

Rethinking Ethical Identity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract: Ethical identity, as one of the core terms of Ethical Literary Criticism, is different from the personality identity in the traditional Western metaphysical philosophy, nor from the identity in the Western cultural studies. The age of AI is reshaping our understanding of ethical identity across various domains, including literature. The rise of AI in literary creation raises questions about the ethical identity of both authors and readers. These questions challenge the boundaries of authorship and creativity, prompting a reevaluation of what it means to be an author in the digital age. Similarly, with the popularization of AI-generated contents, readers may need to develop new skills to critically engage with texts, discerning between human and machine-generated narratives. This shift requires readers to adopt a more active role in interpreting and understanding literature, potentially reshaping their ethical identity as participants in the literary process. The writer would have to become a craftsman or a mixer, mediator or gatekeeper of the resulting artificial work. The traditional concept “reader” is shifted to co-producer or a “prosumer.” As AI technologies continue to evolve, they challenge traditional notions of identity, agency, and creativity, prompting us to rethink our ethical frameworks and responsibilities.

Keywords: ethical identity; Artificial Intelligence; ethical literary criticism

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标题: 人工智能时代伦理身份再思考

内容摘要: 伦理身份是文学伦理学批评的核心概念之一。它既不同于传统哲学中的人格身份，也不同于西方文化研究中的认同概念。人工智能时代的到来正在重塑我们对伦理身份的理解。人工智能在文学创作中的运用引发了对作者和读者伦理身份的追问，促使人们重新思考数字时代作者的意义。同样，随着人工智能生成内容的普及，读者可能需要培养新的技能来批判性地阅读文本，辨别人类和机器生成的叙事。这种转变要求读者在理解和解释文学时采

取更积极的态度去重塑他们作为文学过程参与者的伦理身份。作家应该成为作品的合作者、调解者和守门人。传统的“读者”应转变为“共同生产者”或“生产消费者”。人工智能技术的不断发展,挑战了传统身份、主体和创造等观念,促使我们重新思考我们的伦理规范和责任。

关键词: 伦理身份; 人工智能; 文学伦理学批评

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Introduction

We live in an era of rapid technological advancement, where artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming nearly every aspect of our lives. From virtual personal assistants and self-driving cars to complex medical diagnostics and algorithmic decision-making, AI systems have become deeply embedded in our daily experiences. This rise of AI has profound implications for our individual and collective identity, challenging us to reexamine fundamental questions about what it means to be human in the 21st century.

At the heart of this challenge is the issue of ethical identity—how AI impacts our moral agency, values, and sense of self. As AI becomes more sophisticated and autonomous, it blurs the lines between human and machine, raising complex questions about moral responsibility, the nature of intelligence, and our place in the world. These questions cut to the core of who we are and how we define our ethical identity. This article will delve into the historical and contemporary perspectives on identity, exploring how philosophical, psychological, and technological developments have shaped our understanding of selfhood. It will examine the implications of AI on ethical identity, particularly in the realm of literary studies with Ethical Literary Criticism as an example, where the roles of authorship and readership are being redefined.

The Evolving Definition of Ethical Identity

The concept of identity has been a subject of intense philosophical and scholarly inquiry for centuries, with thinkers from diverse backgrounds grappling with the complexities of what it means to be a self, a person, or an individual. The origins of the term “identity” can be traced back to the Latin word “idem,” meaning “the same,” and the philosophical notion of “sameness” has been central to the evolving understanding of identity throughout history. One of the earliest and most influential

thinkers on the topic of identity was the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who explored the idea of the “self” in his *Dialogues*. Plato’s conception of identity was heavily influenced by his metaphysical views, particularly his belief in the existence of a separate, eternal realm of forms or ideas.

Building on Plato’s ideas, the Roman philosopher Cicero introduced the term “identity” (*identitas* in Latin) in his writings, using it to refer to the essential, immutable characteristics that define an individual. As Cicero argued, identity is the quality that makes an entity definable and recognizable, in terms of possessing a set of attributes that distinguish it from others.¹ This emphasis on the consistent, defining features of the self would become a central theme in the subsequent development of identity theory. During the Middle Ages, the concept of identity was heavily influenced by the rise of Christianity and the Christian conception of the soul. Thinkers like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas grappled with the idea of the self in relation to the divine, exploring the notion of a unified, eternal soul that transcended the physical body.

The Enlightenment era, with its emphasis on rationality and individualism, ushered in a new understanding of identity. Philosophers like René Descartes and John Locke shifted the focus to the individual’s capacity for self-reflection and conscious reasoning. Descartes’ famous declaration, “I think, therefore I am,” exemplified the centrality of the thinking, reasoning self in the Enlightenment conception of identity. According to Descartes argued, the self is defined by its ability to engage in conscious thought, to perceive and understand the world, and to assert its own existence.² Following these ideas, Locke’s notion of the “self” as a continuous, self-aware entity that persists through time and change became a seminal contribution to the understanding of identity. As Locke stated, “Personal identity consists not in the identity of substance, but in the identity of consciousness” (Locke 128). This emphasis on the unity of consciousness and the individual’s capacity for self-awareness would heavily influence later thinkers on the subject of identity.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw a proliferation of diverse perspectives on the nature of identity, as thinkers from various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and philosophy, grappled with the complexities of the self. The existentialist philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir,

1 See Marcus Tullius Cicero, “On the Law,” *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, translated by James E. G. Zetzel, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999, 105-175.

2 See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993, 18-19.

challenged the notion of a fixed, essential identity, arguing that the self is a constantly evolving project that we actively construct through our choices and actions. As Sartre famously declared, “Existence precedes essence,” suggesting that the self is not a predetermined entity but rather a continuous process of becoming (Sartre 588).

Alongside these philosophical developments, the field of psychology also made significant contributions to the understanding of identity. Thinkers like Erik Erikson and George Herbert Mead emphasized the social and relational aspects of identity, highlighting how our sense of self is shaped by our interactions with others and the cultural contexts in which we live. As Mead argued, “the self arises is a social process which implies interaction of individuals in the group, implies the preexistence of the group” (Mead 164). The postmodern era, with its emphasis on the fragmentation and fluidity of identity, further challenged the notion of a unified, stable self. Thinkers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler explored the ways in which identity is shaped by power structures, discourses, and performative practices. As Butler observed, “Identity is not a stable entity, but rather a shifting, contextual, and performative construct” (Butler 201).

The contemporary landscape of identity theory has been further shaped by the rise of digital technologies and the increasing prominence of digital identities. As we can see, the proliferation of online platforms and social media has given rise to new forms of identity expression, where individuals curate and present versions of themselves that may not fully align with their offline selves. This has led to a re-evaluation of the boundaries between the digital and the physical, and the ways in which technology is shaping and transforming our understanding of identity.

Throughout this rich history, the concept of identity has evolved from a focus on essential, immutable characteristics to a more fluid, contextual, and socially constructed understanding of the self. Whether it pertains to identity in the oldest metaphysics or modern philosophy, or identity within the realms of cultural studies and social psychology, two commonalities emerge. Firstly, these discussions revolve around an individual’s internal experience and subjective consciousness, ultimately addressing the question of “self-identity”—how one perceives oneself or acknowledges their existence. Secondly, these discussions remain rooted in the etymology of the term “identity” (same), focusing on the endurance and coherence of subjective self across time and space, irrespective of whether such consistency arises from within oneself or external societal factors.

Generally, the term “identity” in Chinese pertains to an individual’s social status. When extended into a legal context, identity denotes “the position of a

natural person within a specific social organizational system characterized by stable relationships,” exhibiting traits of “relative stability and interdependence” (Wei, Xu and Guo 835). From these two interpretations, “identity” does not prioritize the individual’s subjective experience; rather, it underscores its signifying function, clearly delineating an individual’s standing within a hierarchy or relational framework with others. It is mutually dependent on other identities and remains stable as long as the social order remains unchanged.

As one of the most influential literary theories around world, Ethical Literary Criticism also discusses the question of “who am I.” Though it does not reject the answers from perspectives of essentialism, rationality, memory, etc., it tends to focus on the subject of “I” first, because the premise of answering the question is that I am human. Only obtaining the identity of “human” can people further think about the problem of identification. As a necessary condition for proving the proposition “I am a man,” the first thing to answer is “what is a man.” In the long process of human civilization, human beings define “what is human” by distinguishing themselves from beasts first in physical form and then in essence, which indicates the ethical perspective of identity.

Ethical identity constitutes one of the fundamental concepts in the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism, wherein the term “identity” retains its foundational meaning from the Chinese lexicon. The essence of the concept of ethical identity lies not in introspectively questioning “who am I” or defining the “self,” but rather in ascertaining the position of the identity subject within society through ethical criteria. Given the complexity and diversity inherent in social life, individuals often find themselves engaged in multiple ethical relationships, thereby possessing various ethical identities—akin to the notion of “roles” found in social psychology’s identity theory. However, it is crucial to note that ethical identity does not emerge from conscious acts of “self-identification”; instead, it arises from ethical choices. Whether an individual aligns with their existing ethical identity or experiences a particular subjective perspective does not alter the fact that they possess a specific ethical identity, nor does it diminish the responsibilities and obligations incumbent upon them as subjects of that identity.

Human-AI Interaction and the Agency of Ethical Identity

The concept of ethical identity in the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism possesses objectivity; however, this objectivity does not adhere to essentialism and does not preclude the intimate connection between human subjective consciousness and emotional experience with ethical identity. Moreover, it acknowledges the

subjective initiative of human beings as subjects of identity to comprehend, apprehend, construct, and deconstruct ethical identity. Ethical identity is not solely a consequence of ethical choices but serves as both the prerequisite and foundation for such choices. The construction and deconstruction of ethical identity are actualized through ethical decision-making processes. When individuals make moral choices, their will inevitably becomes involved, giving rise to subjective emotional experiences.

From an origin perspective on ethical identity, humans become subjects of identification due to historical ethical selection; this signifies humanity's acquisition of moral consciousness and entry into civilized society from initial ethical chaos. Humans possess a Sphinx factor, a combination of human factor and animal factor combines, that distinguishes them from other species; their morality constitutes an essential attribute inherent to their nature. However, these moral attributes are neither a priori existence nor an unchanging essence but rather acquired through continuous moral decision-making within human society.

As AI technologies become more pervasive, the boundaries between human and machine are becoming increasingly blurred. One of the central ethical challenges posed by it is the potential erosion of human agency—our capacity as individuals to make meaningful choices and be the authors of our own lives. As AI systems become more advanced and ubiquitous, they are playing an ever-greater role in shaping the decisions and behaviors of humans. This blurring of boundaries has profound implications for our understanding of personal ethical identity, agency, and the very nature of what it means to be human.

The integration of AI-powered devices and interfaces into our daily lives has led to a deeper level of human-machine symbiosis. Intelligent personal assistants, for instance, become intimately entangled with our personal information, daily routines, and even our emotional well-being. This raises questions about the extent to which these technologies shape and influence our sense of self, and whether they can be considered extensions of our own identity. Furthermore, the development of advanced AI systems, such as chatbots and virtual companions, challenges our traditional notions of interpersonal relationships and social connections. As these AI entities become more lifelike and emotionally responsive, “the boundary between man and machine has been completely broken, and machines seem to be more like people, while people seem to be more like machines” (Yang 423). This raises complex ethical questions about the nature of empathy, trust, and the boundaries of authentic human relationships.

In the traditional understanding of ethics, moral agency is closely tied to

the ability to make conscious, rational choices and to be held accountable for the consequences of those choices. However, the advent of AI systems that can autonomously make decisions and take actions raises the question of whether they can be considered moral agents in their own right. If an AI system causes harm, how do we determine the appropriate locus of moral responsibility? Should the system's developers, the users, or the system itself be held accountable? These questions become particularly complex when AI systems are designed to operate in dynamic, unpredictable environments, where their decision-making may be influenced by factors beyond the control or foresight of their creators. This challenges the traditional notions of moral responsibility and the clear delineation between human and machine decision-making. As the influence of AI continues to grow, the need to develop robust ethical frameworks and governance structures becomes increasingly urgent. This task requires the collaboration of various stakeholders, including policymakers, ethicists, technologists, and the public at large. One crucial aspect of this endeavor is the establishment of ethical principles and guidelines that can serve as a foundation for the responsible development and deployment of AI systems. These principles should address issues such as transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, and the preservation of human agency and dignity.

Additionally, the development of AI-specific ethical frameworks and decision-making algorithms is crucial. These frameworks should be designed to navigate the complex ethical dilemmas that arise in the context of AI-powered decision-making, drawing upon philosophical and moral theories to inform the development of autonomous systems that can reliably uphold ethical principles. Another important consideration is the role of human oversight and intervention in the deployment of AI systems. While AI may possess superior capabilities in certain domains, the maintenance of human agency and the ability to override or intervene in AI decision-making processes is essential to preserving ethical integrity and ensuring that these technologies remain aligned with human values and priorities.

It is worth noting that with the rapid development and widespread application of artificial intelligence technology, AI literature, as a new type of genre has inevitably triggered the discussion on the form and the content of literature, the author's role and the literary creation, the reading and the dissemination of the work, the literary theory and the criticism, etc., furthering the change of traditional literary concepts and the reconstruction of literary theory and criticism. For example, in the face of AI literature, people's first interest may be, "who is the author?" "How to define the reader?"

Redefining the Ethical Identity in the Context of Literary Studies

Almost all ethical dilemmas in human moral life are intricately linked to human identities, and the same holds true for ethical predicaments within the realm of literature. For instance, the ethical identity of characters often intertwines with the ethical boundaries, moral quandaries, and societal taboos depicted in literary works. The transformation of ethical identity can directly engender moral confusion and even necessitate a reconstruction of ethical order. Therefore, Ethical Literary Criticism focuses on analyzing the ethical identities of characters in literary works, encompassing an examination of how individuals regulate their own behavior and acquire or alter their identities through decision-making processes. In addition to character analysis, Ethical Literary Criticism also explores the relationship between authors and their creations as well as readers' engagement (criticism) from an ethically informed perspective.

Traditionally, the notion of authorial identity has been closely tied to the idea of the autonomous, rational individual—the creative genius whose unique voice and vision are expressed through the written word. Similarly, the role of the reader has often been conceptualized as a passive receptor of the author's intended meaning, tasked with deciphering and interpreting the text. However, in the ever-evolving landscape of literary theory and philosophy, these longstanding conceptions of authorial and readerly identity have been increasingly challenged and reconceived. The age of AI has ushered in significant transformations in the realm of literature, challenging traditional notions of authorship and readership identity. In response to a series of problems brought about by the rise of AI literature, especially those related to the identity of authors and readers in works, Ethical Literary Criticism provides a new way of thinking from the perspective of ethical identity with the help of the “three-stage theory of human civilization” which holds that the development of human society needs to go through a process from natural selection to ethical selection and finally to scientific selection. When human beings completely enter the stage of real scientific selection, they still need to go through a stage of “pre-scientific selection” dominated by ethical principles, which is also the stage that human beings are currently in.

One of the major differences between the stage of the pre-scientific selection and the one of traditional ethical selection is that artificial intelligence is more and more involved in the practical activities of social life. Therefore, humanists in the era of AI should not think about how to emphasize the boundary between traditional literature and AI literature, nor should they analyze AI literature only

relying on traditional literary concepts or literary theories. Ethical Literary Criticism emphasizes analyzing literature “from the viewpoint of historical development, interpreting the literature of different periods from an ethical perspective, so as to overcome the radical gap of literary interpretation in different ethical conditions and contexts” (Nie 191). Therefore, the primary task of literary research in the age of AI is to construct a theoretical system suitable for literary criticism with the age’s characteristics, the first step of which is to rethink the identity of authors and readers in literary studies.

One of the key philosophers who has influenced the reconceptualization of authorial identity is Michel Foucault. Building on his earlier work on the “death of the author,” Foucault’s insights have taken on new significance in the face of AI-powered writing assistants and generative language models. He posits, “the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (Foucault 124). This means the author is not the source of the text’s meaning, but rather a function within the text—a position that is constructed and negotiated through various social and discursive forces. In the age of AI, these “social and discursive forces” now include the algorithms, data, and programming that shape the creative output of AI-assisted authors.

The advent of AI-powered writing assistants and content generation tools has undoubtedly transformed the creative process for many authors. These technologies can assist in tasks such as ideation, research, structuring, and even drafting text, potentially enhancing the author’s productivity, creativity, and output. However, the increasing sophistication and autonomy of these AI systems raises profound ethical questions about the nature of authorship and the attribution of creative work. When an author utilizes AI tools to generate or refine substantial portions of a text, to what extent can the resulting work be considered a solely human-authored creation? And how should the ethical and legal considerations of ownership, attribution, and responsibility be navigated?

Moreover, the potential for AI systems to autonomously produce original written works, without any direct human involvement, further complicates the ethical landscape. If an AI system is capable of generating a coherent, compelling, and substantive piece of writing, can it be considered the “author” in any meaningful sense? And if so, what are the implications for the moral and legal rights and responsibilities associated with that authorship? These questions become especially thorny when considering the use of AI in the creation of content that carries significant societal impact, such as news articles, political commentary, or educational materials. If an AI system is responsible for the generation or curation

of such content, how can we ensure that the ethical principles and values underlying its decision-making are transparent, accountable, and aligned with the public good?

Thus, in the literary field the trend is to talk of the “(artificial) writer” rather than the author. Therefore, the writer would have to become a “craftsman” or a “mixer,” “mediator” or “gatekeeper” of the resulting artificial work (Gallego Cuiñas 30). This means in the process of reading, we should keep watchful on this mode of digital (re-)production, because it would like to result in the loss of bibliodiversity, and in the dangerous increase in colonial and gender biases. In other words, digital (re-)production, particularly through artificial intelligence and machine learning models, often relies on large but homogenized datasets. These datasets tend to reflect existing publishing trends, which are already influenced by market forces and dominant cultural narratives. Similarly, gender biases manifest in the reinforcement of stereotypes and the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of genders outside the traditionally dominant male perspective. As AI models generate new content, these biases can be unintentionally perpetuated and even amplified.

Just as the role of the author is being reshaped by the advent of AI, the experience and ethical identity of the reader is also undergoing a profound transformation. As Barthes argues, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (Barthes 148). This shift in the conception of authorial and readerly identity has profound implications for the way we approach literary texts and the ethical obligations that arise from the act of reading. The increasing prevalence of AI-powered content recommendation and personalization algorithms has fundamentally altered the ways in which readers discover, engage with, and make sense of written information. On one hand, these AI-driven systems can provide valuable assistance to readers, curating and surfacing content that is tailored to their individual interests, preferences, and cognitive needs. This can help readers navigate the vast sea of available information, discover new and relevant sources, and deepen their understanding and engagement with topics they care about.

However, the opacity and inherent biases of these algorithmic systems raise significant ethical concerns. As readers become increasingly reliant on AI-powered recommendations, they may find themselves exposed to a narrower and more insular range of perspectives, inadvertently reinforcing their existing beliefs and biases rather than challenging them. This can lead to the formation of echo chambers, the marginalization of minority or dissenting voices, and the erosion of the readers’ capacity for critical, independent thinking. Moreover, the commercial incentives and profit-driven objectives that often underlie these recommendation algorithms can subtly manipulate readers’ attention and behaviors in ways that may not align

with their intellectual, emotional, or moral interests. For example, an AI system may prioritize content that is designed to maximize engagement and time spent on a platform, rather than content that promotes deeper understanding, nuanced discourse, or ethical reflection.

In this context, the ethical identity of the reader is transformed from that of an autonomous, intellectually curious, and discerning individual to one that is increasingly reliant on, and potentially manipulated by, the invisible hand of AI. The traditional concept “reader” is shifted to (digital) “prosumer.” The reader of digital literature is always a co-producer or a “prosumer” (Villanueva 5), because the interaction with the work is a consubstantial part of the reading process. This means that the reader is also the (co)author with his or her participating in the output of the text. By refining prompts and engaging with the generated material, readers shape the final product, making their involvement more collaborative and interactive than in traditional reading experiences. Consequently, the boundaries between author and reader become increasingly blurred, emphasizing the collaborative nature of digital literature in the age of AI.

Furthermore, the rise of AI-powered personalization and recommendation systems in the digital reading landscape has introduced new ethical considerations for the reader. As these systems curate and deliver content tailored to individual preferences and behaviors, the reader must grapple with the potential for manipulation, the erosion of serendipity, and the reinforcement of echo chambers. In response to these challenges, the redefinition of the ethical identity of both the author and the reader in the age of AI must be grounded in the establishment of robust ethical frameworks and governance structures. These frameworks should address issues such as transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, and the preservation of human agency and creativity. Ultimately, the ethical identity of the reader in the age of AI must be one that is empowered, discerning, and resistant to manipulation—one that can navigate the informational landscape with a keen awareness of the ethical implications of algorithmic curation and the importance of maintaining a diversity of perspectives and a commitment to truth.

Conclusion

As the roles of author and reader are reshaped by the rapid advancement of AI, the challenge before us is to redefine the ethical identity of these crucial participants in the creative and knowledge-sharing ecosystem. This will require a multifaceted effort that addresses the technical, philosophical, and societal dimensions of the issue. On the technical front, the development of AI systems that are more

transparent, accountable, and aligned with human values will be crucial. AI-powered writing assistants and content generation tools must be designed in a way that preserves the integrity and autonomy of the human author, with clear delineation of responsibilities and attribution. Similarly, recommendation algorithms must prioritize the intellectual and moral interests of the reader, rather than the commercial objectives of platform owners.

At the philosophical level, we must engage in deeper exploration and debate around the nature of creativity, authorship, and the moral status of AI systems. As these technologies become more advanced, we may need to reconsider and potentially redefine our understanding of what it means to be an “author” or a “reader” in the 21st century. This will involve grappling with complex questions about the nature of intelligence, consciousness, and moral responsibility. Ultimately, the preservation and renewal of the ethical identity of authors and readers in the age of AI will require a concerted effort on the part of diverse stakeholders—including technologists, ethicists, policymakers, educators, and the general public. By collaboratively establishing clear ethical guidelines, promoting media literacy and critical thinking, and shaping the development and deployment of AI systems in service of the public good, we can ensure that the remarkable advancements of these technologies empower, rather than undermine, the core values and principles that define our humanity. In doing so, we can forge a future in which authors and readers alike are empowered to engage in the creative and knowledge-sharing processes with a renewed sense of ethical identity – one that celebrates the unique capacities of the human mind, upholds the principles of intellectual integrity and social responsibility, and harnesses the transformative potential of AI in service of a more just, equitable, and enlightened world.

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