



Dehumanization, Justice, and Humanity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

This essay explores how artificial intelligence (AI) challenges moral conceptions of justice by shifting decisions from contexts of human recognition to computational calculation. Drawing on John Rawls's account of fairness and contrasting it with Paul Krugman's political-economic analysis of inequality and institutional design, we show how algorithmic systems can unwittingly advance a form of dehumanization—justice without empathy. We argue for an “algorithmic humanism” that re-centers moral agency, reciprocity, and dignity through transparency and accountability in socio-technical institutions. The paper clarifies the relation between individuality and mutuality in the algorithmic economy and outlines practical normative guardrails to keep justice grounded in human recognition.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; dehumanization; justice; Rawls; Krugman; algorithmic humanism.

When Machines Begin to Judge

More and more, decisions once shaped by human hesitation, empathy, and imperfection are now executed by algorithms. A credit score, a medical prioritization, even a parole recommendation can be produced without the tremor of conscience that once defined our humanity. At first sight, this seems like progress. Machines do not lie, do not tire, do not envy. They promise fairness in a world saturated with bias. Yet the promise is also the danger: a new dehumanization through indifference. John Rawls imagined a just society as one designed behind a “veil of ignorance,” where we choose principles without knowing who we will be (9). By contrast, many AI systems operate behind a veil of data: they may know a vast array of variables about us, yet remain blind to what makes persons moral agents.

The Shadow of Rawls in the Algorithm

Rawls's vision of justice rests on moral imagination—the capacity to put oneself in another's place. Algorithmic impartiality can appear similar, because names and faces are abstracted away. But mechanical impartiality lacks the empathy and acknowledgment of fallibility that make fairness human. A human judge, even when mistaken, remains

aware of error; a model does not. That difference marks a boundary between justice as calculation and justice as humanity (3; 8).

Between Individuality and Mutuality

We often describe AI as “collective intelligence,” yet the more collective it becomes, the less individual it can feel. Rawls's liberal framework begins with the individual; today's algorithmic infrastructures frequently reverse that order, turning individuals into profiles and probabilities. Pure individuality is an illusion, but so is algorithmic mutuality: connection without relation, visibility without encounter. Justice must protect the irreducibility of the person—the tension between being someone and being with others (10, 12; 4).

Paul Krugman versus Rawls

Paul Krugman's reflections on inequality and distributive justice—especially in *The Conscience of a Liberal* (6) and *Arguing with Zombies* (7)—offer an empirical counterpoint to Rawls's normative design. Where Rawls (9) constructs principles of justice from the original position, Krugman situates injustice in the political economy of deregulation, rent-seeking, and institutional capture. Rawls envisions justice secured by rational consensus under fair conditions; Krugman emphasizes

historically contingent policy choices—progressive taxation, social insurance, and labor rights—that can restore fair equality of opportunity. The dialogue between Rawls and Krugman marks the intersection of moral philosophy and political economy: Rawls clarifies what a just order requires; Krugman shows how real societies drift—and how to steer them back.

Justice Beyond Calculation

Can an algorithm be just? Justice is not an equation but a relation among beings who can recognize and answer to one another. AI lacks moral agency; it can simulate fairness but not care about it (2). Properly designed, AI can support human deliberation rather than replace it. The danger is moral outsourcing—confusing intelligence with wisdom (1). Wisdom begins where calculation ends.

Re-Humanizing the Digital Polis

If, as Rawls argued, justice is the first virtue of social institutions, then today's digital infrastructures must count among the basic structure of society. An algorithmic humanism would require at least four guardrails: transparency about data and models; accountability for harms; reciprocity that treats affected persons as co-participants; and respect for dignity in design and deployment (5). These guardrails are moral, not merely technical, ensuring that fairness remains grounded in human recognition.

Conclusion

Dehumanization now often arrives as efficiency, whispering that numbers know better than souls. Our task is not to make machines more human so much as to keep humans from becoming mechanical—to restore hesitation, empathy, and imperfection as civic virtues. Justice may begin behind a veil, but it must emerge—trembling, uncertain, alive—on the far side of the data.

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