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**Title**: Algorithmic management: a threat to the freedom of workers as choosing subjects

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**Extended summary**:

There is no shortage of vocalised concern about the widespread invasion of algorithms into the many facets of our lives. Algorithms have indeed become a critical part of our social infrastructure.[[1]](#footnote-1) They are used to administer welfare and social services, determine prison sentences, structure our social media engagements, detect banking fraud, direct policy deployments, among numerous other functions.[[2]](#footnote-2) It seems that nearly every new application of algorithms has been met with scepticism and genuine apprehension by researchers, policymakers, NGOs, and civil society itself – despite the revelatory claims about their potential by technological optimists.[[3]](#footnote-3) The use of algorithms to manage workplaces, the focus of this paper, is no exception. As algorithms continue to spread quickly across workplaces, global discontent with algorithmic management (henceforth, AM) is growing rapidly.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Much of the conversation about AM has centred on the injustices it perpetuates – and rightly so. In the liberal society, technological advancement precedes contemplation about whether it should be adopted – therefore, critical reflection is always *ex-post*.[[5]](#footnote-5) New technologies simply emerge on the scene, and it is only after their immersion do we investigate their bio-psycho-socio-economic implications. So far, the discussion around AM has largely focused on how this technique perpetuates the social harms of bias, discrimination, non-transparency, and non-accountability.[[6]](#footnote-6) What remains under-theorised, in my view, is the impact of AM on worker freedom(s). In other words, does the substitution of human management with algorithmic management portend a meaningful difference for freedom in the workplace, and if so, in a negative or positive sense?

My approach begins with first examining how workplace discipline is altered by the incorporation of algorithmic management systems in Section II. Specifically, what does transferring the power of managerial prerogative from a human to an algorithm mean for workers. I argue that this transfer, among other things, entails a shift in discipline from a ‘social-causal mode’ to an ‘asocial-random mode’. In the traditional human managed workplace, exercises of prerogative power generally occur within a social relationship (between worker and human manger) and through a causal sequence of events (*choice* A led to *sanction* B). This arrangement, however, no longer holds in the workplace governed by an algorithm. Instead, exercises of prerogative power frequently unfold in an asocial relationship (between workers and software) and are often experienced as random outcomes (*sanction* B resulted from *unknown cause* A).

A morally concerning consequence of the transformation is that it undermines workers’ freedom. This claim obviously requires further explanation of is meant by ‘freedom’, as there are numerous conceptions of freedom that could be used in making such an appraisal. My analysis draws from the feminist tradition, which locates individual freedom in the capacity to be a fully choosing subject.[[7]](#footnote-7) Section III uses the choosing subject theory of freedom to analyse how the asocial-random mode of discipline inherent to AM undermines free choice in the workplace. First, I argue that this conception of freedom logically presupposes a social-causal environment where one’s choices can be reasonably foreseen by the chooser – an assumption I call the ‘foresight condition’. Second, I contend that AM violates the foresight condition. The asocial-random mode of discipline that results from AM instantiates a choice architecture that is less navigable due to its sequential randomness. The ‘managerial randomness’ associated with AM deprives workers of the necessary capacity to reasonably foresee the consequences of their choices, endangering workers’ capacity make decisions in service of their personality or perspectival identity.

1. Burrell, Jenna, and Marion Fourcade. "The society of algorithms." Annual Review of Sociology 47 (2021): 213-237. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wenzelburger, Georg, Pascal D. König, Julia Felfeli, and Anja Achtziger. "Algorithms in the Public Sector. Why context matters." Public Administration (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bourne, Ryan. "Consumers Will Learn to Love the Rise of Dynamic Pricing," Cato Institute, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/consumers-will-learn-love-rise-dynamic-pricing>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Grohmann, Rafael, Gabriel Pereira, Abel Guerra, Ludmila Costhek Abilio, Bruno Moreschi, and Amanda Jurno. "Platform scams: Brazilian workers’ experiences of dishonest and uncertain algorithmic management." New Media & Society 24, no. 7 (2022): 1611-1631. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Deneen, Patrick J. Why liberalism failed. Yale University Press, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tsamados, Andreas, Nikita Aggarwal, Josh Cowls, Jessica Morley, Huw Roberts, Mariarosaria Taddeo, and Luciano Floridi. "The ethics of algorithms: key problems and solutions." Ethics, Discipline, and Policies in Artificial Intelligence (2021): 97-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This analysis largely draws on the development of this philosophical approach by Shay Welch and Nancy Hirschman: Welch, Shay. *A theory of freedom: Feminism and the social contract*. Springer, 2012.; Hirschmann, Nancy J. *The subject of liberty: Toward a feminist theory of freedom*. Princeton University Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)