reality.

Passivity and Social Consequences

In 1935 Bertrand Russell lamented the increased passiveness with which the modern man spent his idle time: "The pleasures of urban populations have become mainly passive: seeing cinemas, watching football matches, listening to the radio and so on."[9] With the advent of self-tracking which allows for ever more personalized forms of entertainment, this trend of passivity has only increased. In the above section we saw how this passivity is intimately tied to inauthenticity with major detriment to the individual. Now, we will focus on the societal impacts of self-tracking technologies particularly as it relates to accelerating and continuing the march towards passivity and mindless consumption.

Knowledge of the self in the form of vast amounts of preference data can be seen to enable the modern phenomenon where algorithms optimize content for maximum engagement rather than substance or value. By tracking precisely what captures and holds attention, companies can deliver an endless stream of brief, dopamine-triggering content that gradually erodes attention spans and critical thinking abilities. This represents not just individual cognitive deterioration but a broader societal shift away from deep engagement and critical analysis.

The result is a potential manifestation of surveillance capitalism, where detailed behavioral tracking enables unprecedented manipulation of political behavior. Rather than having citizens actively participate in political dialogue and independently form political judgments, we allow our tracked data to increasingly determine our political exposure and, ultimately, our political reality. This represents a collective manifestation of bad faith, where society abdicates its responsibility for active political engagement in favor of algorithmically curated political experiences. The implications for democracy are profound—as citizens become increasingly passive participants, the foundation of democratic society is undermined.

Conclusion

When we descend into inauthenticity enabled by the tracking of the epistemic self, we lose out on the intangible and unquantifiable. Put differently, we lose "what counts but cannot be counted."[10] On the individual scale, this manifests itself as a descent into bad faith. On the societal scale, the result is social stagnation and a culture of passivity, where large corporations accumulate leverage and influence. This can be seen as part of the larger trend towards passive leisure described by Russell.

The problem of self-tracking and data abuse is fundamentally one of collective action. Because consumers are fragmented and there are no mechanisms for collective bargaining or collective decision-making, the power rests with large corporations. By herself, the individual is fundamentally powerless in comparison. Only through collective action, most easily achieved through policy reforms, can this change.

If individuals are to reclaim authentic selfhood in the digital age, they must first reclaim meaningful access to their self-data. This requires both technical access to the data they generate and the capacity to meaningfully interpret it—neither of which currently exists for most users. Increased transparency is necessary to raise awareness and facilitate structures and systems to ultimately allow individuals agency over their data. How this fundamental shift in data ownership will occur remains to be seen, but only through such reform can self-tracking technologies be transformed from instruments of corporate power into tools for authentic self-understanding and genuine autonomy.

9 Russell, *In Praise of Idleness,* 13.

10 Mireille Hildebrandt, "Privacy as Protection of the Incomputable Self: From Agnostic to Agonistic Machine Learning," *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 20, no. 1 (2019): 96, https://doi.org/10.1515/til-2019-0004.

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