

The Stagnant Utopia in The Box: Rethinking Freedom Through Dystopian Fiction and Kant's Thing-in-Itself

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Abstract. This paper argues that dystopian fiction carries profound philosophical imprints, primarily facilitating a critical re-examination of the relationship between technology and freedom. It contends that the ultimate horror depicted in the classic dystopian trilogy—*We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984*—is not merely their oppressive institutions but a deeper "stagnation of history." This stagnation occurs when the pursuit of certainty and order extinguishes the openness and potentiality of the historical process itself, leading civilization into a static, albeit technically advanced, equilibrium. To decipher this stagnation, the paper employs Kant's critical distinction between the "thing-in-itself" and "phenomena," illustrating how the inherent limits of human reason confine us to a "transparent glass box" of perception, implying a fundamental intellectual finitude. The analysis further demonstrates that modern technology, particularly algorithmic recommendation systems creating "information cocoons," does not attempt to overcome this Kantian limit but instead operationalizes it. Following Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* (Enframing), technology constructs a comfortable, self-reinforcing "simulated thing-in-itself" that caters to our existing preferences. This system satiates curiosity with predictable content, thereby systematically eroding the desire to explore the true, unknown world outside the "box." Consequently, the philosophical dilemma of cognitive limitation transforms into a technological reality of willing intellectual stasis. The paper concludes that true freedom and transcendence lie not in accepting this designed finitude but in reviving a critical, pioneering spirit that continuously challenges the boundaries of the given, a crucial revelation from dystopian warnings against a stagnant utopia.

Keywords: Dystopian Fiction, Thing-in-itself, Technology Philosophy, Information Cocoons

1. Introduction

This article does not intend to delve deeply into utopian and dystopian political theories, such as related applied ethics discussions or sociological analyses, including those concerning resource allocation and social justice [1]. Nor is it to use dystopian novels as a certain argumentative technique to enhance the persuasiveness of philosophical concepts (such as physicalism), as is often done by contemporary metaphysicians. Instead, it conducts philosophical reflection on a certain common ultimate state depicted in the dystopian trilogy, and expands on this by connecting with the

history of philosophy and contemporary social development, ultimately forming profound social criticism and reflection.

Obviously, regardless of how the concept of freedom has evolved and changed throughout the history of Western philosophy, the scenarios envisioned in dystopian novels have always been a devastating blow to it. Therefore, this article is not intended to repeat this cliché. The crucial issue is not the slogan of freedom, but rather how its boundaries should be reconsidered in a new way, and why dystopian novels offer such significant philosophical insights into this matter.

Research Question: From a technological perspective, using dystopian literature as a case study, how should the freedom of human reason be rethought?

2. Literature review

2.1. Dystopian literature: development and critiques

A brief introduction of the history of dystopia can be seen in Baccolini and Moylan's work [2], which can be divided into 3 periods:

Classic Dystopia (mid-20th century): Representative works such as *We* [3], *Brave New World* [4], and *1984* [5]. They are characterized by depicting a thoroughly oppressive and despair-inducing ultimate nightmare society, where the protagonist's resistance usually ends in failure, serving as a warning. Detailed content of these three classic dystopian works will be further discussed in Findings and discussion.

Critical Utopia (1960s-70s): Influenced by currents of thought such as the New Left and feminism, utopian writing experienced a revival. However, it was no longer the 'traditional utopia' depicting a perfect blueprint, but rather the 'critical utopia,' which emphasizes the process of social change, internal differences, and imperfections.

Critical Dystopia (1980s to present): Faced with the rise of neoliberalism and the waning of utopian ideals, writers revived the dystopian genre but endowed it with new characteristics, forming the 'critical dystopia'.

Further research by Moylan [6] indicates that a resigned, dystopian mood co-opts and encloses a more idealistic ("eutopian") sensibility. This process undermines radical utopian visions by channeling the impulse for change into practices of disciplined "improvement" that operate within the confines of the existing order's "realism". The essay argues that capitalism's retrieval mechanism subsumes and consumes the potential of utopianism, which contributes to a dystopian stagnation. Anti-anti-utopian worth to be mentioned, as it objects the negative and pessimistic attitude towards utopian ideal itself, and aims at reaffirming the value of utopian thought.

The above literature shows the foundation and critical development of dystopian literature. It can be seen that the dystopian literature in recent times has retained the Utopian enclave, that is, it has retained hope in dystopia, and adopted a vague and open ending, giving the protagonist room to resist, suggesting that the dystopian order may be overcome. This paper will further point out that this kind of resistance will produce different results because of the difference between the inside and outside of the order.

2.2. Kantian thing-in-itself

The essay will briefly introduce main sections in the Critique of Pure Reason [7] where the "thing-in-itself" is discussed

2.2.1. Transcendental aesthetic

Key subsections: Space and Time

In this section [7] (P172-185), Kant introduces the crucial distinction between phenomena and things in themselves. Space and time are presented as a priori forms of sensibility, applying only to appearances. The “thing-in-itself” is thus defined as an object existing independently of our sensible intuition—something that cannot be given in experience but must be thought as the ground of appearances. Words like “at”, “or”, “with”, etc. should not be capitalized unless they are the first word of the title. Follow the rule of Capitalization in title. Do not capitalize short prepositions (less than 5 letters), articles, and short coordinating conjunctions.

2.2.2. Transcendental analytic → analytic of principles

Key subsection: The Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection

Here [7] (P267-281) Kant elaborates on the logical distinction between phenomena and things in themselves. The “thing-in-itself” is not an object of possible experience but a boundary concept (Grenzbegriff)—a necessary idea of reason that marks the limits of human cognition. It serves to prevent the confusion of empirical appearances with what might exist independently of them.

Here, Kant criticizes the Leibniz-Wolff school's "intellectualism"(which will be introduced later) and thinks that they mistakenly regard the logical difference between concepts as the ontological difference between objects, thus confusing the boundary between "appearance" and "thing in itself".

He pointed out: "Without sensibility as a given source, our intellectual reflection is only an empty comparison, which will not lead to the understanding of the object."

Therefore, "thing itself" is defined here as the limit of cognitive ability, rather than an experience or metaphysical object.

This paper will combine the philosophy of technology and the example of information cocoon room to further explain how people's cognitive ability shrinks in dystopian technology, and then connect Kant's old proposition of thing itself with the transparent cage constructed by modern society and technology.

3. Research method

This study primarily adopts the literature analysis method as its core research approach.

3.1. Definition and application

This method involves the systematic review and analysis of academic literature related to dystopian literature, the philosophy of technology, and theories of freedom (particularly Kantian philosophy). The research will be conducted by two steps. On the one hand, classic philosophy masterpieces such as Critique of Pure Reason and Technics and Time will be chosen directly as they construct sound philosophy basis of this essay. On the other hand, the research will be conducted by searching authoritative databases such as Google Scholar and Web of Science (WoS), using combinations of keywords (e.g., "Dystopian Fiction & Technology", "Kant's Thing-in-Itself & Freedom", "Information Cocoons & Algorithmic Control") to identify and filter representative classic works and cutting-edge research findings.

3.2. Operational process

Through in-depth critical reading, comparison, and synthesis of these texts, this study aims to identify the profound connections between dystopian narratives and philosophical speculation (especially the Kantian distinction between the thing-in-itself and phenomena), and to explore how modern technology (such as algorithmic recommendations) exacerbates or makes this philosophical dilemma more explicit.

3.3. Anticipated outcome

It is expected that this analysis will reveal the isomorphic relationship between the theme of "stagnation" in dystopian fiction and the limitations of human cognition revealed by Kantian epistemology, and further demonstrate that the "information cocoon" phenomenon in contemporary society is a concrete manifestation of this dilemma at the technological level.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. The ultimate horror of dystopia: the stagnation of history

Dystopian fiction, a crucial branch of twentieth-century literature, exerts its power far beyond serving as a mere warning against totalitarian politics. George Orwell's 1984, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* collectively depict seemingly different yet fundamentally similar visions of the future: societies that have reached an 'end state'—a kind of ultimate form where history itself has terminated. The horror evoked by these works stems not merely from the depicted surveillance, violence, or psychological manipulation, but from a more profound philosophical problem: when humanity's pursuit of certainty, order, and peace ultimately stifles the openness, uncertainty, and potentiality inherent in the historical process itself, humankind is faced with a civilization that is stagnant, though technically alive. This 'stagnation' itself is more despairing than any specific technology of oppression.

In *We*, the 'One State' eliminates all chance and free will through mathematical logic and the 'Table of Hours'; life is reduced to a perfect, unalterable formula. In 1984, the society of Oceania is not in a state of dynamic development but is maintained in a horrific, perpetual static equilibrium through endless war and the constant alteration of history. The goal of IngSoc is not to win the war but to maintain the state of war itself, ensuring the social structure remains forever unchanged. However, the essence of 'stagnation' is most vividly embodied in Huxley's *Brave New World*. There, through genetic engineering, conditioning, and psychological suggestion, society eliminates conflict, suffering, and the fluctuations of desire at their very root. People are content in their pre-assigned roles, satisfied with pre-designed pleasures, achieving a kind of biological eternal stability. As the World Controller Mustapha Mond declares: "We have achieved stability."

This 'stability' is synonymous with 'stagnation'. Huxley insightfully creates the 'Savagery Reservation' as a space of the 'Other,' juxtaposing this stagnation with an alternative mode of existence to highlight its essence. Life in the Reservation is primitive, arduous, and fraught with emotional struggle, yet it represents a real, fluid, and uncontrolled human history. When the 'savage' John enters the New World, the Shakespearean passion, pain, and quest for ultimate meaning he embodies are utterly incompatible with the New World's flattened 'happiness' obsessed with immediate gratification. This irreconcilable conflict is not merely between civilization and savagery; it is a conflict between a stagnant, enclosed mode of existence and an open-ended, transcendent

spirit of freedom. The New World's inhabitants label John a 'barbarian,' which confirms that their world has utterly lost the capacity to understand or even perceive the possibility of an alternative existence. Their cognitive horizons have been permanently locked within the technological 'glass box'.

Therefore, the true nightmare foreshadowed by the dystopian trilogy is not the appalling specific technologies, but the ultimate 'stagnation' of human thought and the historical process that these technologies facilitate. It is the infinite loop and silence a civilization falls into after reaching its self-defined 'perfect' endpoint. This fear of stagnation provides a profound philosophical starting point for re-examining the relationship between technology and freedom.

4.2. The chasm between thing-in-itself and phenomenon: the cognitive limit and intellectual stagnation in Kantian philosophy

The 'stagnant' world depicted in dystopian fiction is not merely a literary fantasy but corresponds to a fundamental dilemma concerning human cognition and existence in philosophy. This dilemma finds its most profound exposition in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, centered on the famous distinction between the "Ding an sich" (thing-in-itself) and "Erscheinung" (phenomenon). Kant's "Copernican Revolution" shifted the focus of cognition from the object to the subject, proposing that we do not passively reflect the world but actively constitute and apprehend it through a priori categories (such as time, space, and causality). Consequently, everything we experience is not the "thing-in-itself"—the world as it exists independent of our forms of sensibility and understanding—but merely the "phenomenon," the world as it appears to us through the structures of our cognition.

This establishes a permanent and insurmountable boundary for human thought. The thing-in-itself is the limit of thought, an impenetrable 'exterior' for cognition. We are perpetually confined within the 'phenomenal world,' akin to living inside a transparent glass box. We can observe, analyze, and predict all phenomena within the box, but the structure of the box itself (our a priori cognitive forms) dictates everything we can see, while the true world outside the box (the thing-in-itself) remains forever beyond our cognitive reach. This structural limitation is not a temporary ignorance but an inherent property of human reason itself, implying a fundamental intellectual stagnation—at its very core, our thought comes to a halt when confronted with the truly 'real'.

Kant's work thus reveals a paradox: the greatness of human reason lies in its power to prescribe laws to nature, but the price is eternal alienation from ultimate reality. While reason constructs a knowable, orderly world, it also erects a prison for itself. As Henry E. Allison [8] notes, Kant's transcendental idealism aims to delineate the limits of reason to prevent it from falling into the fallacies of dogmatism. However, this self-restraint harbors another risk: if we mistake the boundaries of the phenomenal for the entirety of the world, contenting ourselves with infinitely refined internal deductions within these limits while abandoning any inquiry into the limit itself or what lies beyond it, then philosophy and thought risk falling into an immanent, self-sufficient stagnation. This stagnation is no longer a lack of capacity but an extinction of curiosity, an abandonment of the transcendent dimension.

The dystopian world is a literary manifestation of this philosophical predicament. Its technological governance does not simply deprive people of freedom; rather, by thoroughly controlling the human phenomenal world (from sensory experience to emotional desires), it makes people utterly content within this meticulously constructed 'box,' thereby systematically eliminating any possibility of curiosity or inquiry about the 'box' itself or the world outside. The citizens of Brave New World never question the meaning of existence beyond 'happiness,' just as a philosophy

content with the phenomenal world ceases to question the thing-in-itself. Intellectual stagnation here becomes an ultimate state, meticulously designed and experienced as 'happiness.'

Therefore, Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself provides a crucial philosophical lens for understanding the 'stagnation' of dystopia. It reveals that the deepest confinement stems not from external force but from the internal structural limits of cognition and the active relinquishment of pushing against these limits. As we shall see next, modern technology pushes this age-old philosophical dilemma to its extreme.

4.3. The algorithmic 'Gestell': the atrophy and simulation of the thing-in-itself

Kant's critique revealed the structural limits of human cognition, placing the 'thing-in-itself' in a transcendent realm unknowable yet thinkable. However, modern digital technology does not attempt to breach this boundary; instead, it operates upon and exploits it through what Heidegger termed its essence, the "Gestell" (Enframing) [9]. As a 'Gestell', technology is a 'challenging-forth' way of revealing, which forcibly orders the world (including humanity itself) into a calculable, predictable, and controllable system. In this process, the unknowable, open realm of the 'thing-in-itself' is systematically ignored and marginalized, replaced by a meticulously crafted and highly controllable "simulated thing-in-itself"—a world that appears to be the external reality but is merely an internal reflection of algorithmic models.

Social media, recommendation algorithms, and search engines constitute the core mechanism of this 'simulation.' They are not concerned with the world-in-itself but are dedicated to capturing and processing our behavioral data (phenomena) to construct a unique, filtered phenomenal world for each of us. As Bernard Stiegler [10] argued, technology is inherently prosthetic, constituting and shaping our memory and cognition. Now, algorithms, as powerful prostheses, are constructing our cognitive environment with unprecedented precision. They predict our preferences, feed our desires, and ultimately enclose us within a self-reinforcing loop determined by past behavioral data. The infinitely rich, challenging, and surprising world of the 'thing-in-itself' atrophies, within the technological framework, into a narrow, personalized data stream. Intellectual stagnation is thus transformed from a philosophical possibility into a technological inevitability.

The terror of this 'simulated thing-in-itself' lies in its pseudo-transcendence. It perfectly exploits human curiosity about the world 'outside the box' but offers a safe, fabricated substitute. When we click 'refresh' or 'next,' we feel as if we are exploring the unknown, while in reality, we are merely receiving the next customized package of information on a path predetermined by the algorithm. We harbor the illusion of active exploration while being in a state of deeper passivity. Algorithmic recommendation systems create a state of "cognitive compliance," where users are systematically steered away from critical thinking and unconventional viewpoints. Technology ceases to be a tool helping us peer beyond the 'glass box'; instead, it installs countless mirrors inside the box, allowing us to indulge in infinite self-reflexive images, ultimately forgetting the existence of the real external world.

Therefore, modern technology does not solve the Kantian dilemma but internalizes and operationalizes it in an exceedingly shrewd manner. It acknowledges the inaccessibility of the 'thing-in-itself,' subsequently abandons the attempt to reach it, and instead focuses on constructing a simulated environment so satisfying and immersive that the very motivation to inquire about the world 'outside the box' withers away. This provides the most sophisticated technological blueprint for dystopian 'stagnation': achieving an unprecedented, willing intellectual stasis not by suppressing thought, but by pre-forming all its sources of input.

4.4. Imprisoned in the 'Cocoon': alienation and stagnation in contemporary life

The aforementioned techno-philosophical analysis is not an intellectual abstraction; its most tangible manifestation is the increasingly prominent social phenomenon of “Information Cocoons.” A cocoon is not mere bias or information asymmetry; it is the inevitable social consequence of the algorithmic 'Gestell' constructing a 'simulated thing-in-itself' as described in Part 3. It signifies the evolution of dystopian 'stagnation' from a literary prophecy and philosophical deduction into a tangible, hardening reality we are currently experiencing. Within this predicament, the harm of technology lies not only in blocking cognition but, more profoundly, in its consumption of human time, thereby alienating individuals from their authentic lived experience and genuine possibilities.

The 'information cocoon' is the microscopic, individual-level realization of the 'simulated thing-in-itself.' Algorithms, based on our historical preferences, create a comfortable, familiar, and self-validating cognitive environment for each of us. Within this environment, heterogeneous viewpoints are filtered out, and challenging information is blocked. The world appears vast and boundless, but it is merely an infinite echo of personal preferences. As Cass R. Sunstein [11] warns, such highly personalized information ecosystems exacerbate social fragmentation and hinder the public discourse necessary for citizens to reach consensus on the common good. We are like the citizens of Brave New World, contentedly consuming the 'soma' delivered by algorithms—a pleasurable yet critically enervating information stream—immersed in a meticulously calibrated state of 'happiness' and 'stability.' Our capacity to perceive and our desire to explore the real world 'outside the box' (the thing-in-itself) consequently atrophy, transforming cognitive stagnation into existential stagnation.

Therefore, the contemporary 'information cocoon' is far more than a concept in communication studies; it is the embryo and practical foundation of dystopian 'stagnation.' Through technological means, it transforms Kant's cognitive limit from a philosophical reminder into a social practice, imprisoning humanity within a self-referential loop of signs. It foreshadows that, without reflection, the ultimate endpoint of technological civilization may not be a leap of civilization but a state of mental stillness actively chosen in comfort—a brave new world with no savages left to fight, because we ourselves have relinquished the desire to step outside the 'glass box.'

5. Conclusion

This article chooses dystopian trilogy (Brave New World [4], 1984 [5], We [3]) as materials and argues that the despair of them is that they all describe a stagnant, ultimate, non-evolving future, and stagnation itself is more to be feared than the appalling institutions and technologies they describe in the future. Take Brave New World [4] as an example, The great conflict between the rationalized control of urban society and the barbarian reservation is precisely the conflict between the stable stagnation of life and the adventurous life of freedom. The natives were therefore very surprised, because John's thoughts and actions puzzled them so much that they called him a "barbarian." The irreconcilability of this conflict is the essence of dystopia, the actual horror of man's quest for eternity.

At the same time, this paper will also show the dystopian dilemma faced by philosophy. Firstly, the development of philosophy of technology will be discussed from the perspective of technological control in dystopia, and then the similar solution to the philosophy of primary problems will be discussed, and what kind of freedom and transcendence can lead back to the pioneering philosophy era in the current philosophy.

5.1. Technology and philosophy: syncretic control in dystopian society

Kádár and Tóth [12] argues that the dystopia's conclusions about a world ruled by technology are nearly identical to the findings of contemporary philosophers, who examine different practices and concepts related to human presence in the world. The essence of dystopia and the discovery of philosophers is that man appears in his world in a degenerate and unworthy way of being. Through the comparison of literary and philosophical texts, we can find that the two genres share similar crisis symptoms in the common direction of technical criticism.

From the etymological point of view, technology represents human activities that are distinguished from nature and embodies a kind of skill. In the traditional view of reason, technology is regarded as a tool to satisfy practical activities, which itself is not the real wisdom and the essence of human beings is to seek knowledge. Therefore, traditional philosophy holds that technology cannot establish a primary relationship with human beings, but is only an object relative to human subjects.

Different from the traditional view of essence, Heidegger [13] brings the concept of time into ontology, believing that human beings live in the duration of time, and technology helps human beings to construct their own history. Heidegger called the essence of modern technology "Gestell", and believed that technology threw man into the world, and helped man suppress nature and implement man rule, and the essence of man laid the foundation for the essence of technology.

As Kouppanou [14] introduced, Bernard Stiegler's concept of personalization suggests that people are co-constituted with technology. Technology precedes the individual, for the latter is thrown into a technological world that always contains externally inscribed memories. The stagnant and definite technology is in an orderly way to define human beings, and technology is no longer the object of human manipulation, but a shadow over human beings from birth. All freedom is freedom that is restricted and designed, and this finiteness is actually the dilemma that philosophy also faces. I will continue to present this dilemma and raise the deeper questions contained in dystopian novels.

5.2. Transparent glass box: what's real freedom and transcend

Cristian Wolff [15] have described a kind of vicious cycle, an enclosed exterior. In philosophy, consciousness and language construct the "object-world" structure, which includes everything and exclude everything. It includes everything, because before we think, we must be conscious of one thing, and then being locked in the interior of language and consciousness inescapably. It excludes everything, because it indeed faces the exterior, being the window to the world. Therefore, only when consciousness and language are contained by the world, they will include the world vice versa. We are like in a transparent glass box, everything is outside of us, but we have no way to escape. And this notion was furtherly developed into thing-in-itself in Kantian philosophy, which is introduced above.

Martin Heidegger [9] put forward a representative solution for contemporary philosophers. He finds out that all the metaphysics of representationism leads to the obscuring of being, and his fundamental reciprocal attribution of man and being finally turns the thing itself into the external of a second temporal relationship, yet this external was the external that had nothing to do with us at all, but was self-given in its own way, and that thought could be filled with the sensation of conquering foreign lands. With Heidegger, however, there is no longer such an exterior.

Isn't this exactly the same as the kind of stagnation described in dystopian novels? If philosophy is satisfied with this reciprocal attribute, it regards the external "barbarians" as non-essential, secondary material. Just as the "barbarian" called John a "barbarian," in Heidegger's eyes, this is also

the superficial view of existentialist philosophy of all metaphysics that precedes the discussion of the relationship between existence and man. But is this really the case? Isn't this reverse "barbarian" an allegory?

Philosophy has long suffered from this finiteness. Humankind is locked in this glass box, but instead of trying to break free, we hold the box itself as a treasure. Isn't true freedom and transcendence the beginning of the paradox in dystopian fiction? What makes our protagonists different from the rulers and ruled who follow the established order of dystopia?

Every generation is under the illusion that it is at the apex of history, and those who do not feel this way are often compelled to imagine another apex not far ahead, because the absolute peace and order desired by suffering people can only be produced in frozen history, and the "apex" is in fact a highly glorified "stagnation." Development and progress will inevitably bring new problems, after the development of science, technology and social structure to the corresponding degree, we have the option of not facing the problem, but seeking to alienate and dismember the concept of human itself, so as to create a seemingly perfect world, but human progress is precisely in the process of solving and overcoming new problems to achieve, avoiding problems is to choose stagnation.

True freedom, therefore, is to look at everything external, which does not mean a return to metaphysical dogmatism, but to promote a critical pioneering spirit, which is missing from the prison of modern philosophy's content finiteness. There is no society that really stands at the top, and there is no philosophy that really stands at the top, and this is the most profound revelation of dystopian fiction.

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