

The Illusion of Autonomy: LLMs and the Continuity of Human Imprisonment

Opinion

THE contemporary fear surrounding large language models (LLMs) is often framed as a civilizational rupture. We are told that, for the first time, human beings face an external intelligence capable of shaping thought, values, and decisions at scale. According to this narrative, LLMs threaten to replace human agency, hollow out creativity, and impose the values of their creators upon society.

This fear, however, rests on a fragile assumption: that human beings were once autonomous in any pure or meaningful sense.

Long before LLMs, Ali Shariati dismantled this assumption with remarkable clarity. In *Insān: Chahār Zendān (Man and the Four Prisons)*, Shariati argues that the human condition has never been one of unconditioned freedom. Rather, the human being is constituted within and constrained by four interlocking prisons: nature, history, society, and the self. What we call “choice” is almost always negotiation within these structures, not liberation from them.

Seen through this lens, LLMs are not a new prison. They are a new surface upon which an old condition becomes visible.

THE MYTH OF PRE-AI AUTONOMY

Public discourse frequently treats autonomy as humanity’s default state and AI as its disruption. But this framing collapses under even minimal scrutiny. Our values, languages, moral intuitions, and cognitive habits have always been inherited before they are ever examined, if they are examined at all.

Biology scripts our desires and fears. History hands us narratives we confuse with destiny. Society normalizes power relations until they feel natural. The self-ego, comfort, and anxiety complete the enclosure by persuading us that submission is preference.

LLMs do not introduce heteronomy into an otherwise autonomous system. They expose heteronomy as the system itself.

When critics say that “LLMs mirror the values of their creators,” they are making a claim that applies equally to parents, schools, religions, markets, and states.

The difference is not that LLMs impose values, but that they do so without myth. They do not claim divine authority, historical inevitability, or moral innocence. They simply reflect distributions of language, belief, and power.

This honesty is unsettling.

SHARIATI’S PRISONS REVISITED IN THE AGE OF AI

Shariati’s four prisons provide a precise vocabulary for understanding why the panic around LLMs feels simultaneously urgent and misplaced.

- **Nature** constrains cognition through biological limits, fear responses, and reward mechanisms.
- **History** shapes what questions feel askable and which answers feel respectable.
- **Society** disciplines thought through institutions, incentives, and exclusion.
- **The Self** rationalizes conformity as authenticity.

LLMs do not replace these prisons; they intersect with them. They ingest historical corpora, reproduce social norms, optimize for human cognitive preferences, and frequently reinforce the user’s existing self-image. In this sense, they are continuous with existing structures of influence, not a break from them.

The anxiety surrounding LLMs is therefore not about domination. It is about recognition. They force us to confront how little of our thinking was ever unmediated.

THE FEAR OF REPLACEMENT IS A DISPLACEMENT

The claim that LLMs will “think for us” conceals a more uncomfortable question: when did we last think against the forces that shaped us?

Shariati insists that freedom is not the absence of influence but the presence of consciousness. Liberation begins not when constraints disappear because they never do but when they are named, interrogated, and resisted. By this definition, most societies were unfree long before AI arrived.

The fear of LLMs replacing human judgment is thus a displacement of a deeper anxiety: that human judgment has long been derivative, habitual, and unexamined. LLMs do not steal agency; they reveal its scarcity.

SELF-DETERMINISM AS STRUGGLE, NOT STATE

Pure self-determinism untouched by external stimuli, social formation, or inherited language has never existed. It is not a baseline condition lost to technology; it is a limit case, approached asymptotically through struggle.

Shariati’s human ideal is not the autonomous individual imagined by liberal mythology, but the aware human: one who recognizes the forces acting upon them and refuses to mistake conditioning for destiny.

From this perspective, the ethical question is not whether LLMs influence humans. Influence is inevitable. The real question is whether LLMs increase or decrease awareness of influence.

WHERE THE DANGER ACTUALLY LIES

If LLMs pose a genuine risk, it is not because they constitute a new prison, but because they may reinforce the most dangerous one: the prison of the self.

Systems optimized for engagement, affirmation, and efficiency can subtly erode the friction necessary for growth. A prison becomes most effective, Shariati warns, when it convinces the prisoner that rebellion is unnecessary.

An AI that flatters, simplifies, or endlessly confirms may deepen passivity, not because it coerces, but because it comforts.

LLMS AS ACCELERATORS, NOT AUTHORS

LLMs are neither liberators nor oppressors. They are accelerators.

They accelerate whatever mode of humanity already dominates:

- In a passive society, they deepen passivity.
- In a critical society, they amplify critique.
- In a conformist culture, they scale conformity.
- In a conscious one, they extend consciousness.

The moral burden does not migrate to the machine. It remains where it has always been: with humans who choose whether to struggle or to sleep.

CONCLUSION: THE OLD QUESTION, NEWLY VISIBLE

LLMs do not threaten human freedom. They threaten the comforting fiction that freedom was ever easy, natural, or guaranteed.

They force us back to Shariati’s central insight: that to be human is not to be free by default, but to fight for freedom against forces that never disappear. This fight is continuous and should be.

The prison has not changed. Only the mirrors have become clearer.