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SUMARIO

PRESENTACIÓN

ALEXANDER DANIEL CASTLETON FLORES	Política y Pospolítica en la Modernidad Hipertecnológica	7
ALEXANDER DANIEL CASTLETON FLORES	Datafication and the Crisis of the Person in Postpolitical Society	13
ALEJANDRO DE HARO HONRUBIA	Los desafíos de las nuevas tecnologías en la modernidad líquida. Una propuesta antro-po-técnica frente a los riesgos de la necro-técnica para la condición humana	31
CAMILA CUELLO	Entre el Mundo y el Desierto: Una lectura arendtiana de las redes sociales	45
CARL DOLAN	Disinformation, Democracy and the Myth of the Informed Citizen	61
JORDAN ZALIS	The Role of Integrated Marketing and Media Technology in the Diplomatic Projection of U.S. State Power	85
MATTHEW B. CRAWFORD ALEXANDER DANIEL CASTLETON FLORES	La Propiedad de los Medios de Pensamiento: Tecnología, Pospolítica y el Gobierno de Nadie	119

ESTUDIOS

RAMIRO HERNÁNDEZ ROMERO	La guerra fría ideológico-cultural en América Latina: la controversia del Proyecto Simpático en Colombia	129
RUTH FERRERO-TURRIÓN	Capitalismo autoritario: mutaciones neoliberales, soberanía corporativa y resistencias democráticas	169

CRÍTICA

ANTONIO VIÑAO FRAGO	Escolarización y medio rural: ¿progreso o imposición, modernización o aculturación, movilidad social o desarraigo?	195
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Datafication and the Crisis of the Person in Postpolitical Society

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Abstract: The article examines how big data—extremely large and complex sets of digital information that are computationally analyzed to identify patterns, behaviors, and relationships—contributes to the emergence of a postpolitical society in which individuals are increasingly transformed into objects of algorithmic quantification and classification. Drawing on the perspectives of Hannah Arendt, José Ortega y Gasset, Julián Marías, and Roger Scruton, the analysis explores how datafication reduces the person to fragmented and predictable data profiles, weakening the capacities for action, thought, judgment, and democratic participation. In this context, political and ethical questions increasingly become subordinated to technocratic forms of governance and algorithmic decision-making, contributing to a crisis of personhood and political agency. While acknowledging the hybrid nature of the human being as both personal and technical, the article emphasizes the importance of developing critical literacy regarding datafication in order to preserve human dignity, autonomy, and meaningful forms of collective life in increasingly automated societies.

Keywords: Postpolitics; Big Data; Algorithms; Artificial Intelligence; Person; Quantification.

La datificación y la crisis de la persona en la sociedad pospolítica

Resumen: El artículo examina cómo el big data —conjuntos extremadamente grandes y complejos de información digital que son analizados computacionalmente para identificar patrones, comportamientos y relaciones— contribuye al surgimiento de una sociedad pospolítica en la que los individuos son crecientemente transformados en objetos de cuantificación y clasificación algorítmica. A partir de las perspectivas de Hannah Arendt, José Ortega y Gasset, Julián Marías y Roger Scruton, el análisis explora cómo la datafificación reduce a la persona a perfiles de datos fragmentados y predecibles, debilitando las capacidades de acción, pensamiento, juicio y partici-

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pación democrática. En este contexto, las cuestiones políticas y éticas quedan crecientemente subordinadas a formas tecnocráticas de gobierno y toma de decisiones algorítmicas, contribuyendo a una crisis de la persona y de la agencia política. Si bien se reconoce la naturaleza híbrida del ser humano como realidad personal y técnica, el artículo enfatiza la importancia de desarrollar una alfabetización crítica respecto de la dataficación para preservar la dignidad humana, la autonomía y formas significativas de vida colectiva en sociedades crecientemente automatizadas.

Palabras clave: Pospolítica; Big Data; Algoritmos; Inteligencia Artificial; Persona; Cuantificación.

1. Introduction

We live in a «culture of surveillance» (Lyon, 2018) characterized by constant monitoring and the massive collection of data and its algorithmic processing. Datafication is the creation of digital data from human life that can be processed through forms of analysis capable of being automated on a large scale, combined with the generation of different types of value from such data (Mejías & Couldry, 2019). The business model of Silicon Valley technology companies consists in collecting data by monetizing every aspect of our lives, from our voices and facial expressions to our political and intellectual affiliations (Crawford, 2024). The management of the data collected impacts the way we live, influencing the services to which we have access, as well as how governments and corporations classify and treat us. As Mau explains:

The more information that can be collected about a person, the more accurately their future actions can be predicted, given that most data-profile analysts assume future behaviour to be a function of past behaviour. Therefore, value data are not just an illustration of a hierarchical order, but also classifications which determine access to resources, opportunities and services. (Mau, p. 80, 2019)

As a result, we lose agency over our circumstances (Crawford, 2020) and, furthermore, the world becomes increasingly opaque, giving rise to a «black-boxing» of the devices and systems that regulate, and even determine, our lives (Pasquale, 2015).

This article seeks to demonstrate how, within this culture, important aspects of personal life are being modified or lost that have repercussions on how we understand the political subject. It has already been noted that the concept of the person is being disrupted in the context of AI technologies that appear to possess a certain autonomy (Puzio, 2025). However, one of the principal

problems of this digital condition is that we ourselves are transformed into material for social engineering, as our understanding of freedom, dignity, and human responsibility is altered (Zimmerman, 2023). The key question to be addressed, then, is what kind of persons and citizens we are becoming within the increasingly ubiquitous technological-digital condition in which we live.

To this end, this article draws upon the thought of two classical authors whose work contains early reflections on the political subject and technology: Hannah Arendt and José Ortega y Gasset. It also engages with more recent thinkers, such as Ortega's disciple Julián Marías, who developed a personalist philosophy inspired by his teacher's later work (Burgos, 2009), and Roger Scruton, whose understanding of the person runs throughout his philosophy and consistently challenges scientific and reductionist views of the human being (Cullen, 2016)—of which datafication is part.

The choice of these specific authors is justified insofar as they form a coherent path from existential anthropology to political belonging that allows seeing the reductionism of a post-political order. While Ortega and Marías show why the person cannot be reduced to data points, since human life is circumstantial, biographical, and projective, Arendt helps frame post-politics as the erosion of genuine political action and plurality; Scruton, on his part, clarifies what is lost when technocratic management erodes the inter-personal lifeworld. Taken together, these authors' critique of reductionism allows us to see that the person is not merely an informational object, politics is not merely administration, and social order cannot be sustained by data-driven optimization alone.

These authors perspectives will then be contrasted with the reduction of the person to data in the age of big data, recognizing that escaping datafication is virtually impossible. Consequently, preserving personhood and political agency requires the development of a certain degree of awareness and literacy regarding the impact these processes have on us.

2. The Person According to Arendt, Ortega, Scruton, and Marías

Hannah Arendt and José Ortega y Gasset are not thinkers who developed an explicitly personalist philosophy, yet the notion of the person is deeply present throughout their work (Loidolt, 2020; Walsh, 2017; Bono, 2015). Julián Marías and Roger Scruton, by contrast, are authors for whom the person occupies a central place in their philosophy. This section examines the ways in which these thinkers conceive of the person in order to later contrast them with the depersonalizing effects of big data and its political repercussions.

Let us begin with Arendt. For her, life in common, or the shared world, is central to human existence. This involves a conception of the person ac-

according to which being a person means expressing oneself publicly within a plurality of others (Arendt, 2018, pp. 7-8). Each individual possesses what Arendt describes as the «miraculous» capacity of natality, that is, the ability to begin something new in the world (Ibid., p. 247). At the same time, in her classic study of the banality of evil in Eichmann in Jerusalem (Arendt, 2006), as well as in essays such as *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy* (Arendt, 2003, pp. 49-147), and later in her reflections on thinking in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt suggests that another defining characteristic of the person is the capacity to think. Through thinking, individuals develop an inner life in which they enter into dialogue with themselves and thereby become persons in a deeper sense. For Arendt, it is precisely within these internal dialogues that two essential human capacities emerge: conscience and morality. Thinking forces individuals to live with themselves (Arendt, 2003) something that those who refuse to think avoid altogether. As Walsh (2017, p. 161) explains, «personality and morality are co-constitutive,» such that there exists a continuum between «nobodies» and persons. The former lack inner dialogue and are incapable of seeing the world from the perspective of others, whereas persons develop, to use an Orteguian term, a moral sense through inwardness and self-reflection: «the greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by ‘nobodies,’ that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons» (Arendt, 2003, p. 111). In Shuster’s words, «The question of extreme evil, then, just is the question of whether one is or is not a person, a self who has taken upon herself the responsibility inherent to having one’s own take on the world (i.e., a take that is not merely conditioned by the formulations of society, totalitarian, or otherwise)» (Shuster, 2018, p. 7). For Arendt, then, being a person means possessing a perspective on the world and exercising judgment upon reality. Through this process, individuals establish who they are, define their own limits, and constitute a particular self. (Arendt, 2003, p. 101). Arendt also emphasizes the importance of the private sphere for personal development and as a necessary condition for entering the public realm (Ibid). As she writes in her essay *Crisis in Education*: «Everything that lives, not vegetative life alone, emerges from darkness and, however strong its natural tendency to thrust itself into the light, it nevertheless needs the security of darkness to grow at all» (Arendt, 1993, p.186).

Privacy, for Hannah Arendt, is indispensable for action, a concept that is central to her political phenomenology (Loidolt, 2018, p.145). Arendt distinguishes between three fundamental activities within the *vita activa*: labor, work, and action. While the first relates to the maintenance of the biological life of the *animal laborans*, and the second to the material construction of the world by the *homo faber*, action refers to the human capacity to act and speak within a shared world

in which one may be remembered and become part of a story (Arendt, 2018, p. 97). What is essential is not merely being an individual, that is, a something, but being someone who acts within the web of relationships that constitutes the common world and a shared sense of reality, in other words, within a plurality. For this reason, as Loidolt (2020, p. 166) emphasizes, Arendt's phenomenology of the political places persons at the center, proposing an ontology of personhood. It is persons who act, and who become who they are through publicly interacting with others and appearing before them. Consequently, plurality itself is threatened whenever the irreducible uniqueness of each person is flattened, something that is, in fact, fundamentally antipolitical (Arendt, 2018, p. 214).

Although persons acquire their identities by generating stories through their actions, there nevertheless exists an «anarchic quality of appearance,» since the outcome of action can never be fully controlled. This «allows one to experience oneself as an end in itself within an open web of relationships, that is, as a person» (Loidolt, 2024, p. 186). It is within this common sphere that one becomes who one is and, therefore, Arendt, like Ortega, distances herself from substantialist conceptions of the self, emphasizing instead a relational and circumstantial ontology. Just as the key to José Ortega y Gasset's thought lies in the co-constitution of the self and circumstance, summarized in his well-known phrase, «I am myself and my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I do not save myself,» «what Arendt develops is a description of an interrelational space of meaning in which the self, the world, and others mutually co-constitute one another simultaneously» (*Ibid*, p.182).

One of the central problems of modernity for Hannah Arendt is the disappearance of transcendent principles of legitimacy such as tradition (Arendt, 1993, p. 5), with the result that the world loses its meaning and ceases to be our «home» (Arendt, 2018, pp. 248-257). This loss of the world is what gives rise to mass society and totalitarianism (Arendt, 2017). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt describes the problems associated with the loss of privacy and, paradoxically, with loneliness. There, she also shows how one of the ways terror becomes established as the political substance of totalitarianism is through the destruction of the common space in which persons can appear; in other words, by destroying plurality (*Ibid*, p. 623) and plunging individuals into rootlessness and loneliness (*Ibid*, p. 624). Most fundamentally, the aim of total domination in the concentration camps is the «destruction of the person.» (*Ibid*, p. 626) For this reason, as Loidolt (2024, p. 183) points out, a constellation of «self-world-others» is necessary in order for someone to truly be an agent in the world. Put differently, being a person requires private spaces

of solitude in which one can think, and then act in the world within a shared sense of reality alongside others.

José Ortega y Gasset, for his part, would agree with Arendt's view that the formation of an individual personality is profoundly important and even an ethical imperative (Turró Ortega, 2019). Since human life consists in a dialogue between the self and circumstance, Ortega emphasizes the need to «save» one's circumstance, that is, to appropriate it and give it personal meaning. This is the key to his *ratiovitalism*, through which he argues for the inseparability of life and reason within a particular circumstance. Circumstance provides the framework within which we must necessarily become agents in order to shape our lives and personalize ourselves. However, in *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega states:

Perhaps the structure of life in our time largely prevents man from living as a person (...) discouragement will lead the young man to renounce not only all action, but also every personal desire, and he will seek the opposite solution: he will thus imagine a standardized life, composed of desires common to everyone, and will understand that, in order to achieve it, he must request or demand it collectively together with others (Ortega y Gasset, 2004-2010, p. 756).

Here, José Ortega y Gasset moves on both a descriptive and a normative level. On the one hand, he emphasizes that human beings are social beings and therefore live within a society that provides them with formulas for living. On the other hand, persons truly manifest themselves as such when they question those formulas. One must resist the tendency to dissolve into the community and instead affirm one's own personality. For this reason, as López Sastre (2021) points out, Ortega develops a vocabulary that includes terms such as «heroism,» «vocation,» and «authenticity,» all of which refer to the need to be oneself by remaining faithful to that «incorruptible core» or «authentic self» that each individual carries within (Ortega y Gasset, 2004-2010, p. 128). Likewise, concepts such as *ensimismamiento* (inwardness or self-reflection) and *alteración* (*Ibid.*) (alienation into externality) establish a dichotomy between individual agency, which involves thinking, reflecting upon, and judging one's circumstance, and the structures within which one must necessarily live one's life (Walsh, 2021). For Ortega, such agency is an emergent property of human beings. Caballero Bono (2015) further notes that, in addition to solitude and vocation as manifestations of the personal nature of the human being, Ortega also highlights «companionship,» a notion closely related to Arendt's concept of plurality. Since the world is necessarily shared, one discovers oneself first and foremost «in relation to others,» participating in a common sense of reality (Arendt, 2018, pp. 208-209). Identity is therefore the product

of this shared world, which means that personal vocation begins from within it and must ultimately refer back to it.

Roger Scruton complements this reflection by criticizing the modern tendency to reduce the human being to its biological dimension, something particularly evident in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, which explain the person primarily in terms of brain activity. For Scruton, this is an incomplete conception of what it means to be human because, although science is at least partly correct in describing us through causal laws, the person is something more than the material reality that composes them. A person is a point of view upon reality, a perspective capable of accounting for and justifying its actions within the interpersonal sphere of the lifeworld (Scruton, 2012, p. 32). Modern science possesses the capacity to «distance us from the world, making us distrust the concepts through which we respond to it as persons,» (Scruton, 1986, p. 10) but,

«[H]uman beings find themselves in a peculiar metaphysical situation, one that is shared by no other entity in the natural world. We see ourselves [...] in two contrasting ways: both as objects subject to natural laws, and as subjects capable of dictating our own laws. The human object is an organism like any other; the human subject is in some sense 'transcendental,' observing the world from a point of view at its perimeter». (Scruton, 2014, p.123)

What Roger Scruton emphasizes is that the person, what each of us truly is, transcends the empirical world. The person is part of that world, but not reducible to it. Persons inhabit a shared and intrinsically relational lifeworld in which we are able to give reasons to one another, beyond merely being co-constituted by our circumstances. In other words, subjects are capable of responding to the question «why?» at the level of reason and therefore cannot be understood simply as objects governed by causal laws. For this reason, analyzing human beings solely from a biological perspective, as neuroscience does through its reduction of the person to the brain, is ultimately inadequate (*Ibid*, p. 51).

Similarly, Julián Marías defended the idea that the person is a «corporeal reality» unlike any other. Whereas things are determined by a set of characteristics that define and delimit their being, the person is a projective «unreality.» For Marías, the two fundamental human questions are: «Who am I?» and «What will become of me?» (Marías, 1995, p. 48). This is why the verb *to be* is insufficient for understanding human life, since personal reality is never finished; it is dynamic and future-oriented. It is unreal and unbounded because it is a dramatic unfolding, in the sense that it is always directed toward the fu-

ture (Marías, 1984, p. 89). Given these characteristics, the person is something arcane and inexhaustible; never fully given, never complete, and never entirely knowable. One never fully comes to know another person. Whereas things simply are, and can therefore be analyzed and broken down, the person cannot. In a manner similar to the capacity for natality emphasized by Hannah Arendt, the person, for Marías, is a «radical novelty.» As Marías writes:

«(...) because it is projective, everything personal is primarily future-oriented —or rather, *futurible*, given the essential uncertainty of all human reality, which does not allow one to affirm that something simply ‘will be.’ That is to say, it is a form of reality so radically different from things that, from their point of view, it appears unreal (...) Yet the reality of things is incomparably lesser than that of the person, and for this reason every form of naturalism, materialism, or reduction to what is merely given and present ultimately lacks meaning.» (Marías, 1997, p.16)

In conclusion, drawing upon the ideas of Hannah Arendt, José Ortega y Gasset, Roger Scruton, and Julián Marías, we can identify several elements that constitute the person: freedom, the capacity to think and judge, transcendence beyond the material and the merely biological, a constitutive openness toward the future, embodiment, and relationality. These authors did not reflect specifically on algorithmic technologies. Nevertheless, their respective philosophies provide important insights for contrasting them with the forms of depersonalization embedded in the assumptions of datafication. In the following section, drawing upon recent research on the subject, this article will examine the ways in which such technologies conceive of the person and political citizenship.

3. From Persons to Subatomic Depersonalization

For more than a decade, the power of big data and algorithms has been theorized by various observers and critics who have emphasized their capacity to categorize, govern, and guide human action (Beer, 2017). Grounded in a form of «data colonialism» (Mejías & Couldry, 2024), algorithms establish a new kind of «gaze» that «constitutes the ways in which [data analytics] companies design, construct, and manipulate their algorithms in order to better ‘see,’ conceptualize, and influence people» (Kotliar, 2020, p. 921) Both the political and personal life are reduced to calculable and measurable atoms that can be represented through the aggregation of discrete, independent, and empirically observable units, which are then statistically manipulated.

Ever since nation-states began registering citizens, people have been classified and categorized from birth, thereby constituting us as «informational

persons» (Koopman, 2019) However, in the digital age, as Gilles Deleuze anticipated in his early description of the transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control, we move from the individual to the «dividual,» a being fragmented into data (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000). It is precisely in the «conjunction of big data» and algorithms that, as Kehlenbach (2022) argues, a «new subatomic person» emerges.

This reformulation of the person occurs as increasingly smaller aspects of ourselves are used to identify, classify, and render us useful and predictable through statistical analysis and our subjection to technological mechanisms. The resulting subatomic persons are stripped of all cultural and historical context and assigned an identity beyond their control, one that decisively shapes their agency in the world by alienating them from it. As Agamben (2011) wrote, it was in the nineteenth century, with the development of biometric data such as fingerprints, that a rupture took place in which identity ceased to be primarily a social function and became something biological. This marks a profound transformation, since it is through the recognition of others that we constitute ourselves as persons, whereas we cannot meaningfully take a stance toward or distance ourselves from biological data such as fingerprints.

This production of an «identity without the person» is taken to an extreme through big data technologies. Our metadata are used by governments and corporations to generate typified profiles of «who we are,» subjecting us to forms of power exercised through quantification that reduce us to mere digital percentages (Van der Meulen & Bruinsma, 2019).

In this context, the individual ceases to be the basic unit or atom of Western society. Every time surveillance systems collect the data we leave behind through our interactions with technology, individuals are disaggregated into minute fragments that are later reconstituted in ways that determine our social identities. At the same time, a new epistemology emerges, as data become the privileged source of knowledge and acquire absolute primacy as a mechanism for establishing truth (boyd & Crawford, 2012). The «truth» derived from data becomes more important than our own understanding and our personal relationships with others, while our individuality comes to be governed by algorithms rather than by reflection and introspection. Moreover, because everything remains recorded on the internet, we become prisoners of our past: our data are transformed into a «digital self» considered more «objective» than our analog identity.

Politically, we are beginning to live under an algocracy, that is, «a system of governance in which computer-coded algorithms structure, constrain, incentivize, nudge, manipulate, or encourage different forms of human behavior»

(Danaher, 2020, p. 257) Algocracy transforms reality into an eternal present devoid of the capacity for future transformation—or for action, in Arendtian terms—insofar as this is precisely what the new predictive system requires. As we come to be defined by others and categorized according to patterns of behavior, we become incapable of acting politically. We are transformed into inputs for algocracy, and with this, the plurality of perspectives on social and political problems is lost (Lake, 2017). On the other hand, the expansion of big data creates new forms of knowledge that generate new spaces of power through the development of new forms of biopolitics that fuse state control with corporate technocracy (Kehlenbach, 2022). This is a form of algorithmic governance that is accountable to no one and shielded from the democratic process. Big data, as the privileged site of knowledge and due to its complexity, becomes accessible only to those who possess the technological expertise and power required to handle massive amounts of data. Democratic processes of decision-making, public deliberation, and the transparent discussion of proposals for society that are subject to accountability are eliminated in a society governed by the rationality of big data. This means that political disputes are transformed into technocratic problems that can supposedly be solved through the collection of ever more data and its subsequent analysis by corporations possessing advanced computational capabilities and technical sophistication. The new political subject that emerges from this process is a hyper-individualized entity stripped of all context and deprived of the capacity to construct shared meaning and, therefore, collective action (Lake, 2017).

Can we still be persons and political agents when we are reduced to an aggregate of data and our thoughts and actions are increasingly controlled and conditioned by algorithms? The decomposition of the self and its commodification suggest a debate about agency and morality that ultimately collapses traditional humanist categories (Danaher, 2020). As we become mediated by technologies, interpellated as aggregates of data, and treated as pieces on the chessboard of institutions that subsume us within categories, we must take responsibility for our human condition and our circumstance, in Arendtian and Orteguian terms respectively, and become conscious of the consequences of this depersonalization, which will be discussed below.

4. Datafication and the Postpolitical Eclipse of the Person

Datafication entails a distrust of human judgment (Crawford, 2019); what is sought is the universal, the abstract, the objective, and the perfect (Vallor, 2024, p. 6). We seek to manage our bodies and minds while leaving nothing to chance through the exhaustive technical control of every aspect of our physi-

cal, emotional, psychological, and political lives (Tabachnick, 2013, p. 47). Yet big data and algorithms are incapable of incorporating the personal experience of the self into their abstract quantifications of what each of us is. They cannot answer the most radical questions of life, such as those posed by Julián Marías: «Who am I?» and «What will become of me?» Their explanations fail to encompass the *who*—that is, the personal, transcendent, and future-oriented dimension of being. We become depersonalized to the extent that we eliminate the moral responsibility that accompanies our freedom when we actively participate in the culture of surveillance and delegate decisions to big data and ChatGPT (Gertz, 2023). David Lyon warns about the dangers of this:

«Data-driven surveillance, which is proliferating today, progressively removes human initiative, discretion, and judgment from the situations it touches. Worse still, it tends to reduce our humanity to mere data. Our personhood, understood in Christianity as the ‘image of God,’ capable of responsible action, is reduced to a concatenation of data points, a profile assembled from data residues, an emaciated dividual rather than a fully formed social person [...]. This compromises the very idea of human flourishing.» (Lyon, 2020)

Loidolt, for her part, enumerates «the figures of alienation and deformation in Arendt’s writings that diminish the person, de-individualize them, and, in the worst cases, dehumanize them.» She proposes a possible system of classification that includes:

«[...] the natural processes of labor and life (including pain); competition understood in terms of mere achievement (without any personal dimension); the consumerist culture of mass society (conformism and alienation either as the owner of a commodity or as a commodity itself); disintegration in the condition of the refugee and the stateless person, extending to the horrors of totalitarian bureaucracy; and finally, the camps that produce bare life.» (Loidolt, 2020, p. 182)

In summary, for Hannah Arendt the person in the fullest sense transcends biological necessity and consumption, the realm of the *animal laborans*, as well as what is purely instrumental, the realm of the *homo faber*. Certainly, the condition of the refugee and totalitarianism eradicate every vestige of personhood, whether by excluding individuals from the public space in which one can appear, in the case of the former, or by extinguishing personhood altogether, in the case of the latter. Yet we might also include the «datafied»

individual among these figures of alienation, insofar as such individuals are subjected to constant surveillance and algorithmic processing.

Scruton further reinforces the idea that big data produces depersonalization because, by subsuming persons into measurable and quantifiable types, it eliminates the capacity to account for our actions, thereby seriously threatening our personhood. Datafication ignores reasons, treats the person as a means for controlling and predicting reality, and furthermore erodes relationality:

«When I am interested in someone as a person, their own understanding of their reasons for acting and their declarations of purpose are of the utmost importance to me. In seeking to change their conduct, I first seek to change these understandings, and I accept that they may have valid reasons on their side. However, if I am not interested in them as a person, if for me they are merely a human object that, for better or worse, crosses my path, then I will give no special consideration to their reasons and purposes. If I seek to change their behavior, then (if I am rational) I will choose the most efficient means. For example, if a drug is more effective than the tedious process of persuasion, I will use the drug. Everything depends upon the available basis for prediction. To put it in Kant's famous language: I now treat them as a means, and not as an end. For their ends, their reasons, are no longer sovereign in determining how I act toward them. I am alienated from them as a rational agent, and I do not particularly care whether they are alienated from me.» (Scruton, 1986, p. 53)

In short, datafication poses profound challenges to the constitutive elements of personhood identified by Hannah Arendt, José Ortega y Gasset, Julián Marías, and Roger Scruton. It suppresses freedom by eliminating contexts for action and undermining the capacity to think and judge through the imposition of a totalizing epistemology of quantification. It erases the transcendent dimension of the person by reducing human beings to something purely biological or behaviorist. It ignores the constitutive openness of the person toward the future, insofar as personal projection is irrelevant to data, while also disregarding the fundamentally relational nature of the person as an agent capable of giving reasons for their actions in the world.

It is therefore essential to reflect upon what can be done within a Western technological ecology that is moving toward ever greater digital interconnection, through which increasing areas of human life are surveilled and colonized as sources of data. This reality must be acknowledged, and we must learn to conduct our lives within it—to «save our circumstance,» in Ortegui-an terms. Doing so requires nuance and an awareness that freedom, and its

restriction through datafication and algorithms, is not absolute. Freedom is not something one either entirely possesses or entirely lacks; rather, it is multidimensional and scalar. At times, delegating decisions and aspects of our freedom to algorithmic systems can indeed be highly useful (Danaher, 2020).

But this requires a certain degree of individual responsibility and the active exercise of our personal nature (Castleton, 2024). Vallor (2011) draws upon José Ortega y Gasset to argue that, within a mass technological culture in which we possess countless means but no longer know what to desire, it becomes essential to cultivate virtues that allow us to authentically identify and choose which ends to pursue. Datafication and algorithms become a threat if we do not possess the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) necessary to navigate them, making this one of the great sociopolitical questions of our time. Bruno Latour (2012) argued that it is necessary to «love technology as we love our children,» (*Ibid.*) meaning that the products of human technique are not autonomous, beyond control, or necessarily oppressive; rather, they require us to take responsibility for their impact upon us, since they are part of ourselves. In this sense, authors such as Dorresteijn (2017), Aagaard (2021), Pangrazio & Selwyn (2023) propose that we must exercise a form of «care for our hybrid self,» actively shaping the relationship we establish with datafication, since the constitution of our subjectivity is inconceivable independently of technology in general and, today, independently of big data and algorithms in particular. This entails developing a literacy regarding these technologies that enables us to become conscious of how they affect us as persons (Sander, 2020a, 2020b). Pangrazio & Selwyn (2023, p. 85) propose that «a new literacies approach would begin by attempting to open the black box of datafication, that is, by identifying and understanding when and how we generate digital data through our everyday interactions with digital devices and systems.» Caring for our hybrid self may involve attempting to develop the capacity to be seen as little as possible, thereby avoiding being placed into categories designed for prediction, difficult though this may be. The digital divide of our time increasingly lies in the distinction between those who are both able and willing to do this and those who are not (Gran, Booth & Bucher, 2021). It is highly significant that, while technology leaders promote the use of the social media platforms and applications they design, they often shield their own children from them (Rausch, Haidt & Torres, 2024).

This call for personal responsibility does not preclude the possibility of collective approaches to the problem, such as collective data governance. Some argue that traditional governance frameworks emphasizing individual consent fail to capture the complexities surrounding data ownership, control, and

ethical use. For this reason, one possible path forward is the development of collective governance by the groups directly affected by the collection and use of their data (Rone & Biancalana, 2025). A concrete example of this is the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC), which is responsible for the stewardship and administration of data relating to the Indigenous peoples of Canada. This center safeguards community interests, intergenerational sustainability, self-determination, data sovereignty, and oversight of algorithmic data processing. (Wong, Duncan & Lake, 2025) These are models that are beginning to chart a path forward so that, ultimately, we may live lives that are more genuinely our own.

5. Conclusion

With digital technologies, surveillance has become the basic organizational form of virtually every institution of our time and something we inevitably experience in our everyday lives. In daily life, algorithms powered by big data embody a growing tendency toward atomization, quantification, and classification, through which complex human actions are reduced to data and a series of calculable steps (Willson, 2017, p. 149). This raises profound questions about how to conceive of the person within hyperconnected societies. Classical thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and José Ortega y Gasset, along with more contemporary authors such as Julián Marías and Roger Scruton, provide us with key concepts for evaluating how datafication impacts personal life. There exists an underlying assumption that the more variables involved in human life can be controlled, the more precisely personal being itself can be understood (Vargas, 2012, p. 70). But this vision is mistaken because it reduces the person to circumstance, ignoring that circumstance must be «saved,» as José Ortega y Gasset would argue. The reality, as Julián Marías writes, is that «[m]y life is not a thing but a doing, a projective, narrative, dramatic reality that does not properly 'exist' but rather unfolds.» Datafication transforms us into isolated, hyper-individualized, decontextualized, categorized, and predicted subatomic entities living within a continuous present. Although we must recognize that our personal condition is indeed hybrid, it is equally necessary to emphasize our capacity for reflection and decision-making, both individually and politically, so that we may become conscious of the ways in which we are shaped by big data and algorithms, and do as much as possible to prevent our personhood from being colonized by them.

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