An Existentialist Perspective on Autonomy, Dataveillance and Ethics

Oetse Donner – 6600433

Applied Ethics, Utrecht University

Supervisor: Dr. Simon Gusman

Second reader: Prof. dr. Marcel Verweij

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'Superheroes are part of a brainless desire to replace true desire with simulation. You don't talk, you watch talk shows. You don't play games, you watch game shows. Travel, relationships, risk; every meaningful experience must be packaged and delivered to you to watch at a distance so that you can remain ever-sheltered, ever-passive, ever-ravenous consumers who can't free themselves to rise from their couches to break a sweat, never anticipate new life. You want superheroes to protect you, and make yourselves ever more powerless in the process. Well, you tell yourselves you're being "looked after". That you're inches from being served and your rights are being upheld. So that the system can keep stealing from you, smiling at you all the while. Go ahead, send your supers to stop me. Grab your snacks, watch your screens, and see what happens. You are no longer in control. I am.'

– Screenslaver from Incredibles 2

'I wanted to run away that day, but you can't run away from your own feet.'

– Flint Lockwood from Cloudy with a chance of meatballs

'*With great power, comes great responsibility*'

– Uncle Ben from Spider-Man

Abstract

This thesis investigates the extent to which individuals subjected to exploitative data surveillance (dataveillance) can be held responsible for the loss of personal autonomy they experience. It addresses whether individuals have the power to escape digital control through dataveillance and if they bear a moral responsibility to do so. The aim is twofold: to demonstrate the problematic portrayal of individuals within the conventional narrative of autonomy and digital control and to present existentialist philosophy as an empowering alternative. The thesis critiques the dominant discourse on the moral responsibility of individuals subject to dataveillance, which is obscured by the widespread operationalization of weak externalist accounts of personal autonomy. This leads to a disproportionate focus on the passive, unconscious aspect of autonomy, portraying individuals as lacking both the power and the moral responsibility to prevent their "loss of autonomy" through the malicious use of dataveillance. A resolution can be found in the existentialist ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre and the ambiguous ethics of Simone de Beauvoir, offering a reproachful, yet hopeful analysis of those who submit to the oppressive features of dataveillance. In chapter one, I introduce the Big Data paradigm and dataveillance, demonstrating the urgency of investigating their existing and future complications for society. In chapter two, I show that the current discourse on autonomy in relation to dataveillance focuses too much on identifying how online control violates external conditions of autonomy, undermining the self-governing agency of the individual. Chapter three argues why Sartre's existentialist theory of freedom can serve as a way out of the current narrative, asserting that individuals have the power to escape digital control if they accept their freedom. I also show how Beauvoir's ethics imply a moral responsibility to resist the Big Data paradigm and its underlying ideology. The conclusion acknowledges the limitations of this thesis and calls for future research into the applicability and implications of existentialist freedom - and unconventional theories of autonomy in general - in relation to the ethics of dataveillance. Furthermore, this thesis underscores the need for ethical discussions to go beyond the direct consequences of technologies.

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INTRODUCTION

Large-scale "dataveillance", defined as 'the systematic use of personal data systems in the investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons' (Clarke, 1988, p. 499), has been observed to enable technology companies and governments to exert influence over those whose data is collected (Harari, 2018; Harcourt, 2015; Lanier, 2018; Roessler & DeCew, 2023; Susskind, 2018; Wilsdon, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). The exploitative use of dataveillance to influence actions and choices, or manipulation, captured in terms such as "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019) and "data colonization" (Roessler & DeCew, 2023; Wang, 2022), has been identified as a potential risk to personal autonomy (Clarke, 1988; Harari, 2018; Lanier, 2018; Van Den Hoven, 2008; Wilsdon, 2022; Zuboff, 2019).

Many who argue for regulations against dataveillance to protect autonomy, use accounts of autonomy that include one or more external conditions to determine a person's self-governance agency (Grafanaki, 2016; Lanier, 2018; Susser et al., 2019; Susskind, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). These conditions are found or exist outside of the individual and serve as a measure of the existence of personal autonomy as self-control. Those who argue that dataveillance undermines personal autonomy have shown in numerous books and articles that dataveillance disregards at least one of the conditions that they claim are necessary for personal autonomy or similar concepts such as freedom or self-determination (Castelluccia, 2020; Grafanaki, 2016; Harari, 2017; Harcourt, 2015; Lanier, 2018; Prunkl, 2022; Susser et al., 2019; Susskind, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Consequently, those whose personal autonomy is undermined by dataveillance are victimised and depicted as unaccountable for the loss of their self-governing agency. They have been morally wronged by others, yet often remain morally pure in relation to their loss of personal autonomy. Most importantly, they are seen as powerless and dependent on the moral imperative of others to help them regain their autonomy. The narrative described above is used to argue for solutions to stop or prevent the autonomy-undermining practices of dataveillance, for example, restricting access to data through legislation and introducing regulations against exploitative use of dataveillance to protect consumers.

However, other scholars have suggested that individuals also have a responsibility to prevent their apparent loss of autonomy. For example Janon Lanier states that social media engagement results in the loss of free will (2018), and that you should therefore take the responsibility for deleting your social media accounts. Harcourt (2015) and Rasch (2020) argue that individuals have a responsibility to resist the growing influence of dataveillance through disobedience and by becoming a source of friction. And René Baston (2024) argues that freeing ourselves from unwelcome influences is a matter of taking a more proactive stance in our daily lives.

Thus, there are different ethical approaches to the growing power of surveillance technologies to influence, manipulate or control. These approaches differ in their emphasis on the power and moral responsibility of individuals, institutions or both. This complicates the ethical dilemma of determining **the extent to which individuals who are subjected to exploitative uses of dataveillance can be held responsible for the loss of personal autonomy that they undergo as a consequence.** The sub questions underlying the debate about the moral responsibility of individuals to protect their personal autonomy are **whether individuals have the power to escape digital control** and, if so, **whether they have a moral responsibility to do so**.

The aim of this thesis is twofold: to demonstrate the problematic, discouraging portrayal of the individual that emerges from the conventional narrative of autonomy and digital control; and to show how the existentialist philosophy offers an alternative approach to autonomy and the ethics of dataveillance that gives individuals the power and responsibility of their choices. I argue that the dominant discourse on the moral responsibility of individuals subject to dataveillance is obscured by a widespread operationalisation of weak externalist accounts of personal autonomy. This leads to a disproportionate focus on the passive, unconscious aspect of autonomy to the extent that individuals are portrayed as lacking both the power and the moral responsibility to prevent their "loss of autonomy" through the malicious use of dataveillance. A resolution can be found in the existentialist ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/2021) and the ambiguous ethics of Simone de Beauvoir (1947/1962, 1944/2023), which offer a reproachful but hopeful analysis of those who submit themselves to the oppressive features of dataveillance.

The first chapter introduces the concepts of the Big Data paradigm and dataveillance to demonstrate the urgency of investigating the existing and future complications that they produce for society.

In the second chapter, which consists of two parts, I show that the current discourse on autonomy in relation to dataveillance focuses too much on identifying how online control violates external conditions of autonomy, thereby undermining the self-governing agency of the individual. First, I discuss how personal autonomy is defined and operationalised in order to examine the influence of dataveillance on autonomy; we will see that studies arguing for structural regulations against dataveillance portray individuals as powerless against digital control. I then argue that this approach instantiates a deleterious image of personal agency in which autonomy is dependent on the efficacy of regulations.

In the third chapter I argue why Sartre's existentialist theory of freedom can be used as a way out of the current narrative. In contrast to those who claim that our autonomy can be threatened by digital control, Sartre proclaims that our autonomy as self-control is absolute, while acknowledging that this freedom is freedom-in-situation. Here I show that his ontology can serve as a valuable position in contemporary debates, controversially asserting that **individuals have the power to escape digital control through dataveillance if they accept their freedom**. Furthermore, I show how Simone de Beauvoir has argued that to be morally free, we should actively will freedom for ourselves and universally, which implies that we should reject the current narrative on autonomy and dataveillance as described in the second chapter. Therefore, she argues that we **have a moral responsibility to actively oppose the ideologies of the Big Data paradigm, and thereby digital control.** Finally, I relate our discussion back to the research question and shortly discuss what the existentialist ethics of ambiguity can offer to the debate about autonomy and dataveillance.

1 BIG DATA PARADIGM AND DATAVEILLANCE

1.1 BIG DATA PARADIGM

Given that Big Data technologies have created radical new opportunities for data-driven research in almost all scientific fields (Hey et al., 2009), including the study of social phenomena (Chang et al., 2014) and health care (Shilo et al., 2020), and that these opportunities have raised significant epistemological implications (Kitchin, 2014), and that these opportunities are driven by a particular scientific ideology (Dijck, 2014), we are wise to refer to Big Data as more than just a technological advance. Following Barocas and Nissenbaum, I refer to the emerging conceptual shifts about fundamental components of science, humanity and morality due to big data technologies as the Big Data paradigm.

> [The] Big Data paradigm, is a way of thinking about knowledge through data and a framework for supporting decision making, rationalizing action, and guiding practice. (…) the ascent of big data involves, fundamentally, a belief in the power of finely observed patterns, structures, and models drawn inductively from massive datasets.' (Barocas & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 46)

The belief in the power of finely observed patterns that characterises this paradigm is best described by Dataism, which is the belief that the world can be understood as the flow and processing of information. 'Dataism says that the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing' (Harari, 2017, p. 294). Human behaviour can be understood as information processing and the more is known about the input, the better one can predict the output, which is reminiscent of the radical behaviourist view (B. F. Skinner, 1971). The ultimate goal of Dataism is to create an information processing system that encompasses the information of the entire universe, starting by connecting everything to the system.

The rapid growth of the Big Data paradigm has been driven primarily by economic incentives, scientists who rely on large amounts of data for their research, as well as governments that seeking to prevent or detect fraud and ensure public safety (Dijck, 2014; Harari, 2017; Susskind, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Our present time is marked by this new widespread scientific paradigm of datafication, which is 'rooted in problematic ontological and epistemological claims' (Dijck, 2014, p. 198).

We can see the emergence of the Big Data paradigm all around us, as everything is being digitalised. Nothing escapes datafication. We post our lives and have discussions on social media, use Google Maps to navigate through the world, pay with banking apps and fill our free time with watching clips online. Datafication has infiltrated 'every fibre of the social fabric' (Dijck, 2014, p. 205) and has even entered the confines of our homes, thermostats, televisions, toothbrushes, lights, watches, fridges, home assistants and toys, exploiting every opportunity to extract more data from the world. It has made our lives easier in many ways, but unfortunately making our lives easier has not been its main driving force.

1.2 DATAVEILLANCE

A technological socio-economic consequence of big data technologies and one of the main drivers of the Big Data paradigm is *dataveillance*. The term "dataveillance" is a portmanteau of "data" and "surveillance". It was first defined in 1988 by Roger A. Clarke, an information privacy expert and

academic, as 'the systemic use of personal data systems in the investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons' (Clarke, 1988, p. 499).

Today, some 35 years later, technological advances have made it possible to conduct *mass surveillance* on an unprecedented scale. 'Mass surveillance is the surveillance of groups of people, usually large groups. In general, the reason for investigation or surveillance is to identify individuals who belong to some particular class of interest to the surveillance organization' (Clarke, 1988, p. 499). Anyone with access to data of individuals can infer patterns of behaviour, interests or predispositions, create categories and 'identify individuals who belong to some particular class of interest' (p.499). Nowadays, the class of interest is mostly not a suspect, but the class of people with a predisposition or susceptibility to certain behaviour or behavioural stimuli (Zuboff, 2019).

The upsurge of the Big Data paradigm and mass dataveillance has produced preliminary systems of "digital control," also referred to as "online manipulation" (Susser et al., 2019) and "datapulation" (Castelluccia, 2020). Digital control is the systematic use of data and technology to monitor, predict, and influence individual behaviour. Organisations with access to personal data systems, have developed technological procedures that identify patterns and categorise individuals using digital profiles based on their online behaviour. This information can be used to adjust the digital environment that someone engages with in such a way that their behaviour is influenced or controlled (Grafanaki, 2016; Harari, 2017; Lanier, 2018; Otterlo, 2014; Susser et al., 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

Instances of digital control underpin the business model of major tech companies such as: Alpha (Google), Meta (Facebook), Microsoft and Amazon, which provide or have access to personal data systems *and* control over digital environments of their users. This allows them to automatically experiment how small adjustments to the interface of their users influence their behaviour (Otterlo, 2014), and progressively collect new behavioural data that feeds back into the system. This has given rise to "surveillance capitalism," 'a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales' (Zuboff, 2019, *preface*). Driven by economic incentives, surveillance capitalism relies on vast amounts of *behavioural data* extracted from user activity to predict and influence behaviour.

As surveillance capitalism shows, tech companies are devising technologies of digital control and are highly successful at monetising their influence. However, dataveillance is also identified as a threat to democracy (Confessore & Hakim, 2017; Harari, 2018; Susskind, 2018). For example, because it allows for "political microtargeting," data-driven, personalised political advertising (Dobber, 2020; Groen-Reijman, 2018; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018) and it actualises the possibility of a "supercharged state," in which the government has the power to (subtly) control their citizens towards social harmony through big data technologies (B. F. Skinner, 1971; Otterlo, 2014; Susskind, 2018).

Since Clarke coined the term "dataveillance," time has proven him right regarding the complex socio-economic phenomena and challenges it has spawned. However, Clarke also foresaw a broader impact:

> [A] further, more abstract, yet scarcely less real impact of dataveillance is reduction in the meaningfulness of individual actions, and hence in self-reliance and self-responsibility. (…) it involves a change in mankind's image of itself, and risks sullen acceptance by the masses and stultification of the independent spirit needed to meet the challenges of the future (Clarke, 1988, p. 508)

This statement emphasises that the unprecedented use of dataveillance not only seeks to influence our behaviour, but also promotes specific ideological assumptions about humanity, the value of "self-reliance," and our "independent spirit." These themes are explored further in the following chapters.

2 THE POWER TO ESCAPE DIGITAL CONTROL

In the previous chapter, I discussed the alarming instances of digital control that have emerged from the fertile ground of the Big Data paradigm and dataveillance. The autonomy-undermining nature of digital control has sparked ethical debates on its permissibility. As a result, concerned citizens, law makers and ethicists have argued for the need of regulations against digital control. These arguments mostly refer to the potential loss of autonomy when users are influenced outside their awareness (Grafanaki, 2016; Lanier, 2018; Prunkl, 2022; Susser et al., 2019; Susskind, 2018; Van Den Hoven, 2008; Zuboff, 2019).

In this chapter, I show that this current narrative on autonomy in relation to digital control focuses too much on identifying how online control violates external conditions of autonomy, thereby undermining the self-governing agency of the individual. The focus of this chapter is on the first sub-question I formulated in the introduction: **Do individuals have the power to escape digital control?**

In the first section of this chapter, I show that the current discourse on autonomy in relation to dataveillance focuses mainly on practical external conditions, resulting in a narrative that leans towards the idea that individuals do not have the power to escape digital control (it happens outside their awareness) and therefore do not have the responsibility to do so either. Then, in the second section (2.2), I discuss the problematic consequences of the vision of personal agency that weak externalist accounts of autonomy instantiate.

2.1 AUTONOMY IN DEBATES IN THE ETHICS OF DATAVEILLANCE

Discussions on autonomy and dataveillance primarily focus on when and to what extent dataveillance harms our autonomy (Aylsworth, 2022; Clarke, 1988; Grafanaki, 2016; Lanier, 2018; Pérez-Verdugo & Barandiaran, 2023; Susser et al., 2019; Susskind, 2018; Van Den Hoven, 2008; Zuboff, 2019). It is important to mark that the type of autonomy they are most concerned with, is not our physical autonomy to act in the world, which refers to our ability to move and perform actions without physical constraints. Instead, ethical debates on digital control are concerned with "autonomy as self-control," 'a relationship between an agent and her motivational states which can be roughly characterized as the agent's ability to decide which of them to follow' (Arpaly, 2004, p. 174), often conditioned by psychological independence i.e. without unknown or unwelcome external influences. This is also the type of autonomy that is under discussion in this thesis.

Definitions of autonomy rest on assumptions about the extent to which our consciousness can have control over our actions within a situation. Therefore, 'the key concern (…) in any attempt to define personal autonomy is to define the relationship between autonomy and the situation' (Buchan, 1996, p. 194). The following discussion uncovers the assumptions about our being that underly the definitions of autonomy as self-control which are used in the debates on autonomy and dataveillance.

In what follows, I present two exemplary definitions used in the ethical literature on dataveillance and autonomy in order to 1) deduce what these definitions tell us about the structure of the interaction between autonomous individuals and the situation, and then 2) discuss the role appointed to the individual when their autonomy is undermined. We will see that, in the current narrative, the focus for measuring autonomy is on the influence of the situation outside the individual's awareness; that

autonomy is defined in such a way that the individual has no situational role in her loss of autonomy, and is therefore powerless.

2.1.1   Empirically defining autonomy

In the applied ethics literature, it is common to start with a general notion of autonomy as self-control and operationalise it so that it can be measured or tested empirically against practices such as dataveillance. Conceptions of autonomy as self-control can be divided into distinct accounts that share a vision of what constitutes autonomous actions (Buss & Westlund, 2018). Carina Prunkl (2022) has analysed which of these conceptions of autonomy as self-control is most used and operationalised in debates on autonomy and artificial intelligence. In the following sections, I present two exemplary definitions of this conception of autonomy and their operationalisation in relation to digital control, to show that these fit the "weak externalist, responsiveness-to-reasoning" conceptions of autonomy.

Sofia Grafanaki has written an extensive article on the challenges of autonomy in the age of big data. She introduces autonomy as self-control with the following premise: 'The basic premise adopted is that autonomy concerns not just one's actions, but also the independence and authenticity of the desires (values, emotions, etc.) that move one to act in the first place' (Grafanaki, 2016, p. 810). In order to analyse the influence of big data technologies on this kind of autonomy she operationalises the term in a two-stage process. The first stage is the exploration of one's true self and the relationship of this self to a decision, and the second stage is the decision itself. Grafanaki provides examples and situations to argue that autonomy as self-control is undermined by big data technologies, 'when Big-Data technologies are involved, they can interfere at several points and in multiple ways in the course of this two-stage process, with the individuals involved being unconscious of their interference most of the time' (Grafanaki, 2016, p. 810).

In another article, Susser et al. (2019) similarly argue that the exploitative use of dataveillance harms our autonomy as self-control. Autonomy as self-control according to them, is 'having the opportunity to think about and deliberate over one's options, considering them against the backdrop of one's beliefs, desires and commitments, and ultimately deciding for reasons one recognises and endorses as one's own, absent unwelcome influence' (Susser et al., 2019, p. 8). They operationalise autonomy slightly different to Grafanaki, namely by distinguishing between conditions of *competence* and *authenticity:*

> In the first place, being autonomous means having the cognitive, psychological, social, and emotional *competencies* to think through one's choices, form intentions about them, and act on the basis of those intentions. Second, it means that upon critical reflection one identifies with one's values desires, and goals, and endorses them *authentically* as one's own. (Susser et al., 2019, pp. 8–9)

Both definitions fall into the overarching category of responsiveness-to-reasoning accounts of personal autonomy. These accounts generally 'believe that the key to autonomous agency is the ability to distance oneself from one's attitudes and beliefs—to occupy a standpoint that is not constituted by whatever mental states are moving one to act' (Buss & Westlund, 2018). Moreover, one's competently chosen actions, implicitly reveal one's values, desires and goals. This is what makes them *authentically* one's own. Furthermore:

> They imply that an agent can be mistaken about whether she is really reasoning – and so can be mistaken about whether the power of her motives reflects the fact that she

has the authority to determine her own actions. (…) [One] can say that her reasoning does not guarantee her autonomy because it is under the control of external forces. Insofar as accounts of autonomy simply stipulate that certain influences on an agent's intention-forming process "interfere with," or "pervert," this process, these accounts are incomplete. For they leave it mysterious why certain influences, and not others, are a threat to self-government. (Buss & Westlund, 2018)

Responsiveness-to-reasoning accounts, such as those of Susser et al. and Grafanaki, imply that it is plausible that you think you have *motives* that come from genuine *competent* reasoning, when in fact you were under the influence of "unknown to you" external forces. "Motives" are reasons for doing something in order to realise underlying intentions or motivations. I.e. your intention is to be healthy and therefore you advocate eating vegetables because of the motive that they will keep you healthy.

As described above, responsiveness to reasoning accounts imply that reasoning about motives can be undermined if there are external, unconscious motives that unconsciously move you to act. The possibility of external interference with reasoning places these accounts in the "weak externalist accounts" of personal autonomy. As we can read in the last part of the quote above, is not enough to say that some external influence can undermine autonomy. Such a theory needs to argue clearly why certain influences, and not others, are a threat to autonomy as self-control. This, as we shall see, is a persistent problem.

To argue that using responsiveness-to-reasoning, weak externalist autonomy as self-control leads to a portraying individuals as lacking both the power and the moral responsibility to escape digital control, we will analyse a case study. By examining how a specific case uses this type of autonomy to advocate for regulations, we can understand its implications for autonomous selves in general. The article by Susser et al., which is more specific and focuses on direct forms of online control, will be used for this analysis.

Susser et al. argue that online manipulation violates the competence and authenticity conditions, and therefore undermines autonomy (Susser et al., 2019, p. 10). Online manipulation is 'the use of information technology to covertly influence another person's decision-making, by targeting and exploiting decision-making vulnerabilities' (Castelluccia, 2020; Susser et al., 2019, p. 6). For example, the *competence* to deliberate about our options is diminished without our knowledge when the information we encounter is presented according to someone else's intention to influence and thus manipulate our actions. Items for sale might appear next to pictures of friends or at moments when we are vulnerable, which are covert and deliberate ways of circumventing one's competence. Moreover, the choice that follows does not meet the condition of *authenticity,* since the choice could be said to belong to the person who controlled it, implicitly revealing values, desires and goals of the other. On reflection at a later moment, one might feel alienated by one's choice, not being able to reconcile it with one's own desires, intentions and values. What does this tell us about the relation between autonomy and the situation?

2.1.2   Autonomous individuals and the situation
As noted above, an important aspect of defining autonomy is 'the relationship between autonomy and the situation' (Buchan, 1996, p. 194). In the definition of autonomy by Susser et al. we saw that, to be autonomous, it is not enough to think that your motives come from competent reasoning; one must, to be autonomous, actually have sufficient knowledge of situational inflicted influences that interfere with the decision-making process. In other words, objectively true information about oneself and the

environment is integral to autonomous decision making. We will refer to this objectively true information *about the external influence of the situation on your Self* as "situational self-knowledge."[1]

Situations that interfere with your competence outside your awareness, contain hidden information about your Self i.e. that you tend to buy products that appear next to relatives. In this sense, the situation denies access to, or *masks information* about your "actual" motives. More situational self-knowledge would enhance your ability to distance yourself from the situation and to reflect on the interaction between you and the situation in order to make a competent decision; *having enough situational self-knowledge* is a condition for *autonomy*. A practical consequence of this belief is that for example, technologies are being developed to help individuals better understand and reflect on their motives by providing additional information about themselves in the form of wearables.[2]

The authenticity condition goes on to suggest, that this initial lack of situational self-knowledge seeps into the capacity to critically reflect on whether we endorse the intentions behind our motives, because we lack important *information* to understand our true motives. We may form authentic intentions based on choices that we mistakenly think are competently justified because of our ignorance of external forces. Imagine that I think I am motivated by my intentions to be smart and relaxed to take care of my online farm every day, which seems like a really relaxing and educational game. Then, on critical reflection, I might say that I genuinely want to play the game every day because it helps me to become smart and relaxed.

But in reality, the motives behind my actions were not that it was fun and educational, but that I was unconsciously influenced by perfectly timed push notifications telling me to harvest because it was fun and educational. The creators are pushing misinformation to get me to act towards their ends. In reality, the time I invest in the game can be used to meditate and study, which are arguably better ways to become wiser and more relaxed. My capacity to reflect on and endorse my motives is undermined because I have the wrong knowledge, or information about them. So again, *having situational self-knowledge* is a condition for *autonomy.*

We can rephrase the example of autonomy being violated by online manipulation in terms of lacking situational self-knowledge. First, by exploiting decision-making vulnerabilities, the situation "hides" situational knowledge of the self and thus hinders one's competence to accurately describe the "reality" of one's choices. Second, because situational self-knowledge about why a choice was made is missing, manipulation distorts the endorsement of authentic values, desires and ends. Someone can mistakenly believe that a choice has been made on the basis of competent reasoning, and thus also believe that one endorses the ends implicit in the choice. Therefore, *autonomous selves exist in situations that do not deny individuals access to situational knowledge of the self.*

The examples above are examples in which a violation of the first condition (competence) leads to a violation of the second condition (authenticity); non-competent individuals are exploited to act for purposes other than their own, without knowing it. However, online manipulation could also be used to manipulate individuals into acting towards authentic ends, which would be a violation of the first condition, but not the second - on critical reflection, you endorse your intentions, but you are mistaken in thinking that your motives come from competent reasoning.

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[1] 'Self-Consciousness and Self-Knowledge A Presentation by Jean-Paul Sartre,' (Sartre, 1948/2023)
[2] For interesting discussions on the influence of wearables on autonomy see: (Leuenberger, 2024; Owens & Cribb, 2019).

Think of apps that supposedly make you smarter and calmer, but manipulate you into using them. Because this still creates a situation in which the experience of the interaction between the individual and the situation does not accurately match reality, there is still a harm.[3] If one were to act towards authentic ends without really having the right information about why he acted, one would become 'opaque to himself' (Susser et al., 2019, p. 11). He would be oblivious to his real motives, while endorsing his motivations. 'The fundamental harm of manipulation is to the process of decision-making, not its outcome'(Susser et al., 2019, p. 11). This also holds for the process of critically reflecting on our ends, desires and values.

We have now discussed how the interaction between autonomous individuals and the situation is structured in the definitions used by Susser et al. (2019) and Grafanaki (2016). In short, autonomous selves exist when their situational self-knowledge accurately reflects reality, so that they have 'the ability to distance oneself from one's attitudes and beliefs to occupy a *standpoint that is not constituted by whatever mental states are moving one to act*' (Buss & Westlund, 2018, *emphasis mine*). Occupying a standpoint that is not constituted by whatever mental states are moving one to act is only possible if one knows about those mental states. This premise acknowledges that the mental states driving our actions can escape our consciousness, and thus escape our direct control.

Online manipulation refers to situations in which there is a deliberate imbalance in the individual's situational self-knowledge and reality, so that she is motivated outside of her awareness and thus deprived of the ability to competently think through her choices, form intentions about them, and act on the basis of those intentions. From this point of view, it is beneficial to collect data about the self in order to enhance autonomy, but it is also not unreasonable to insist on privacy regulations that prevent the dissemination of this data, since it can also be used to undermine autonomy.

2.1.3   The powerless individual

It is thus argued that online manipulation harms our autonomy as self-control because it happens outside our awareness. When we are manipulated, we are unknowingly controlled by our environment 'by inducing us to act *toward ends* not of our choosing and *for reasons* we haven't endorsed' (Susser et al., 2019, p. 10). We are *victims* of an environment that denies us the information to reflect on a situation, and make a decision. The imbalance in the situational self-knowledge, is insurmountable for the individual. The experience of the non-autonomous individual is said to diverge from reality outside of her consciousness and she is therefore powerless to do anything about it.

The individual was metaphysically unable to autonomously govern her actions because she was unaware of the covert influences on her decision. Metaphysically, both types of decision involve similar interactions between individuals and their environment. The basic processes of decision making, consideration of options and influences are experienced in the same way. What distinguishes them is the individual's degree of awareness of the external influences, not a different internal metaphysical mechanism. Thus, from the individual's perspective, a manipulated choice feels the same as an autonomous one. This makes them powerless against manipulation because it is beyond their direct experience. Only after gaining new knowledge can we distance our 'true' self from the choice and blame the environment for having tricked us, reducing ourselves to mere passive objects manipulated into action.

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[3] A harm, is not necessarily a moral wrong. It could be that certain benefits outweigh the harm, but it would have to be justified.

Note that this realisation, the feeling that one has been 'strung along by a puppet master' (Susser et al., 2019, p. 4), is not a condition for manipulation. Manipulation can be established empirically and externally to the manipulated. So if a system of manipulation were perfect at "tricking" us in ways that we would never find out, which is theoretically possible since it is not a condition, it would be able to manipulate us forever, to act towards ends not of our choosing for reasons we think we endorse. It would turn us into 'happy slaves,' thinking we are autonomous because we are manipulated so meticulously that even critical reflection cannot save us from mistakenly believing that we really act towards ends for reasons that we endorse. The puppet master has us so well strung along, that we mistake her negative influences on our decision making for natural ones, perfectly in tune with our competence and authenticity. Or, as the radical behaviourist B.F. Skinner would say, 'a system of slavery so well designed that it does not breed revolt is the real threat' (B. F. Skinner, 1971, p. 44), and revolt could only possibly occur if there is realisation. How can we make sure that we will not be made into happy slaves?

A first response is to develop legislation to prevent online manipulation. Susser et al. agree that this is necessary, but also suggest that it requires more than consumer protection, namely that it also requires the creation of the necessary "positive conditions" that support individual and collective self-determination. However, they propose broad and vague solutions, that do not specify what these positive conditions consist of, and are very careful in attributing responsibility to individuals. Their proposed solutions are, firstly, to limit digital surveillance through policy interventions and privacy legislation; secondly, to problematise personalisation: 'At the very least, we ought not to uncritically accept personalisation as a rationale for increased data collection, and we ought to approach with care (if not scepticism) the promise of an increasingly personalised digital environment' (Susser et al., 2019, pp. 12–13); and third, to promote awareness and understanding by giving people 'tools to understand and manage a digital environment designed to shape and influence them' (Susser et al., 2019, p. 13). These are all structural solutions, framed in such a way that the victims of online manipulation mostly need help from above, apart from being gently encouraged to be critical of a personalised digital environment.

Similarly, Grafanaki, whose definition of autonomy we discussed earlier, places responsibility in the hands of programmers and regulators: 'The complexities involved, make it almost imperative that both the architects (coders) and the regulators work together to develop the ethical norms that will govern' (Grafanaki, 2016, p. 868). Soshana Zuboff, whose notion of surveillance capitalism we discussed earlier (1.2), even argues for the need for an additional human right to protect our autonomy, the '*right to a future tense*, which is the right to act free of the influence of illegitimate forces that operate outside our awareness to influence, modify and condition our behavior' (2019, p. 194). However, when we focus so much on the need to be protected from the external influences of big data technologies, the power we *do* have to be proactive in our choices becomes clouded.

2.2   THE EXTERNAL LIMITS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AS SELF-CONTROL

We now have an idea of how the responsiveness-to-reasoning, weak externalist account of autonomy-as-self-control, substantiates the premise that we can lose our autonomy as self-control to unconscious external influences – such that the individual is unaware therefore powerless against these influences. This premise is used to infer that users must be protected first and foremost by laws and to increase awareness that manipulation haunts us in the digital age. However, weak externalist accounts of autonomy that are used to argue for structural solutions have two major deficiencies that

lead to an alarming conclusion about autonomy in the Big Data paradigm, which I discuss in the last part of this chapter.

2.2.1 The challenge of identifying "unwelcome" influences

When we defined the weak externalist account of autonomy, I mentioned the challenge of arguing why some influences are autonomy undermining, while others are not. This is the first, and most persistent shortcoming of the weak externalist account of autonomy, which is also prevalent in the definition used by Susser et al. We saw that in their definition, autonomous selves have the 'competencies think through one's choices, form intentions about them, and act on the basis of those intentions' (Susser et al., 2019, p. 8). This can be determined empirically, as we discussed earlier (see 2.1.2). To truly be competent, we need be able to access an independent order of reasons, think about them, and choose the option that we best suits our intentions. We need to be 'sufficiently sensitive to the reasons there *are*' (Buss & Westlund, 2018, *emphasis mine*), not just the reasons that we think there are. This is a problem because researchers are increasingly finding unconscious influences that we fail to take into account when deliberating about our choices, making competent and authentic decisions increasingly rare, if not unattainable.

Advances in cognitive psychology are pushing the boundaries when it comes to finding the reasons there are for making a choice. The field of cognitive and social psychology has taken on the task of finding all the unconscious reasons you might have for making a choice: 'more than 100 cognitive, decision-making, and memory-related biases have been documented in the literature, and the research in cognitive and social psychology continues to frequently identify and delineate new biases' (Ehrlinger et al., 2016). Given these findings, it is becoming more challenging to claim that actions are truly autonomous according to the weak externalist perspective.

It might be objected that only *intentional* interference in our decision-making process is considered as a (partial) loss of autonomy. Although this is indeed an essential feature of manipulation, it is not an essential feature of autonomy. Imagine that there is an accidental case of manipulation. For example, I changed the choice architecture of my food truck because I needed more space to make muffins. In doing so, I accidentally trigger some of the more than 100 cognitive biases, I "nudge" people to choose the sugary muffins[4]. Had I done this intentionally, I would have been deliberately and covertly influencing my clients' decision-making process by targeting and exploiting their decision-making vulnerabilities and undermining their autonomy. So, even though it was unintentional, in this case their autonomy was still undermined by the situation according to Susser et al.'s definition.

Another objection could be derived from Daniel Kahneman's well-known distinction between slow (system 1) and fast (system 2) thinking (Kahneman, 2011).The objection would be that cognitive biases only affect small and quick decisions, our System 1, automatic thinking, and do not pose a real threat to autonomy because for important decisions we can rely on our slow and more rational System 2 thinking. But this objection neglects the importance of the individual's awareness of System 1 when thinking in System 2. The individual's knowledge of the interaction between himself and the situation (System 1) must be accurate in order to think through his choices competently, form intentions about them, and act on those intentions (system 2).

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[4] For an overview of 422 nudges through choice architecture interventions see (Szaszi et al., 2018)

With the growth of scientific behavioural knowledge and the exploration of cognitive biases, autonomous choices seem to be explained away by empirically discovered unconscious reasons for choosing. As a result, the boundaries of unwelcome influences are blurring and manipulative practices become more sophisticated. Arguments defending the claim that manipulation harms autonomy, must increasingly acknowledge that autonomous selves are vulnerable to more and more aspects of their situation. Because it seems progressively difficult to be aware of all the cognitive biases that influence our decision-making, weak externalist accounts of autonomy open the door to the idea that we benefit from more "objective" information about ourselves in the form of discovering (personal) cognitive biases, doing objective personality-tests, asking for personalised-content and learning from health-trackers. If we allow this narrative to play out, the autonomous self will slowly be immersed in the Big Data paradigm's view of humans, in which we are essentially information processing systems, always one step behind our subconscious.

2.2.2   Emphasizing the external 'threat' to autonomy

The second deficiency of weak externalist accounts of autonomy is that, when used in the applied ethics literature, they often lead to an overemphasis on external threats to autonomy that should be mitigated, at the expense of fostering internal resilience and autonomy (see 2.1.3). Focusing on external threats to autonomy to justify regulations, downplays the active and demanding nature of autonomy; powerlessness breeds passivity, while accountability breeds activity.

An appropriate objection would be to argue the exact opposite, that weak externalist accounts of autonomy emphasise the importance of internal deliberation rather than neglecting it. After all, responsiveness-to-reasoning accounts are based on the premise that autonomous selves have the competence to deliberate. Although this is true, a transition, also visible in the two articles by Susser et al. and Grafanaki, occurs when the minimal conditions for autonomy as self-control are identified. The main aim becomes to identify when autonomy is undermined and by what. Threats to autonomy from digital control are framed as threats because they overrule the power to deliberate, and turn individuals into 'happy slaves,' unknowing victims of their exploitative situations. Again, discussions of manipulation or online control only serve to reinforce the image of the passive and powerless individual in the face of threats to autonomy. Especially when articles disproportionately argue for protection rather than advocating for a collective societal change in behaviour and proactively exercise autonomy to fight the collective threats to autonomy, for example.

This undermines the importance of will and responsibility in combating unfree choices. By pointing out, for example, that targeted advertising can manipulate our choices, arguments typically stop at acknowledging the harms of manipulation without exploring the phenomenological experiences or implicit choices that make us susceptible to such influences. The discrepancy between an individual's experience and the reality of their motives is seen as sufficient to argue for non-autonomous choices. However, this perspective overlooks the potential lack of willpower to be autonomous, which may precede or even facilitate susceptibility to unwanted influences due to the reduced effort or willpower required. Focusing on making individuals more responsible for their level of autonomy might encourage them to adopt a proactive attitude. Focusing on their helplessness might lead them to passively wait to be rescued.

2.2.3   Do individuals have the power to escape digital control ?

Now we have an answer to the research question, **to what extent can individuals who are subjected to exploitative uses of dataveillance be held responsible for the loss of personal autonomy that they**

undergo as a consequence? from the weak externalist reasoning responsiveness account of autonomy. Because of unconscious digital control enabled by dataveillance, 'the person's reasoning falls so short of the norms of "rational reflection" that she is not really reasoning at all. Alternatively, one can say that her reasoning does not guarantee her autonomy because it is under the control of external forces' (Buss & Westlund, 2018).

Because there are unwelcome influences over which our consciousness has no direct control, we can be mistaken about our competence. Our autonomy as self-control depends on our situational self-knowledge (see 2.1.2). Therefore individuals do not have the power to escape digital control solely on their own. And, because they do not have the power, they cannot be held morally responsible for being controlled. Whether this means that they are also not morally accountable for the controlled actions that follow is a different discussion[5].

The Big Data paradigm, 'a way of thinking about knowledge through data and a framework for supporting decision making, rationalizing action, and guiding practice' (Barocas & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 46), purports to unlock the secrets of decision making by learning about individuals and the things that affect their decisions through big data information technologies. This can be used to help or control people. Either way, it reinforces the idea that we are, at least in part, observers of our mental states, and the more we know about their origins, the better we can decide how to incorporate them into our intention formation.

As a result, we get access to increasing assistance in our decision-making, and increasingly accept the idea that our choices are subject to forces beyond our control. Making people unwittingly contribute to the growth of Dataism by enabling the collection of vast amounts of personal data, and embracing the weak externalist notion that we need more than our own consciousness to make competent decisions. This passivity arising from technological decision aids is characterized in the monologue manifesto of Screenslaver, the villain from Pixar's movie Incredibles 2:

> Travel, relationships, risk; every meaningful experience must be packaged and delivered to you to watch at a distance so that you can remain ever-sheltered, ever-passive, ever-ravenous consumers who can't free themselves to rise from their couches to break a sweat, never anticipate new life. You want superheroes to protect you, and make yourselves ever more powerless in the process. (Bird, 2018)

Although there are no superheroes like the Incredibles, there are regulators who work to ensure that the knowledge gained from our collective urge for comfort and decision support is not used against us. And as the Screenslaver lectures, while we count on them, our growing passivity and reliance on technology and science to ensure our competence makes their task increasingly vital yet difficult.

The value of identifying as many unwanted influences that undermine autonomy possible, eventually portrays the individual as confronted with a plenitude of unwelcome influences that happen outside the proactive, reflecting part of our consciousness. Consequently, the focus on external conditions that must be met in order to be autonomous becomes more precise and peculiar (see 2.2.1). These

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[5] When you are not in control over your actions, can you have moral responsibility for them? See: 'Arguments for Incompatibilism' (Vihvelin, 2022), for an overview of arguments that say we do not have moral responsibility for a actions we did not control.

advances instantiate the idea that external threats may render us helpless if "superheroes" do not protect us with regulation, information or new human rights (see 2.3.2).

If weak externalist accounts of autonomy continue to guide the literature on data surveillance and autonomy, they will reinforce the value of uncovering the hidden influences that motivate us; 1) to protect us from them and 2) to enhance our autonomy by increasing awareness about them. New insights into hidden influences or cognitive biases will in turn be used by those who wish to exploit us. This leads to an increasingly challenging, self-perpetuating conflict between those who seek to uncover, help us overcome, and protect us from unwelcome influences on self-control on the one hand, and powerful, unprecedented dataveillance technologies that aim to undermine self-control on the other.

In short, if we accept the premise that we can indeed lose our autonomy as self-control to unconscious external influences – such that the individual is unaware of these influences and therefore powerless, then we must accept the conclusion that the conflict between dataveillance and autonomy in the Big Data paradigm will develop into an unresolvable tension in which laws and rights, and their effectiveness, will determine our degree of autonomy as self-control rather than us.

Accepting this conclusion, bearing in mind the emergence of digital control systems and an increasingly digital environment, means to put the fate of our autonomy as self-control into the hands of regulators. Rejecting this conclusion however, means to endorse alternative perspectives on autonomy as self-control that reject the premise that we can lose our autonomy as self-control to unconscious external influences – such that the individual is unaware therefore powerless against these influences. Furthermore, an alternative perspective on the power to escape digital control will have consequences for our conceptions of the moral responsibility to do so. The next chapter proposes such an alternative perspective on autonomy, and sheds light on its consequences for individual responsibility in the Big Data paradigm.

3 EXISTENTIALIST VIEW ON DATAVEILLANCE

We have discussed how dataveillance and the Big Data paradigm are changing our environment and influencing our behaviour. The weak externalist account of autonomy is used to argue for more transparency, for citizens to be more aware of how they are being influenced, and for regulation against dataveillance. As we have seen, this could lead to passivity and perpetuate the idea that we are only autonomous as long as our increasingly digital environment allows us to be. The weak externalist premise that we can lose our autonomy as self-control to unconscious external influences – so that the individual is unaware of these influences and therefore powerless – leads to the conclusion that the conflict between dataveillance and autonomy in the Big Data paradigm will develop into an unresolvable tension in which laws and rights, and their effectiveness, will determine our degree of autonomy as self-control rather than us.

To reject this premise in order to change current perspectives on the fragility of autonomy as self-control, means to endorse unconventional perspectives on autonomy. By the same token, Bryce Goodman (2023) argues that the dominant discourse on privacy and AI is wandering in misguided assumptions about the self, and that unconventional, non-western, perspectives shed light on what chronic troubles this is amounting to. He argues that surveillance capitalism 'systematically distorts and perverts the true nature of reality, instilling a fundamentally misguided and corrupting conception of human flourishing' (Goodman, 2023, p. 781). In this chapter, I argue for an equivalently fundamental critique on current conceptions of autonomy as self-control in the Big Data paradigm, by offering an existentialist perspective.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that gained great popularity in the 20th century, with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as its figureheads. Existentialism offers perhaps the most radical idea of freedom in Western philosophy. Sartre was deeply concerned with what we have called self-control, but which he called freedom. He fundamentally disagreed with the possibility of a puppet master controlling our actions, and would therefore reject the premise and conclusion with which we ended the previous chapter. Existentialism is therefore highly relevant to the debate on autonomy and dataveillance, and an interesting alternative to the prevailing weak externalist accounts of autonomy.

Because of the specific (second) aim of this thesis - to show how the existentialist philosophy offers an alternative approach to autonomy and the ethics of dataveillance that gives individuals the power and responsibility of their choices - the following discussion is limited to presenting key existential concepts and arguments that answer the two sub-questions of this thesis; **do individuals have the power to escape digital control? Do they have a moral responsibility to avoid digital control?**

In this chapter I present the main arguments why existentialist philosophy can make a valuable contribution to the autonomy and dataveillance debate: it rejects the premise that our autonomy as self-control can be undermined *outside* of our control, and therefore does not get caught up in debates that focus disproportionately on external influences on our autonomy; it avoids portraying individuals who are unintentionally influenced as powerless victims of their surroundings, but asserts that we always choose ourselves; and it provides a naturalistic normative justification for an ethics, which urges individuals to take freedom as an end for themselves and others and to reject the Big Data paradigm.

In the first section of this chapter, I argue why Sartre's existentialist theory of freedom can be used as a way out of the current narrative. In contrast to the discussed accounts of autonomy which argue that

our autonomy can be threatened by digital control, Sartre proclaims that our autonomy as self-control is ultimately absolute, while acknowledging that this freedom is freedom-in-situation. Here I show that his ontology can serve as a valuable position in contemporary debates, controversially asserting that **individuals have the power to escape digital control through dataveillance if they accept their freedom**.

In the second section of this chapter, I show how Simone de Beauvoir has argued that although we can choose not to actively will this power, we should always realise this is a choice. She argues that we **have a moral responsibility to actively will freedom for ourselves and for others.** At last, we will infer what Beauvoir's ethics can tell us about how to act within the Big Data paradigm.

3.1 SARTREAN FREEDOM AND THE POWER TO CHOOSE

So far, we have not really discussed the place where we effect our autonomy as self-control. To effect autonomy is to govern your actions. We have seen that actions controlled by un-*conscious* external influences, are not really considered to be autonomous, thus, if we want to autonomously control our actions autonomously, they have to be governed consciously, "inside" us. Therefore, definitions of autonomy say something about the structure of our consciousness in relation to the world.

In what follows, I show how Jean-Paul Sartre introduced a theory of consciousness that departed from both physicalism and Cartesian dualism, allowing him to argue that we are radically free beings. It will neither be exhaustive nor do justice to the rigorous nature of his work. However, the key points I discuss provide enough to see how Sartre could break away from the premise that we can lose our autonomy as self-control to unconscious external influences – so that the individual is unaware of these influences and therefore powerless. Let us begin with how autonomy as self-control, as described above, is derived from a misunderstanding about our being, about the "structure" of our consciousness.

3.1.1 The "structure" of consciousness

To see how Sartre rejects the premise of unconscious influences, it is not necessary to open Pandora's box of definitions of consciousness that may, or may not support the weak externalist accounts of autonomy. What is important is that, as we have seen, they firmly adhere to the belief that there are such things as "unconscious" influences that elude autonomous selves, and that this presupposes a "structure" of consciousness that is at least partly beyond our subjectivity; something with which Sartre's approach to consciousness is fundamentally at odds.

The weak externalist accounts of autonomy, such as responsiveness to reasoning, describe some form of *knowledge of self,* that is essential to our competent decision-making (2.1.2). Knowledge of self is characterised by a dichotomy between the knower, the subject or Self that is doing the knowing, and what is known, the object or content that is being known (Buchan, 1996; Sartre, 1948/2023). In this view, the knower posits or adopts an attitude towards objects, events or mental states, the known. This relationship of consciousness to *the situation* is thus indirect, because it is interpreted, structured and given meaning by and within the Self through observations of experiences. The situation in this sense, exists *before* consciousness becomes aware of it.

Sartre calls this "knowledge of self" concept of consciousness, *positional consciousness*, 'for the name implies a 'position' in which the self stands apart and seeks knowledge of itself as an abstract entity (Buchan, 1996, p. 195; Sartre, 1948/2023). Positional consciousness, claims that experiences i.e. the urge to by something, need to be interpreted *within* the structured context and knowledge in the

psyche of the Self in order to become conscious *of* experiences. In this sense, consciousness can be defined as a reflective process that is *preceded* by events in the world.

The definitions of autonomy as self-control (2.1.1), its conditions (2.1.2) and their deficiencies (2.2), arise from this positional self-knowledge structure of our consciousness. Known influences, unknown influences, the ability to step back from a situation to think about it, factual knowledge about the self, intentional covert influence, external threats to autonomy, the need for protection, are all based on the assumption that self-control exists within a framework of positional consciousness as self-knowledge.

The primary text of modern existentialism, Being and Nothingness (1943/2021) by Sartre, who was influenced by phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, breaks with the "knowledge of self" structure of consciousness. According to Sartre, the dichotomy between the knower and the known as consciousness' relation to the world, rests on an error about the most basic being of consciousness. Consequently, it is unable to adequately define freedom as self-control.

According to Sartre, consciousness is *pre*-reflective. This means that consciousness does not require interpretation in order to become aware, it simply is aware. Being conscious of pleasure, *is* pleasure. 'Pleasure cannot exist "before" any consciousness of pleasure' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 13). A pre-reflective consciousness, is *pre-reflectively* aware that it is conscious (of) pleasure.[6] Pleasure does not precede consciousness (of) pleasure. Consequently, the knower is not separated from the known in order to interpret the known *within* consciousness.

Moreover, a pre-reflective consciousness *has no inside,* it is "intentional." This means that 'consciousness is a positional consciousness *of* the world. All consciousness is positional in that it transcends itself to reach an object, and it is exhausted by just this act of positing' (Sartre, 1943/2021, pp. 9–10). Thus, consciousness is positional, yet not positional at a distance from itself. It is an act in the world that is pre-reflectively conscious (of) the world. Consciousness is always conscious (of) something; it is inherently intentional. However, consciousness itself is empty, lacking content, structure, or substance. It exists as a relation to objects and *nothing more*. '[A] conscious act is nothing but consciousness of its object, (…) this means that it does not coincide with its object, but is also not something entirely separate from it' (Gusman, 2020, p. 117).

Thus, consciousness is always conscious of something other than itself. Consciousness is a pre-reflective intentional presence in the world, which Sartre termed "being-for-itself." Contrary to the dichotomy between the knower and the known, being-for-itself cannot be its own object of consciousness because it a relation and not a thing with structure or content. It can be conscious of anything but itself, such as objects, thoughts, or events, which Sartre referred to as "being-in-itself." Being-in-itself is always a full positivity of being, existing in a state of completeness.[7]

As above, it can be concluded, that consciousness is not, in its most basic being, positional to itself, but pre-reflectively conscious (of) something. This implies that the world, thoughts, feelings or events are experienced directly, without reflection or introspection. This immediate awareness (of) its intentional object even extends to the for-itself *itself*.

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[6] To be conscious of a thing, seems to imply again the dichotomy between the knower and the known that we have just disregarded, therefore when referring to a pre-reflective consciousness, Sartre used brackets to remind us that to be conscious (of) something is to be conscious.

[7] BN, Introduction, (pp. 1-24)

The for-itself is not only pre-reflectively *aware* of its being consciousness (of) something, but it is pre-reflectively aware (of) its *being*. Being-for-itself is conscious (of) being. 'We may call this *self-presence. The law of being of the for-itself as the ontological foundation of consciousness is to be itself in the form of self-presence'* (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 126). The for-itself, *does* have a relationship to itself, but this is not *positional*. It is consciousness (of) itself without having a distinction between a knower and the known due to self-presence; the relationship of the for-itself to its being is *immediate*.

We now have, the fundamental understanding required to grasp why it is impossible to be unaware of external influences:

> [It] is impossible to assign to consciousness any motivation other than itself. Otherwise we would need to conceive of consciousness, to the extent to which it is an *effect*, as not being conscious (of) itself. In some respect, consciousness would need to be without being conscious (of) being. We would succumb to that all-too-common illusion that makes consciousness into something half-unconscious, or passivity. But consciousness is consciousness through and through. *It cannot therefore be limited by anything other than itself*. (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 14, *emphasis mine*).

This brief introduction to the existentialist view of consciousness, as presented by Sartre, fundamentally challenges weak externalist accounts of autonomy, which 'succumb to that all-too-common illusion that makes consciousness into something half-unconscious, or passivity' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 14). Their mistake is to think in terms of self-knowledge, which entails a separation between the knower and the known and this separation allows for the possibility of unconscious influences on autonomy.

However, Sartre's notion of pre-reflective, intentional consciousness suggests that the existence of such a separation is illusory. Consciousness is, in its being, always and directly aware of itself and its objects. Consequently, the idea that we can be unaware of external influences is an illusion. Being inherently self-aware and intentional, consciousness cannot be partially unconscious or passive. It is a relationship with the world and itself, continuously aware of its own existence and its interactions with external objects and nothing more. This understanding challenges the assumption that consciousness is divided by something and can be influenced *before,* or *outside* awareness. In Sartre's view, true autonomy as self-control must be grounded in the recognition of consciousness as a unified, self-present being-for-itself. If there seems to be a subconscious interfering in the background, one is choosing to flee the anguish that the freedom, the for-itself, is confronted with. This is called *bad faith*, which will be discussed below (3.1.2).

This break with the premise that we can indeed lose our autonomy as self-control to unconscious external influences – such that the individual is unaware of these influences and therefore powerless – is the first step in the existentialist philosophy towards radical freedom. To be truly free, one must first be *free from* external influences that one is unable to engage with. Sartre does not deny that we encounter situations in which manipulation occurs. However, he asserts that our being is a being that transcends immediate situations and projects possible futures, thereby escaping and forming the situation through choosing and acting. Thus, the for-itself, the human consciousness, has the power to escape any unconscious influences, because they do not exist; every "influence" is a manifestation of our own transcendence towards future possibilities. Therefore, the existentialist philosophy posits that, even in the context of the Big Data paradigm and dataveillance, individuals will always retain the

power to escape digital control in their being; this view represents a significant deviation from the perspective presented the second chapter of this thesis.

In the above, we have seen that the existentialist ontology shows that individuals have the power to escape digital control, and therefore avoids portraying individuals who are unwantedly influenced as powerless victims of their surroundings. However, it is not convincing to simply say: "The existentialists have a different conception of consciousness, such that by definition we evade external control, therefore, we should use their philosophy." To be convincing, we need to show why, if we really are freedom, as being-for-itself, we so often *feel* influenced and powerless, and why we so easily accept the idea that our actions may be the result of higher forces?

In other words, if we really do have the power to escape digital control, why do we often fail to exercise that power and perceive ourselves as subject to external forces? The argument in chapter 2 convincingly concluded that we sometimes feel influenced and powerless, because we sometimes are. How does Sartre explain that we are not influenced and powerless when we feel that we are?

3.1.2   Fleeing from anguish in Bad Faith

In order to answer this question, we need to understand more about how the for-itself exists in the world; in particular, what the true acceptance of our being as the for-itself described above means. Sartre said:

> The essential consequence of our previous remarks is that man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders: he is responsible for the world and for himself, as a way of being (…) That is precisely how the for-itself apprehends itself in anguish (...) But most of the time, (…) we flee from anguish in bad faith. (Sartre, 1943/2021, pp. 718, 722)

In the above, Sartre formulates the answer to question of why we often fail to exercise our power and perceive ourselves as subject to external forces. Because we *are* freedom we cannot choose not to be free, he famously said that we are 'condemned to be free' (p. 718). The for-itself exists as a free act in the world. 'Man does not exist *first* in order to be free *later*; rather, there is no difference between man's being and his *being-free*' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 61). One consequence of being free from external influences, then, is that we can never escape freedom, and say that something was not our own choice.

This could be seen as a revelation, because it would mean that our autonomy as self-control, can *never* be undermined without us choosing, or allowing it to happen, at least we will never be powerless victims of someone taking over control of our actions. But, says Sartre, being freedom, also means to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, it makes you responsible for the world and for yourself. At its core, being freedom means to be the source of everything except yourself. All the values, motivations, reasons, meanings that you see in the world, are a consequence of how you choose to act in the world. This is what Sartre means by being responsible for the world. How you choose to act in the world, determines your presence in the world. You act in the world by "negating" the present situation and projecting possible futures.

We discussed earlier that the separation between the knower and the known, is illusory because of the self-presence of the for-itself. But, it is illusory insofar that this separation is approached as being something. Self-presence, implies 'a certain distance without real separation' (Gusman, 2020, p. 117). If this separation were *something*, it would mean that there was *something inside* consciousness, and

then consciousness would cease to be anything but intentional. So Sartre concludes that this separation is *nothing.* The being-for-itself, has *nothingness* in its being, being-for-itself is the origin of nothingness.[8]

Nothingness is the reason why the for-itself has self-presence, a relation to *itself*, without coinciding with itself. This self-presence highlights the ambiguity of the being-for-itself, it has no content, but it still *exists*; its existence is an event. The for-itself *is* not; it is *becoming,* but will never *be*. 'It *is been*' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 128). The for-itself is a constant, immanent self-nihilation in which it 'is what it is not and is not what it is' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 117). The dynamic, immanent, process of becoming through nihilation and nihilation through becoming is consciousness' constant self-nihilation (being what it is not) and reaching beyond itself (being not what it is).[9]

But why does this mean that we are responsible for the world and ourselves, how do we "choose" values, meanings and reasons in the world? Because the being-for-itself carries nothingness in its being, the for-itself, in its direct relation to the world, *negates* the in-itself, questions the world and projects possible futures. To transcend the situation and negate the in-itself, means to *disclose* a situation in the light of one's own projections, expectations or ends.

Transcendence through the negation of the in-itself and disclosing the world is something that the for-itself does, but, as we have said, it cannot choose not to do it. It is at the heart of its being to nihilate itself and the world. For example, if I turn on a light switch so that I can realise my project of reading a book, but the light does not appear, I am conscious (of) the *absence of light.* What I perceive, is a negation of being, and through this negation, the for-itself *projects* meaning onto the situation, it discloses the situation. The room, being in itself, just a room where everything is in a state of completeness, becomes illuminated with meaning by the absence of light which only exists because of my projected end. My chosen end of reading a book, gave the situation a meaning beyond what *is*. 'In fact, our choice originally creates all the reasons and all the motives that might lead us to partial actions, and it arranges the world with its meanings, its equipment-structures and its *coefficient of adversity'* (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 608 *emphasis* mine).

The coefficient of adversity refers to the obstacles and challenges that arise in pursuit of our projects. It represents the resistance we encounter in the world as we attempt to actualise our intentions. This concept highlights how our choices and projects give meaning to the world. However, we have to remember that without the room, the lamp, the book, without being-in-itself, freedom has nothing to *negate*, and therefore: the situation *conditions* the freedom to project ends. So we are freedom-*in-situation*. Sartre used the example of a rock, which in-itself facilitated the possibility of a rock-climbing project, and, through this project, took on a meaning as a rock to be climbed: 'This rock, which manifests a profound resistance if I want to move it, will on the contrary become a valuable aid if I want to climb up it in order to contemplate the landscape' (Sartre, 1943/2021, pp. 629–630).

We now know enough to understand we are condemned to be free, because I *always* exist 'beyond the motives and reasons for my action' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 577). We also know why this makes us 'responsible for the world' (p. 718); there is no given meaning in the world; when we disclose the world, it becomes meaningful *through* us. We are also responsible for ourselves in this sense, because

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[8] BN, Part One, Chapter 1, The origin of negation & Part two, Chapter 1, The immediate structures of the for-itself
[9] BN, Part Two, Chapter 1, The for-itself's facticity

we also apprehend ourselves through our disclosure of the world. This rock, which appears to me as a rock-to-climb, makes me appear to myself as a rock-climber, but I *am* not, my being is always *beyond* being. So, I am not what I am, and I am what I am not. If we now ask *how* we are conscious (of) our being which discloses the world and ourselves, 'our answer will be that this consciousness is expressed through the twofold "feeling" of anguish and responsibility' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 607). Anguish and responsibility, is the experience of freedom, and to experience freedom, is therefore to have a feeling of anguish and responsibility.[10]

We should remember that we are talking about freedom-in-situation which explicitly acknowledges that not everyone has the same physical autonomy. Freedom-in-situation is freedom on a fundamentally distinct level, which is the same for everyone. While our circumstances differ, our freedom-in-situation, or autonomy as self-control, remains equal; every for-itself transcends its immediate conditions through acting, and thereby discloses the situation and projects future possibilities.[11]

The answer to the question we posed above, if we truly have the power to escape digital control ourselves, why do we often fail to exercise this power and perceive ourselves as subject to external forces? is that we often fail to fully embrace the unconditional freedom that we are and perceive ourselves as subject to external forces, because we *flee* from responsibility and anguish in *bad faith*. Bad faith 'is the idea that people can genuinely fool themselves into thinking that they are something which they are not'(Gusman, 2020, p. 143). If I *deny* that through my project, I disclosed the rock-to-be-climbed and myself as a rock-climber, I make myself belief that I belong within the completeness of the world, that I truly *am* a rock-climber. I pretend to have an *essence* that precedes my existence[12]. Bad faith, is to deny the ambiguity of our being: 'bad faith's most basic act is to flee from something it is impossible to flee from: to flee from what one is' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 117). To act or live in bad faith, is to pretend to *be* rather than to *become*.

Thus, in Being and Nothingness, Sartre presents an ontology of humans and their relationship to the world in which the individual, in his *being,* is beyond all determination. This is the existentialist, alternative answer to the first sub-question: **Do individuals have the power to escape digital control?** They do, but most of the time, they pretend they do not, because, to accept it, is to choose always to be conscious (of) being-for-itself, to accept that all justifications, reasons, values, meanings in the world exist through them, to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders, to feel immanent responsibility and anguish.

The bright side, however, is that there is a first step to freeing yourself from digital control, which is to accept that to say have been influenced from the outside is to act in bad faith. Once we acknowledge that we are not powerless *victims,* but our own creators of our situations, we can begin to actively want and imagine new possibilities within our situations, for we are always in and *beyond* them.[13]

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[10] BN, Part four, Chapter 1, I. The first condition of action is freedom
[11] BN, Part four, Chapter 1, II. Freedom and Facticity: The situation
[12] This is the opposite of the famous existentialist mantra, 'existence precedes essence,' which Sartre popularised in 'Existentialism is a humanism' (Sartre, 1947/2007) .
[13] An interesting point is that digital environments make it harder to imagine new possibilities and project different futures, because users are often not able to customize online environments. For more information see: (Pérez-Verdugo & Barandiaran, 2023).

We saw in the previous chapter that, because digital control can be done in such a way that individuals are powerless victims, they cannot be held morally responsible what is done to them, and because it is seen as a harm, we need regulation. We have seen that Sartre argues that it is bad faith to say that someone's self-control can be undermined outside their control, and that individuals, therefore, do have the power to escape digital control but choose to deny it.

This may be too strong a conviction for some, but the power to do something does not imply the moral responsibility. Nor does the fact that we are not powerless victims of online manipulation, mean that we should not condemn and prevent it. Living in bad faith, and submitting to regulations that control the degree of autonomy we have, may even seem better than living in responsibility and anguish. After all, is there not a certain serenity in being a 'happy slave'? Sartre himself did not even say that bad faith is necessarily a *wrong* way to live, it is merely a descriptive explanation of why we so often perceive ourselves as subject to external forces.

Nevertheless, it would mean to deny our inherent freedom, to forsake the futures we might project as a free being, lagging behind our capacities and in the end, 'you can't run away from your own feet' (Lord & Miller, 2010). Sartre did not paint a pretty picture of fleeing in bad faith. The gloomy, pessimistic image that haunts existentialism stems from this image of man as always fleeing, but never escaping:

> [T]hey are condemned to despair, because they discover at the same time that all human activities are equivalent – for they all aim to sacrifice man [being-for-itself] in order that the self-caused may arise- and that all of them are doomed, by definition, to failure. (p. 810)

Sartre said at the end of Being and Nothingness that questions regarding moral responsibility would be answered in a future work. His project may have disclosed too much coefficients of adversity, because he never managed to actualise this end. Simone de Beauvoir, on the contrary, did actualise an ethics grounded in existentialism. In the next section, her ethics is used to show that the existentialist philosophy offers a comprehensive and valuable alternative to autonomy and the ethics of dataveillance in which individuals have the power and responsibility of their choices, as well as a moral responsibility to resist the objectification of freedom by dataveillance and the Big Data paradigm.

3.2   Ethics of ambiguity

In the preceding section of this chapter, we discussed aspects of Jean-Paul Sartre's complex ontology. Before continuing, it is necessary to briefly reiterate the most important points to keep in mind for this section. The first is, that Sartre characterised our consciousness as *a failure*. It is always transcending, projecting, becoming, but never *being something*. This failure is definitive. It is impossible to imagine the for-itself succeeding in becoming *something*, because to realise that one has become something requires a negation of what one currently is. This negation is, paradoxically, only possible if one is able to transcend what one is. The for-itself 'is what it is not and is not what it is. (...) It *is been*' (Sartre, 1943/2021, pp. 117, 128). Consequently, the for-itself is a perpetual process of becoming and not becoming.

The second point to consider is that the world, is devoid of inherent meaning. However, it does constitute our situation, which *gets* meaning when we disclose it. Through projecting goals and having ends, things become meaningful. For example, if my project is to walk home, then the rocks I walk on

become meaningful as a road, but they would serve as building blocks if my project were to build a home. In this way, the world is disclosed by us, through our projects and by means of our being. If we extend this argument to its logical conclusion, we must bite the bullet that life itself has no justification outside of us. We are responsible for ourselves and the world. It is important to note that the first point, the condemnation to be free, means to never *not* disclose the world, because we are always, in and *beyond* it.

The third and final point is that the for-itself is capable of acting or living in bad-faith. The for-itself, is an *ambiguous* self that perpetually seeks to define itself, but in doing so, it must continuously negate its current state, thus embodying both what it is and what it is not. However, it can lie to itself in order to escape the anguish and responsibility of its being. To say, "it is just who I am," or "it was not really my choice," is to pretend you are a thing that is not a freedom. While even choosing to pretend to be a thing, is a choice; only a freedom can choose to live in bad faith.

3.2.1   Beauvoir's moral freedom thesis

One of the most common criticisms of existentialism, particularly from ethicists, is that if there is no inherent meaning to anything, then even morality is disclosed through us, which means that we decide for ourselves what is and is not valuable. Without at least one universal value, it is almost impossible to devise any universal morality. Therefore, existentialism is an uncommon theory within applied ethics debates. Nevertheless, Jonathan Webber (2018a, 2018b), Kate Kirkpatrick (2023) and Kristina Arp (2001) have argued that this critique has been rebutted by Simone de Beauvoir in PHYRRUS ET CINÉAS (1944/2023) and in THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY (1947/1962). Both of which were published within 5 years after BEING AND NOTHINGNESS (1943/2021). Although the ethics of ambiguity does not provide clean, externally justified rules, or the comfort of hedonic calculations, it does provide a fundamental stance on how we ought to treat the conception of freedom. According to Beauvoir, only from the existentialist conception of freedom, can we *truly* start to morally justify our actions.

In PHYRRUS ET CINÉAS (1944/2023), Beauvoir argues that human freedom is fundamentally relational. She demonstrates that 'every man needs the freedom of other men and, in a sense, always wants it, even though he may be a tyrant; (…) Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity' (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 71). Even those who seek to oppress others — tyrants, for example — are, paradoxically, reliant on the freedom of those they oppress. The existence of other free beings prevents an individual from becoming stagnant, trapped in the mere facts of their existence.

In THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY (1947/1962), Beauvoir emphasises that Sartre's description of disclosure demonstrates how freedom is the value 'from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence' (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 24). Without freedom, nothing can have significance or value because none of this is given. Beauvoir infers from this, that to value anything truly, one must first value freedom itself, as it is the precondition for any valuation. This means that if a person holds any values, they must inherently acknowledge and desire freedom for themselves. However, as shown in PHYRRUS ET CINÉAS (1944/2023), they must also desire the freedom of others: 'each object is penetrated with human meanings. (…) [we] must disclose the world with the purpose of further disclosure and by the same movement try to free men, by means of whom the world takes on meaning' (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 74). Therefore, the intrinsic relationship between freedoms, and valuing and freedom, establishes freedom as the highest and most essential value.

The two theses of these books, when considered together, provide a foundation for the *moral freedom* thesis, which states 'that moral freedom is a willed relation to one's freedom-as-transcendence and to the ideal of moral freedom, which involves recognizing our indeterminacy and interdependence and adopting freedom as an end for oneself and others' (Kirkpatrick, 2023, p. 10). This moral freedom thesis offers an alternative answer to the second sub-question: **do individuals have a moral responsibility to avoid digital control?** Individuals **have a moral responsibility to actively will their freedom for themselves and universally.**

Before making some concluding remarks in 3.2.3 on how this applies specifically to individuals in the Big Data paradigm, and why it shows that the existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Beauvoir offers a valuable and comprehensive approach to the dominant discourse in the autonomy and data surveillance debate, I will elaborate on how we can *will freedom for ourselves and universally.*

3.2.2   Willing freedom

Sartre showed that there is no universal meaning, that we *have* no justification, and that we are a 'useless passion' (1943/2021, p. 797) present in the world of being-in-itself where 'nothing is useful, nothing is useless' (1947/1962, p. 12). However, Beauvoir said that although Sartre 'insisted above all on the abortive aspect of the human adventure (..) if we reflect upon his descriptions of existence, we perceive that they are far from condemning man without recourse' (1947/1962, p. 11). Beauvoir insists that although many people cope with their existence by fleeing in seriousness, in bad faith, if we follow Sartre's description of the for-itself closely, we can also, apart from, either living in anguish or fleeing from it in bad faith, *will our freedom.* This is the mode of being in which we can achieve *moral freedom*.

Remember that being-for-itself perpetually negates itself, thereby disclosing and valorising the world: '[M]an makes himself this lack of being *in order that* there might be being' (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 12). *Being* here refers to meanings, reasons, justifications etc.. Beauvoir says:

> It is not in vain that man nullifies being. Thanks to him, being is disclosed and he desires this disclosure. There is an original type of attachment to being which is not the relationship "wanting to be" but rather "wanting to disclose being." Now, here there is not failure, but rather success. This end, which man proposes to himself by making himself a lack of being, is, in effect, realized by him. By uprooting himself from the world, man makes himself present to the world and makes the world present to him. (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 12)

So on the one hand there is failure, which we know by now, and on the other hand there is success. Success is not fleeing from the failure of the for-itself, but actively pursuing it and *willing* it. But we know that we cannot escape freedom, and freedom means disclosure, so we cannot escape disclosure. How can we will what we cannot lose?

Disclosure always happens, but it is our *attitude* to that happening, that distinguishes disclosure from *willing* to disclose. William S. Wilkerson (2012, p. 65) paraphrases Debra Bergoffen's constructive way of explaining the distinction between disclosure (freedom) and willing disclosure (willing freedom). She explains that there are two "moments" of intentionality[14]. 'In the first moment, my consciousness seeks to disclose being, to reveal meaning' (2012, p. 65); this moment is defined by its constant tension.

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[14] I have put "moment" in parentheses because it insinuates a temporal dimension, while this is not the case. The tension lies in the fact that these two "moments" are essentially one, always occurring.

In the second "moment" consciousness wishes to coincide with the world, which Beauvoir describes rather poetically as:

> I should like to be the landscape which I am contemplating, I should like this sky, this quiet water to think themselves within me, that it might be I whom they express in flesh and bone, and [yet] I remain at a distance. But it is also by this distance that the sky and the water exist before me. (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 12).

In the second "moment," being-for-itself wants to coincide with the world that it discloses in the first "moment." To escape the emptiness that it is, to escape the anguish of freedom and fill itself with the valorisation of the world that it, quite literally, finds itself in.

Bad faith, is to escape the tension of the two "moments," by denying the existence of the first "moment". In other words, it means to act in bad faith as if the world is disclosed to, rather than through you. By denying the first "moment" you mislead yourself into seeing the world and yourself *as it is*, rather than *as it is disclosed through you*. Willing freedom means choosing not to deny the first "moment," but to will it; to seek to disclose the world, fail to possess it, and 'take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession'(Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 12). We should *want* this failure to be, this tension between the for-itself and the in-itself. We should try to coincide with our failure to be and our will to disclose the world.

To achieve moral freedom, one 'must will freedom within himself and universally' (Arp, 2001; Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 78; Kirkpatrick, 2023; Webber, 2018b). This is *moral* freedom because by accepting your ambiguity, you accept the fact that the morality of your actions comes from within. Beauvoir, hereby, articulates a transition from Sartre's descriptive ontological freedom to moral agency: 'To will oneself free is to effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence' (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 25). This means recognizing and embracing the responsibility that value and meaning are not inherent in the natural world but are created and justified through our free choices and actions. By taking on this responsibility, one commits to the immanent project of justifying one's existence, the values one upholds, and one's actions.

Most of all, embracing moral freedom entails willing freedom as an end for oneself and others. By willing freedom universally, one not only wills freedom for oneself but also strives to create conditions in which everyone knows they can always exercise their freedom. This universal commitment to freedom, is the cornerstone of ethical living, where moral responsibility is fuelled, in the first place, by the ambiguity of being-for-itself.

3.2.3   What would Beauvoir do?

So far, we have discussed that dataveillance, digital control, weak externalist accounts of autonomy, and the Big Data paradigm all resort to an image of reality in which humans are, at least in some situations, unfree to govern their actions within their physical limitations. After that, I showed how it is argued that the emergence of digital control systems and an increasingly digital environment result in a tension where laws and rights, and their efficacy, determine our degree of autonomy as self-control. Contrary to this conclusion, I illustrated how Sartre's ontology rejects the assumption that human beings can be unfree to govern their actions within their situation, providing an alternative approach to autonomy and the ethics of dataveillance that emphasizes individuals' absolute power and responsibility over their choices. Finally, we examined Beauvoir's moral freedom thesis, which states that morality is grounded in ambiguous existence and manifests itself by willing freedom for

oneself and universally. This involves actively resisting seriousness or bad faith, where one denies freedom and becomes a passive object, manipulated by outside forces.

At this point, we have achieved the twofold aim of this thesis: to demonstrate the problematic, discouraging portrayal of the individual that emerges from the conventional narrative of autonomy and digital control; and to show how the existentialist philosophy offers an alternative approach to autonomy and the ethics of dataveillance that gives individuals the power and responsibility of their choices. However, the question that unavoidably lingers in between the lines, and which I will answer concisely, is: What does the existentialist approach to autonomy and dataveillance offer in terms of practical guidance or solutions to the ethical challenges posed by digital control?

We ought to act while willing our freedom and our ambiguity for ourselves and universally (Arp, 2001; Beauvoir, 1947/1962, 1944/2023; Kirkpatrick, 2023; Webber, 2018a, 2018b). We should never fall into seriousness by believing that our freedom is limited. When we feel controlled, or threatened by digital systems, we should not say that our freedom fell victim to the situation, for that is to believe that you are a thing with limited freedom. Instead, we should will the disclosure of the current moment, and project possible futures formed by the fundamental intention of willing freedom, project possible futures in which you will refrain from acting in bad faith. Thus, to take responsibility and project possible futures in which you acknowledge that, whether to submit to digital control, or not, either choice, is a free choice.

This individual act of willing freedom, means also to resist any person, believe, ideology or other entity that pretends that freedom has other limits than itself. If you do not partake in this resistance, you choose to belong to the oppressors, rather than the oppressed. Oppressors of freedom act as if others are static beings who have a given human nature, full of flaws like cognitive biases and inadequate self-knowledge that limit their freedom. They make others believe that freedom is a delicate thing "to have" that can be unconsciously "taken away" by digital control. [15]

Therefore, I do not, in any way, claim that we should stop arguing for regulation against digital control, but we *should change the nature of the arguments* to prevent passivity towards autonomy. The current narrative relies on depictions of powerless victims who can "lose," rather than forsake their freedom. Therefore, when seen through an existential lens, weak externalist accounts of autonomy, the Big Data paradigm and digital control are the modern day embodiments of oppression. The Big Data paradigm, in which many take part, epitomizes this by reducing individuals to data profiles and interactions to data points, forsaking the ambiguous beings that it simulates.

The existential harm of the Big Data paradigm, therefore preludes and transcends current debates on digital control; the underlying depictions of humans in the Big Data paradigm represent a collective flight from responsibility and anguish; it is bad faith, *en masse*. And it makes us believe that there are external powers, that we cannot resist:

> The slave is submissive when one has succeeded in mystifying him in such a way that his situation does not seem to him to be imposed by men, but to be immediately given by nature, by the gods, *by the powers against whom revolt has no meaning* (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 85)

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[15] The ethics of ambiguity, Chapter 2. Freedom and Liberation (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 78)

By willing freedom for ourselves and others we can start to resist the fundamental ideologies of the Big Data Paradigm. First of all through stopping to accept, investigate and submitting to a static image of ourselves and others as beings whose freedom can 'be limited by anything other than itself' (Sartre, 1943/2021, p. 14). The threat of dataveillance is not that it actually takes away our autonomy, it is making us *believe that it can*; slowly making us passively surrendering into the seriousness of the objective world.

Conclusion

We started this thesis with the following research question: to what **extent can individuals who are subjected to exploitative uses of dataveillance, be held responsible for the loss of personal autonomy that they undergo as a consequence?** The sub questions underlying the debate about the moral responsibility of individuals to protect their personal autonomy that we discussed were **whether individuals have the power to escape digital control through dataveillance?** and, if so, **whether they have a moral responsibility to do so**?

We have seen that the dominant discourse on the moral responsibility of individuals subject to dataveillance, portrays individuals as lacking both the power, and the moral responsibility to prevent their "loss of autonomy" through the malicious use of dataveillance. And that this leads to the conclusion that the conflict between dataveillance and autonomy in the Big Data paradigm will develop into a tension in which laws and rights, and their efficacy, will determine our degree of autonomy as self-control rather than us. At last, I introduced existentialism as a valuable alternative that rejects this dominant view of autonomy and offers an ethics grounded in freedom.

In the last chapter we have seen that the existentialist philosophy argues that **individuals do have the power to escape digital control** and that existentialist ethics of Beauvoir, does not directly state that individuals have a moral responsibility to do so. Even more, she denounces any externally justified morality or authority: 'The fact is, that no behavior is ever authorized to begin with' (Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 142). We are condemned to authorize our behaviour *ourselves,* justify our actions, values and ends and take responsibility for them. She argues however, that to do so, we ought to resist oppression of freedom for ourselves and universally. This means that we do have a **moral responsibility to resist the Big Data paradigm, and everyone who says that there are external limits to autonomy as self-control**.

In concluding this thesis, I acknowledge that the real potentiality of the presented argument exceeds its word and time restrictions, which have limited my freedom to endlessly clarify, rebut all possible rejections, and take interesting side roads. As a consequence much work remains to be done. However, as Beauvoir paraphrased Kant, 'the resistance of the thing sustains the action of man as air sustains the flight of the dove'(Beauvoir, 1947/1962, p. 81); this would have been a never ending inquiry, had it been free of restrictions. Therefore, these limitations also enabled me to show that the existentialist philosophy can offer a breath of fresh air to debates on autonomy in relation to dataveillance.

The work that remains to be done includes, but is not limited to, discussing the applicability and implications of the existentialist ethics in relation to dataveillance. In Beauvoir's most famous work, THE SECOND SEX (1949/2009), she contributed significantly to the second feminist wave by extending her argument to the oppression of women by thoroughly investigating the implications and applicability of the existentialist view that freedom must be claimed and exercised by resisting societal structures that seek to limit it. Future research could similarly extend the existentialist view thoroughly to individuals in the Big Data paradigm to uncover more about its applicability, implications and potential. Thereby, contributing an ethical dimension to current research that is already applying different aspects of the existentialist philosophy to scrutinise modern day technologies (Cairns, 2018; Cheong, 2023; Leuenberger, 2024; Lopato, 2015).

Lastly, this thesis contributes and underscores the wider request for ethical discussions to go beyond the initial consequences of technologies. An example of research that takes up this task is the international research program into the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies (*ESDIT | Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies*, n.d.), which investigates the challenges that socially disruptive technologies pose to concepts and values that constitute our moral thinking.

In conclusion, much work needs to be done on the ethics of dataveillance, to which this thesis has contributed by introducing the existentialist viewpoint on autonomy, data surveillance, and digital control. Future research can offer deeper insights and more solid solutions to the ethical difficulties brought by the Big Data paradigm by researching these ideas more and exploring them further. Contributing to a more autonomous and morally sound digital future.

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