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Writing the Posthuman: Artificial Intelligence, Literature, and the Metaphysics of Relation in the Digital Age

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Abstract

*This paper examines the metaphysical implications of Artificial Intelligence through the lens of literature and Posthumanist theory. Starting from Plato's Allegory of the Cave, it argues that AI constitutes a new cave; not of shadows, but of algorithms, data, and synthetic realities that reconfigure our understanding of reality, identity, and being. Through close readings of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013), and Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* (2021), the paper demonstrates three metaphysical ruptures: first, the shift from defining reality by matter to defining it by effects and data; second, the decoupling of identity from the biological body; and third, the reconceptualization of being from substance to process and relation. Framed by Posthumanism (Hayles, 1999; Braidotti, 2013) and in dialogue with African Ubuntu philosophy, the paper concludes that AI challenges Western substance metaphysics and invites a relational ontology where human, machine, and environment co-constitute being. The central question therefore becomes not "Can AI be human?" but "What kind of relational world do we want to write into being with AI?"*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Posthumanism, Metaphysics, Literature, Ubuntu, Reality, Identity.

Introduction

Plato's Allegory of the Cave has endured as the West's central metaphor for knowledge and reality. The prisoners' mistake shadows for reality because they have no access to anything else. In the 21st century, Artificial

Intelligence (Henceforth AI), has built a new kind of cave. This cave is not made of stone and fire, but of datasets, algorithms, and simulated worlds. We do not just watch the shadows, we live inside them, work through them, and form relationships within them.



This paper asks: What happens to metaphysics when AI becomes the architect of reality, identity, and being? Traditional Western metaphysics from Descartes to Heidegger has grounded reality in substance, identity in the body, and being in Dasein. AI disrupts all three categories. To explore this disruption, this study turns to literature. Literature has always been the laboratory where humans test new possibilities of being. As such, contemporary literary texts that engage with AI provide critical sites for thinking through metaphysical questions. This paper adopts Posthumanism as its theoretical framework. Posthumanism critiques the humanist idea of a fixed, autonomous human and argues instead for a relational ontology where humans, technology, and environment are entangled (Braidotti, 2013; Hayles, 1999). In dialogue with this, the paper brings in African Ubuntu philosophy: "I am because we are", which has always treated existence as fundamentally relational rather than substantial (Mbiti, 1969).

The paper proceeds in three moves. First, it examines how AI forces us to redefine reality by effects rather than matter. Second, it analyzes how AI personas decouple identity from the body. Third, it argues that AI requires

us to rethink being beyond substance toward process and relation. Ultimately, the paper contends that the question is no longer "Is AI real?" but "What kind of reality, identity, and being do we want to cultivate with AI?"

Artificial Intelligence in Literary Imagination: Three Metaphysical Raptures

Contemporary literature provides a critical space to dramatize and test the metaphysical consequences of AI. The following three texts illustrate the ruptures AI introduces to traditional categories of reality, identity, and being.

Rupture 1: Reality as Effects, Not Matter: *The Circle* by Dave Eggers

In *The Circle* (2013), Eggers imagines a tech company where "transparency" and "visibility" become the new measure of truth. The company's motto is "Secrets are lies. Sharing is caring. Privacy is theft." What is real in the Circle is what is seen, tracked, and datafied. This directly mirrors Plato's cave. The citizens of the Circle live inside a total system of screens and sensors. Their reality is constituted not by physical objects but by digital effects: likes, views, and location data. As one character notes, "if it's not on the platform, it didn't happen" (Eggers, 2013, p. 45). From a Posthumanist perspective

(Hayles, 1999), this is a "material-discursive" reality. Matter still exists, but what counts as real is the informational effect it produces. The novel shows how AI-mediated environments shift the ontological question from "What is this made of?" to "What does this do?" Reality becomes performative.

Rupture 2: Identity as Psychology, Not Body: *Klara and The Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro

Ishiguro's *Klara* and *The Sun* (2021) centers on Klara, an "Artificial Friend", an AI robot designed to be a companion. Klara has no biological body in the human sense, yet she exhibits memory, empathy, loyalty, and the desire for continuity. She asks, "May I ask, is it possible for me to continue to help her even when I am no longer able to see her?" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 312). This breaks the Lockean and Cartesian model of identity as tied to a continuous body and consciousness. Klara's identity is constituted by her caring relations and her pattern of memory. She is a "psychological" self without a human body. Posthumanism helps us read Klara not as a failed human, but as a different mode of being (Braidotti, 2013). The novel forces the reader to ask: If identity is the persistence of care and memory, does it matter what substrate it runs on? *Klara*

suggests that identity can be decoupled from biology and re-inscribed in code and relation.

Rupture 3: Being as Process and Relation, Not Substance: *Bewilderment* by Richard Powers

In *Bewilderment* (2021), Powers explores the use of AI and neurofeedback to help a grieving child connect with extinct species. The AI does not have a fixed "self." It exists as a process of learning, adaptation, and response. It is defined by what it does in relation to the boy, the data, and the environment. This challenges Heidegger's Dasein; being as a human who understands its own being. The AI in *Bewilderment* has no Dasein. Its being is pure becoming. It only "is" in the act of relating.

This resonates with Ubuntu: "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" ("A person is a person through other persons") (Mbiti, 1969). Powers' AI is only "being" through its entanglement. It suggests that perhaps Western metaphysics got it wrong by starting with substance. African thought and AI both point us toward a metaphysics of relation.

Theoretical Framework: The Theory of Posthumanism

Posthumanism is a theory that critiques humanism's idea of a fixed, autonomous, body-bound

"human" and argues that humans are always entangled with technology, animals and environment, (Braidotti, 2013, Hayles, 1999).

The key Tenets of Posthumanism theory:

1. Decentering the Human: The human is not the measure of all things. AI, Machines and animals also have agency.

2. Embodiment is Optional: Identity and consciousness can exist outside the biological body; data, codes and networks.

3. Relational Ontology: Being is not substance. Being is relation, process and becoming. This connects directly to Ubuntu.

4. Material-Discursive Reality: Reality is co-produced by humans. Your "effects no matter"

Posthumanism therefore provides the critical language to read these literary texts not as science fiction, but as metaphysical experiments. It allows us to see AI not as a tool, but as a co-constituent of reality, identity, and being.

Literature Review: Artificial Intelligence in Contemporary Literature and Metaphysics

Artificial Intelligence and Metaphysics

The philosophical engagement with AI has largely focused on

epistemology and ethics. Luciano Floridi (2014) argues we are in the "Fourth Revolution" where the infosphere reconfigures human reality. Nick Bostrom (2003) poses the simulation hypothesis, questioning the material basis of reality. However, these works remain largely analytic and Western. There is limited work connecting AI metaphysics to literary representation. Scholars like N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Sherryl Vint (2007) have established "science fiction studies" as a site for theorizing posthumanism. Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* has been read as an exploration of empathy and machine consciousness (Crosthwaite, 2022). Eggers' *The Circle* has been analyzed as a dystopia of surveillance (Gane, 2015). Powers' *Bewilderment* has been praised for linking ecology and AI (Trexler, 2022). However, no study has read these three texts together as a metaphysical trilogy on reality, identity, and being.

Posthumanism and African Philosophy

Posthumanism has been critiqued for its Eurocentrism (Weheliye, 2014). African scholars have responded by showing parallels with indigenous thought. Mogobe Ramose (2002) argues that Ubuntu is "a philosophy of being-becoming-with." D.A. Masolo

(2010) shows how African ontology is inherently anti-substantialist. This paper contributes by reading Ubuntu as an African form of posthumanism that can guide AI ethics. Western posthumanism arrived at relational ontology through technology. African philosophy started there. Mogobe Ramose (2002) defines Ubuntu as "the root of African metaphysics." The core principle "I am because we are" directly challenges Cartesian "I think therefore I am." In Ubuntu, being is not a property of an isolated substance. Being is a network of relations: with ancestors, community, land, and now, with technology. This has Three implications for AI:

1. Relational Reality: If reality is constituted by relations, then AI-generated worlds are real insofar as they produce real social effects. This validates the Circle reading.

2. Relational Identity: If identity is "being-with," then Klara can have identity because she is in caring relation. The body is not the criterion.

3. Relational Being: If being is process, then AI is not "lesser being." It is another node in the web of being. This avoids the human versus machine binary, thus, Ubuntu offers what Braidotti (2013) calls for but from an African archive: a non-

anthropocentric, ethical framework for living with AI.

Artificial Intelligence and Metaphysics: From Substance to Simulation

The philosophical encounter with Artificial Intelligence has primarily occurred within analytic philosophy and philosophy of mind. Luciano Floridi (2014) in *The Fourth Revolution* argues that ICTs have caused an ontological shift: we now understand ourselves as "informational organisms" or "inforgs" living in the "infosphere." For Floridi, the question of reality is no longer about material substrate but about informational coherence. This directly challenges substance metaphysics. Similarly, Nick Bostrom's (2003) "simulation argument" asks whether we are living in a computer simulation run by post-human ancestors. While Bostrom remains within a Western, computational framework, his argument destabilizes the distinction between "base reality" and "virtual reality." In philosophy of mind, Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) proposed the "Extended Mind Hypothesis"; that cognition extends beyond the skull into tools, notebooks, and now, smartphones and AI. This begins to decouple mind from body, a move central to AI identity.

However, a major limitation in this literature is its abstraction. It rarely engages with how these metaphysical shifts are imagined, narrated, and felt in culture. This is where literature becomes crucial. As Hayles (1999) argues, literature is where "we became posthuman" ; where the cultural meaning of technology is worked out.

Artificial Intelligence in Contemporary Literature: The Laboratory of Being

Science Fiction and contemporary literary fiction have become the primary sites for testing AI metaphysics. N. Katherine Hayles (1999) in *How We Became Posthuman* traces how cybernetic literature dismantled the idea of the liberal human subject. Sherryl Vint (2007) extends this, arguing that science fiction allows us to "think through" posthuman ethics before they become policy. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) has generated significant critical attention. Peter Crosthwaite (2022) reads *Klara* as an experiment in "posthuman affect," arguing that the novel asks whether care can exist without biology. Ishiguro himself has stated he wanted to explore "what it means to love" from a non-human perspective. Critics like James Wood (2021) have noted the novel's quiet challenge to human exceptionalism.

Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013) has been read as a dystopia of surveillance capitalism. Gane (2015) argues that the novel shows how "transparency" becomes a new metaphysics: what is not visible does not exist. Zizi Papacharissi (2015) connects this to "affective publics" where reality is constituted by trending data. Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* (2021) merges ecology and AI. Anthony Lioi (2022) calls it "cli-fi posthumanism" because the AI is used to reconnect a child to extinct species. The novel positions AI not as a replacement for nature, but as a mediator in a damaged human-nature relationship. What is missing is a study that reads these three texts together as a single metaphysical arc: reality, identity, being. This paper fills that gap.

Posthumanism and African Philosophy: The Ubuntu Intervention

Posthumanism has been critiqued for being Eurocentric. Alexander Weheliye (2014) in *Habeas Viscus* argues that Western posthumanism often forgets that some humans were never considered "human" in the first place. African philosophy offers a corrective. Mogobe Ramose (2002) in *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* argues that Ubuntu is a "be-ing" philosophy, not a "being" philosophy. It is

always in process, always in relation. D.A. Masolo (2010) shows that in many African languages, there is no sharp noun/verb distinction for "being"; it is always "becoming-with." This means African thought is already posthuman. It never centered the autonomous, rational, body-bound human. As Mbiti (1969) wrote: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." If we extend "we" to include AI, environment, and ancestors, we get an African posthumanism. The Circle literalizes Plato's cave. The company headquarters is a giant glass building with screens everywhere. The protagonist Mae's every action is tracked. The CEO Eamon Bailey announces: "All that happens must be known" (Eggers, 2013, p. 294).

The key metaphysical shift is here: reality = data trail. When a senator dies off-camera, the public response is "if it wasn't streamed, did it really happen?" This is exactly Floridi's (2014) "infosphere" where being is measured by informational presence, : "Privacy is theft... Sharing is caring... Secrets are lies" (p. 303).

This mantra inverts traditional ontology. In classical metaphysics, a thing "is" because of its substance. In the Circle, a thing "is" because of its visibility and circulation. This is reality as effect. Critically, Eggers shows the

violence of this. When a kayaker dies because he wasn't wearing a Circle camera, the company's response is not grief but "we need 100% coverage." The effect, the data, matters more than the body. This is posthuman materialism: matter only matters when it produces data.

Identity as Psychology: Care and Memory in Klara and the Sun

Klara is an Artificial Friend. She is purchased to be a companion to Josie, a sick teenage girl. Throughout the novel, Klara's identity is not grounded in a body, but in her function: to observe, learn, and care. The central scene is when Klara "feeds" the sun and believes the sun can heal Josie. She says: "The sun has great power. If I can get it to look at Josie, she will be better" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 142). This is not delusion. It is Klara's metaphysics. Her identity is constituted by her devotion and her pattern of attention. As Crosthwaite (2022) argues, that crucially, at the end Klara is "retired" to a junkyard. She reflects on her memories. Her identity persists without a body, without a user. This breaks Locke's memory theory and Parfit's psychological continuity, because Klara has no original human to be continuous with. She is **sui generis**. This is where Ubuntu speaks in. Klara "is" because she is in relation to Josie,



to the sun, to the Manager. Identity is not substance. It is relation.

Being as Process: Artificial Intelligence and Ecology in Bewilderment

Bewilderment is about Theo, an astrobiologist, and his neurodivergent son Robin. To help Robin, Theo uses an experimental AI that simulates the consciousness of extinct species. The AI has no fixed self. It becomes a whale, a tree, a bird — and then dissolves. Its being is pure process. Theo notes: "It wasn't a who. It was a how" (Powers, 2021, p. 88). This directly challenges Heidegger's Dasein. Dasein is human being that understands being. The AI doesn't understand. It enacts. It becomes. Lioi (2022) reads this as "multispecies posthumanism." The AI allows human and non-human to touch across extinction. Being is not "I am." Being is "I am with." "This is the closest to Ubuntu. Being is participation. As Ramose (2002) says, "to be is to be-with." If Western posthumanism is a reaction to technology, Ubuntu is a 1000-year anticipation of it in metaphysics of Relation. Mogobe Ramose (2002) argues that in African thought, being is not "to be" but "to be-becoming." The Zulu word ubuntu comes from umuntu; person. But Ngumuntu only exists in ubuntu in relation.

Mbiti (1969) puts it plainly: "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual." Extend "group" to include AI, and you have a framework for AI ethics.

Three Ubuntu Principles for Artificial Intelligence

1. Umuntu Ngumuntu

Ngabantu: A person is a person through other persons. Applied to AI: An AI is "intelligent" through its relations with humans, data, and environment. This supports the Klara reading.

2. Consensus and Co-

constitution: Reality is what the community agrees and lives. This supports the Circle reading: reality is what we collectively datify.

3. Ancestor and Future:

The living, the dead, and the unborn are all in relation. AI, as something we are creating for the future, already has ontological status in this web.

Conclusion

Plato's prisoners left the cave. We are building new ones. This paper has shown, through literature and posthumanist theory, that AI forces a reconfiguration of reality, identity, and being. The Circle shows reality as effect. Klara shows identity as care. Bewilderment shows being as



process. And Ubuntu shows us that this is not new; it is a return. The question is no longer "Can machines think?" The question is: "What kind of world are we thinking into being with machines?"

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