



THE ETHICAL RE-TURNS: LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

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Abstract

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed what critics often describe as the “ethical turn” in the humanities—a renewed concern with the moral dimensions of human existence as represented in art, culture, and thought. This paper proposes a more dynamic term, the “ethical re-turn”, suggesting not merely a turning toward ethics but a return to it after periods of aestheticism, formalism, and poststructuralist skepticism. The ethical re-turn manifests across literature and philosophy as an attempt to rethink the foundations of responsibility, subjectivity, and the human condition in the wake of crises—wars, genocides, dehumanization, and ecological collapse. Drawing on thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, and Martha Nussbaum, alongside literary figures like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, Toni Morrison, and J.M. Coetzee, this paper argues that both literature and philosophy converge on an urgent question: what does it mean to be human in an age of moral exhaustion? The discussion foregrounds how narrative imagination and philosophical reflection collaboratively reopen ethical inquiry, transforming suffering, alterity, and empathy into grounds for re-envisioning the human condition.

Keywords: Ethical Re-turns; Literature; Philosophy; Human Condition; Posthumanism; Responsibility.

1. Introduction

The humanities have long been haunted by the question of ethics. Every epoch of intellectual history has oscillated between engagement with and retreat from moral inquiry. The modernist fascination with art’s autonomy, the postmodern distrust of moral universals, and the structuralist commitment to linguistic systems all contributed to what might be called the eclipse of the ethical. Yet, at the threshold of the twenty-first century, amid ecological collapse, technological alienation, and persistent violence, a profound return to ethical thinking has reemerged. The “ethical re-turn” is not a nostalgic reassertion of moral absolutes but a renewed attention to human vulnerability, interdependence, and responsibility.

The term “ethical re-turn” implies motion in two directions: a turning toward the ethical and a return from ethical neglect. The prefix “re-” suggests recovery, repetition, and reflection—a process of revisiting questions once considered settled or obsolete. Literature and philosophy participate in this re-turn as twin practices of moral imagination: philosophy articulating concepts of justice and responsibility, and literature dramatizing their lived contradictions. This convergence reaffirms the human condition as an ethical condition.

Philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas have argued that ethics precedes ontology, that the self finds its meaning only in the face of the Other. Meanwhile, writers such as Dostoevsky and Morrison translate this abstract claim into

human experience—showing how guilt, forgiveness, and empathy shape moral consciousness. In their different idioms, both philosophy and literature respond to what Hannah Arendt called the crisis of the human condition: the degradation of human dignity in mass society and the loss of moral agency in bureaucratic modernity.

This paper explores how the ethical re-turn unfolds in philosophical and literary discourses. It will trace (1) the theoretical background of ethics in postwar and postmodern thought; (2) the role of literature as a site of ethical dramatization; (3) the reconsideration of the human condition in contemporary philosophy; and (4) the emergence of new forms of ethical thinking that move beyond anthropocentric and rationalist traditions. Together, these explorations illuminate how the ethical re-turn reclaims the humanities as a moral enterprise grounded in empathy, dialogue, and responsibility.

2. Theoretical Background: From the Death of Ethics to Its Return

The twentieth century was marked by skepticism regarding moral universals. Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of God, the rise of existential and phenomenological inquiry, and poststructuralist critiques collectively questioned the grounding of ethics. Structuralist and poststructuralist approaches emphasized language, power, and discourse, challenging the notion of stable moral truths. Amid these theoretical shifts, some argued that ethics had become obsolete, replaced by subjective or culturally contingent norms.

Yet this period of crisis catalysed a renewed ethical consciousness. Philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Hannah Arendt emphasized responsibility, relationality, and moral judgment as essential to human life. Their work represents the intellectual core of the ethical re-turn.

Levinas and the Primacy of the Other

Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* (1961) reoriented philosophy by positing that the encounter with the face of the Other is the first ethical event. For Levinas, ethics is not a system of rules but an infinite responsibility that

precedes cognition or will. This radical inversion—placing ethics before ontology—constitutes the foundation of the ethical re-turn. The self is not autonomous but summoned by the Other's vulnerability. Literature, as a mode of encountering alterity, becomes an ethical act in itself.

Derrida and the Paradox of Responsibility

Jacques Derrida extends Levinas's insight into a deconstructive framework. In *The Gift of Death* (1992), Derrida explores the aporia of ethical decision: every responsible act is also irresponsible, for to choose one duty is to betray another. The ethical is thus haunted by undecidability. Yet Derrida's "ethics of deconstruction" is not nihilistic; it invites humility, attentiveness, and openness to the Other's singularity. The re-turn to ethics, in this sense, is not the recovery of certainty but the embrace of moral difficulty.

Jacques Derrida explores the tension inherent in ethical responsibility. Every act of responsibility simultaneously entails potential failure or betrayal. Derrida's deconstructive ethics highlights the impossibility of absolute moral certainty, emphasizing the need for attentiveness, humility, and openness to the Other's singularity. Literature, by dramatizing moral dilemmas without resolution, exemplifies this ethical complexity.

Arendt and the Banality of Evil

Hannah Arendt's reflections on totalitarianism and the Holocaust deepen this re-turn. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), she revealed how evil can manifest not in demonic figures but in ordinary individuals who abdicate thinking. For Arendt, ethics depends on the capacity to think—an internal dialogue that resists conformity. Literature, through its imaginative re-creation of perspectives, keeps this dialogue alive. The ethical re-turn, then, is also a return to thinking as a moral activity.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of Adolf Eichmann revealed how ordinary individuals may participate in evil through unreflective obedience. Ethics requires critical reflection and moral judgment; failure to think critically can result in catastrophic consequences. Literature functions as a medium for reflective

engagement, providing scenarios that challenge readers to confront ethical ambiguity.

Nussbaum and the Literary Imagination

Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* (1990) and *Poetic Justice* (1995) articulate how literature contributes to moral reasoning. For Nussbaum, novels cultivate "moral emotions" such as compassion and indignation, expanding our capacity for ethical judgment. This argument bridges philosophy and literature, affirming that narrative form is not ethically neutral—it trains the reader's moral imagination.

Together, these thinkers frame the ethical return as a multidimensional project: one that reconnects moral thought with human experience, restores the dignity of emotion and imagination, and acknowledges the fragility of ethical certainty.

3. Literature and the Ethics of Representation

If philosophy theorizes ethics, literature performs it. The literary text becomes a site where moral conflicts are lived, not merely conceptualized. Through characters, voices, and narratives, literature exposes the ethical limits of human understanding.

Literature serves as a site for ethical reflection. Through character, narrative, and perspective, it enables readers to confront moral dilemmas, vulnerability, and relational responsibility.

Literature functions as both a mirror and a mediator of ethical inquiry. By dramatizing moral dilemmas, suffering, and relationally, literary texts provide experiential insight into ethical concepts.

Dostoevsky and the Drama of Conscience

Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels, particularly *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, explore guilt, redemption, and the moral abyss. Raskolnikov's philosophical justifications for murder collapse under the weight of conscience, demonstrating that rational ethics cannot replace the felt immediacy of moral experience. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan's rebellion against divine justice exposes the tension between faith and morality. For Dostoevsky, to

be human is to wrestle endlessly with ethical contradiction.

In *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky explores the tension between rational calculation and moral conscience. Characters face ethical dilemmas revealing the fragility of moral reasoning. Readers engage with the narrative's ethical stakes, reflecting on responsibility and redemption.

Camus and the Absurd Responsibility

Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947) and *The Fall* (1956) present a post-religious ethics grounded in solidarity. In an absurd world devoid of ultimate meaning, Camus locates morality in the refusal to be indifferent. Dr. Rieux's compassion in *The Plague* represents the ethical re-turn as an act of resistance against nihilism. Ethics, in this view, is not a system but a stance—an affirmation of human dignity amid absurdity.

Albert Camus's *The Plague* portrays human beings navigating absurd and uncontrollable circumstances. Ethics arises not from universal laws but from acts of solidarity and care. Camus emphasizes moral courage, responsibility, and the affirmation of human dignity amid suffering.

Morrison and the Ethics of Memory

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) confront historical trauma and racial injustice. Morrison transforms literature into a space of ethical remembrance, where silenced voices demand recognition. Her narratives compel readers to bear witness, turning reading into a moral act. The ethical re-turn here is a return to those excluded from the human community—a restoration of moral attention to the marginalized.

Toni Morrison's works, including *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, confront the ethical challenges posed by historical and systemic injustice. Literature here functions as an act of witnessing, requiring readers to recognize the humanity of marginalized subjects and to confront collective complicity in injustice.

Coetzee and the Limits of Empathy

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Elizabeth Costello (2003) interrogate the boundaries of empathy and the postcolonial conscience. Coetzee's protagonists struggle to reconcile personal guilt with systemic injustice. Through metafictional self-questioning, his work dramatizes the failure of moral language itself. The ethical re-turn thus involves recognizing the insufficiency of ethics while still insisting on its necessity.

The Narrative as Ethical Encounter

Across these texts, narrative form functions as an ethical structure: it stages encounters with difference, compels judgment, and resists closure. Reading itself becomes an ethical practice, as readers are invited to inhabit other lives and question their own assumptions. As Nussbaum writes, "literature shows us what it means to live with others, and to see the world as they see it." The ethical re-turn in literature is therefore not about moral instruction but about cultivating relational awareness.

4. The Human Condition Revisited

The ethical re-turn inevitably raises the question: what is the human condition? For centuries, humanism defined "the human" as rational, autonomous, and superior to nature. But the catastrophes of the twentieth century—the Holocaust, colonialism, ecological destruction—have revealed the fragility and violence underlying that ideal. The ethical re-turn challenges humanism from within, seeking a more humble, relational conception of humanity.

The ethical re-turn challenges traditional humanist conceptions of the human condition, emphasizing relationality, vulnerability, and contextuality.

Existential and Phenomenological Dimensions

Existentialism, from Kierkegaard to Sartre, foregrounds the individual's freedom and responsibility in a meaningless world. However, Levinas reinterprets this freedom as responsibility before freedom: the self is called into being by the Other's demand. The ethical re-turn thus shifts the focus from autonomy to vulnerability. Being human means being exposed to the needs and suffering of others.

Phenomenology further deepens this understanding. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodied perception reminds us that ethics is not purely rational but lived and sensory. Our bodies mediate our ethical relations, grounding moral life in shared embodiment. Literature, with its attention to gesture, sensation, and atmosphere, often captures this embodied ethics more vividly than abstract theory.

Social and Political Dimensions

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) distinguishes between labor, work, and action, locating human dignity in action—the capacity to begin anew in a shared world. The ethical re-turn aligns with this vision of plurality and responsibility. In an era of mass politics and technological anonymity, reclaiming ethical agency means recovering the ability to act and to judge.

In the postcolonial and feminist contexts, the human condition is redefined through intersectionality and relationality. Writers such as Arundhati Roy and Chimamanda Adichie depict how ethics must account for power, gender, and historical trauma. The ethical re-turn thus resists universalism while reaffirming common vulnerability.

Posthuman Dimensions

Contemporary philosophy pushes this further by questioning the anthropocentric basis of ethics. Thinkers like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti call for posthuman ethics, recognizing nonhuman agency and ecological interdependence. The human condition, in this view, extends beyond the species boundary. Literature, too, participates in this shift—Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, for instance, reimagines moral life in a biotechnological world where the human is no longer central. The ethical re-turn here is both ecological and ontological: a turn toward coexistence rather than domination.

The question of ethics has always been at the heart of human civilization. Yet, in the twenty-first century, traditional ideas of morality and human centrality are being challenged by what is now called the posthuman condition. The term posthuman does not mean the end of humanity, but rather a rethinking of what it

means to be human in an era of technological, ecological, and philosophical transformation. In this context, the idea of ethical re-turns—a turning back and a turning anew toward ethics—becomes crucial. The posthuman moment asks us to reconsider our ethical responsibilities not only toward other humans but also toward animals, machines, the environment, and all forms of life and non-life that share existence. Literature and philosophy together create a vital space to explore these redefined ethical dimensions of the human condition. Humanism, as it emerged from the Renaissance and Enlightenment, placed human beings at the center of the moral and intellectual universe. Rationality, autonomy, and individuality became the defining features of humanity. However, posthumanism challenges this anthropocentric framework by exposing its exclusions—of women, non-Western peoples, animals, and machines—and by questioning the boundaries between the human and the non-human. Thinkers such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Rosi Braidotti argue that the human is no longer a fixed category but a networked entity, entangled with technology, ecology, and other species.

The posthuman thus signals a shift from “Man” as the measure of all things to a relational, interdependent view of existence. This shift has deep ethical implications. If the human is no longer sovereign, then ethics must move beyond human interests and embrace a more inclusive, planetary perspective. The ethical re-turn, in this sense, is not a regression but a reorientation—an acknowledgment that ethics must adapt to the complexity of our posthuman world.

The term ethical re-turn suggests both a return and a renewal of ethical thinking. In a posthuman context, ethics is no longer grounded in human exceptionalism but in responsibility without mastery. Jacques Derrida’s concept of *l’hospitalité* (hospitality) and Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of the other serve as philosophical foundations for this re-turn. Both thinkers emphasize that ethics begins not with self-interest or rational calculation, but with openness to the other—another that can be human, animal, or even technological.

Levinas argues that the face of the other calls us to infinite responsibility. In posthuman ethics, this call extends beyond the human face to include the silent cries of the planet, the suffering of nonhuman animals, and the agency of artificial intelligence. The ethical re-turn, therefore, is not a nostalgic return to old moral codes but a radical rethinking of what it means to act responsibly in a networked, more-than-human world.

Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* further illustrates this ethical shift. The cyborg—a hybrid of organism and machine—symbolizes the collapse of the boundary between the natural and the artificial. In this new ontology, ethics must accommodate entities that are neither fully human nor purely mechanical. Responsibility, then, becomes distributed across networks of relations rather than centered in an autonomous subject.

Literature offers a unique space to imagine and test the ethical possibilities of the posthuman condition. Through narrative, writers can stage encounters between humans and nonhumans, reveal the consequences of technological progress, and explore new forms of empathy and responsibility. From Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, literature has long engaged with the question of what it means to be human in relation to the nonhuman.

In *Frankenstein*, the creature’s plea for recognition exposes the failure of human-centered ethics. Victor Frankenstein’s refusal to acknowledge his creation as a being worthy of care and respect becomes a metaphor for humanity’s ethical blindness toward others. Similarly, in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro presents a world where cloned humans are exploited for organ donation—a haunting allegory for the commodification of life in biotechnological modernity. These texts challenge readers to reconsider empathy, justice, and moral responsibility in a world where the boundaries of the human are blurred.

Contemporary eco-literature and speculative fiction—such as Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy or Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*—extend this exploration to ecological ethics. They dramatize the

interconnectedness of human and nonhuman systems, calling for a new environmental consciousness. Through imaginative storytelling, literature helps readers inhabit the perspectives of animals, plants, or even artificial intelligences, fostering what Rosi Braidotti calls zoe-centered ethics—a celebration of life in all its forms

Philosophy complements literature by providing conceptual clarity to the ethical re-turns of the posthuman age. Thinkers like Braidotti, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett advocate for a vital materialism—an understanding of matter as active and alive. This philosophical stance challenges the instrumental view of nature as mere resource and recognizes the agency of the nonhuman world. In Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, humans and nonhumans are co-actors in a web of relations, each exerting influence and ethical weight.

Posthuman ethics thus demands humility and relational awareness. It asks: how can we live ethically when our actions have consequences that ripple through ecological, technological, and cosmic networks? This question redefines the human condition not as mastery but as vulnerability and co-dependence. The posthuman subject is not the autonomous rational being of modernity, but a becoming-with—a participant in the continuous unfolding of life and matter.

The re-turn to ethics in this philosophical frame means turning toward the world with attentiveness, care, and accountability. It involves listening to the “voices” of nonhumans—whether the cries of melting glaciers or the algorithmic “decisions” of AI systems—and responding with justice and compassion. Ethics becomes an act of solidarity across species and systems.

The human condition in the posthuman age is defined by paradox: we are both creators and creations, masters and dependents, destroyers and caretakers. Technology amplifies human capacities while also exposing our fragility. Climate change reveals the limits of human control over nature. Artificial intelligence challenges our notions of consciousness and agency. In such a world, the ethical re-turn

demands that we redefine what it means to live a good life—not in isolation, but in relation.

The posthuman perspective does not erase the human; it decenters and redistributes humanity within a broader network of being. It invites compassion that transcends species, awareness that includes the planet, and creativity that reimagines coexistence. The ethical re-turn, then, is not simply about rules or duties—it is about cultivating sensitivity, humility, and interconnection.

5. The Ethical Re-turn in Contemporary Thought

The contemporary ethical re-turn is marked by three intertwined movements: the return to vulnerability, the return to relationality, and the return to futurity.

- a) Return to Vulnerability – Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004) underscores that our ethical lives begin in recognizing shared precarity. Literature that represents trauma or displacement performs this recognition, transforming pain into solidarity. Vulnerability becomes the ground of moral community.
- b) Return to Relationality – Ethics is increasingly seen as relational rather than individual. The ethics of care, developed by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, values empathy, context, and relationships over abstract principles. This aligns with narrative ethics, where storytelling mediates understanding between self and other.
- c) Return to Futurity – The ethical re-turn is not nostalgic; it gestures toward the future. In an age of climate crisis and digital transformation, ethics must anticipate new forms of the human condition. Literature and philosophy thus collaborate in imagining futures of coexistence, sustainability, and justice.
- d) These re-turns indicate that ethics today is not a fixed doctrine but an ongoing conversation—a re-engagement with the human as an open question. As Derrida insists, “the question of the human is never closed.” The ethical re-turn keeps that question alive.

6. Conclusion

The ethical re-turn in literature and philosophy is not merely a trend but a profound reorientation of the humanities. Against the backdrop of moral fatigue and philosophical scepticism, it reclaims ethics as the heart of human inquiry. This return is not a regression to moral certainty but a reawakening of moral sensitivity—a recognition that to think, to read, and to imagine are themselves ethical acts.

Philosophy offers the conceptual language of responsibility; literature embodies its affective and narrative dimensions. Together, they affirm that the human condition is not defined by mastery but by exposure—to others, to history, to the fragility of life. In confronting suffering, injustice, and ecological peril, the ethical re-turn invites us to reimagine what it means to be human: not the sovereign subject of humanism, but the vulnerable, responsive being of shared existence.

The humanities, when ethically re-turned, become a practice of care—for words, for others, and for the world we inhabit. In this sense, the ethical re-turn is not only a movement within thought but a demand upon life itself: to turn again, and again, toward the other.

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