

## **From Citizens to Subjects: A Socratic Inquiry into Algorithms, Atomization, and the Erosion of Agency**

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Open any major newspaper or news site in recent years and the pattern is unmistakable. Articles proliferate about artificial intelligence seeping into medicine, education, hiring, journalism, law, entertainment, personal finance, and the quiet routines of daily life. Smart speakers, recommendation engines, predictive text, automated hiring screens, AI tutors, diagnostic tools, and ambient agents are no longer experimental curiosities. They form a dense atmosphere in which ordinary decisions are increasingly mediated, ranked, predicted, or completed by systems most of us neither fully understand nor meaningfully control. The coverage is constant, almost breathless: AI is here, it is everywhere, and its reach expands faster than our capacity to deliberate about it.

This technological saturation coincides with another diagnosis of our social condition. In a *New York Times* piece published on August 10, 2026, Jesse McKinley described a phenomenon more extreme than polarization: atomization. “Some social scientists and cultural observers are increasingly considering a more extreme concept: atomization, or the scattering of people — not into two opposing factions but into countless smaller tribes. Like groups of atoms, those subsets can form — and dissolve — at quicksilver pace, leaving people in ever-tinier bubbles, devoid of connection with one another and the larger social fabric. Even subgroups have subgroups, dividing amoeba-like into combative factions, creating a nation of us vs. them and them and them.” The image is of a society dissolving into ever-smaller, more fleeting, less mutually intelligible units. What happens when these two forces—ubiquitous AI and deepening atomization—meet?

For centuries, the hard-won trajectory of Western political thought moved in the opposite direction. From subjects of monarchs, feudal lords, and absolute rulers, people struggled, through revolutions, declarations, and institutional reforms, toward the status of citizens. Enlightenment thinkers insisted that individuals possessed reason, rights, and the capacity for self-government. Democracies were built on the premise that free citizens could deliberate together, hold power accountable, and shape the laws under which they lived. Citizenship implied agency: the ability to speak, to choose, to contest, and to belong to a shared public sphere larger than any private interest or temporary tribe. From a Deweyan perspective, democracy is not merely a set of institutions but a mode of associated living in which citizens continually reconstruct shared experience through communication and cooperative inquiry; without that ongoing participation, citizenship itself withers.

What, then, does it mean if the tools that now structure so much of experience quietly erode the conditions of that citizenship? Consider the Socratic questions that press upon us.

If algorithms curate the information most people see, rank the candidates they encounter in hiring or dating, and shape the news that forms their understanding of the world, in what sense do citizens still form their own judgments? When personal AI agents increasingly manage

schedules, correspondence, purchases, and even social interactions, at what point does convenience become dependence, and dependence become a form of subjection?

Atomization already fragments the public into transient micro-tribes. Does AI accelerate that process by supplying each bubble with its own tailored reality, its own predictive models of belonging and threat? Or might shared AI systems eventually impose a new kind of uniformity that flattens difference while still leaving people isolated from one another? Either outcome raises the same deeper question: can a democratic public exist when the very experience of reality is privately optimized?

Citizenship has always required a measure of friction—the necessity of arguing with neighbors, of encountering unfiltered disagreement, of bearing responsibility for collective choices. What becomes of that friction when systems trained on vast data smooth every edge, anticipate every preference, and reduce the need for face-to-face negotiation? If people no longer need to persuade one another because an intermediary system already knows what each wants and can deliver it separately, do we remain a people capable of self-rule, or do we become clients of an invisible architecture?

The historical movement from subject to citizen was never merely legal. It was also psychological and cultural: the cultivation of habits of attention, critical scrutiny, and mutual recognition. AI systems excel at prediction and optimization. They are less equipped, by design, to foster the slower virtues of deliberation and solidarity. As these systems grow more ambient—present in glasses, vehicles, homes, workplaces, and public administration—who decides the values they encode? Who audits the quiet hierarchies they enforce? And if most citizens lack the technical literacy or institutional power to contest those decisions, have we not, in effect, returned to a condition of subjection, only this time the sovereign is distributed, opaque, and endlessly adaptive?

None of these questions admit easy answers. That is their point. The flood of coverage about AI's expansion rarely pauses long enough to ask whether the tools that promise greater individual power might, over decades, hollow out the collective capacity that made citizenship meaningful in the first place. Atomization already weakens the social fabric that democracy requires. When that fabric is further mediated by systems that know us better than we know one another, the risk is not simply technological disruption. It is a gradual, almost imperceptible reversal of the long arc from subject to citizen—back toward a quieter, more personalized form of subjection.

The question that remains is whether we will notice the change while we still possess the agency to debate it.

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