

Tel Aviv University
Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Sociology

Reconceptualising Authorship in the Age of Generative AI: A Theoretical Review

Academic paper submitted for the course:

Digital sociology

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1. Background and Rationale

Authorship has never been a theoretically settled concept. Across literary theory, philosophy of mind, and intellectual property law, scholars have long contested what it means to originate a text. The arrival of large language models capable of producing coherent academic prose has not created this instability; it has made it impossible to ignore. Historical scholarship demonstrates that authorship has always encompassed precursory, collaborative, and revisionary functions, and that the ideal of the solitary originating author is a culturally specific convention rather than a universal baseline (Behzadi et al., 2015). Recognition for intellectual labour nonetheless remains, as survey evidence across humanities scholars confirms, a central struggle shaped by institutional pressures (Knöchelmann, 2023). When the origin of a text is genuinely ambiguous — as it is whenever a researcher delegates drafting to a generative AI system — the institutional machinery built around authorial recognition begins to malfunction.

The specific problem motivating this proposed paper is the inadequacy of frameworks currently deployed to adjudicate AI-assisted academic writing. Legal copyright doctrine rests on categories — originality, creative labour, and legal personhood — that are structurally anthropocentric and cannot be extended to non-human generative processes without doctrinal incoherence (Fenwick & Jurcys, 2023). Posthumanist perspectives, while better equipped to accommodate distributed agency, risk dissolving authorship so thoroughly that scholarly accountability becomes unworkable (Zeilinger, 2021). Each framework illuminates something the others obscure, yet none is individually sufficient.

This paper will address that gap by asking how competing theoretical frameworks conceptualise authorship when generative AI tools mediate academic writing. The aim is to examine what each framework can and cannot explain, and to argue that a provisional synthesis — reconceiving authorship as a transparency-regulated continuum of human–AI epistemic delegation — represents the most analytically coherent path forward for scholarly accountability.

2. Conceptual Framework

The paper will build its framework by placing three theoretical traditions in direct comparative dialogue, tracing the point at which each encounters the same underlying problem: where epistemic responsibility resides when text is produced through human–AI collaboration.

The first strand is the **poststructuralist reconceptualisation of authorship**. The paper will draw on the "death of the author" thesis (Barthes, 2017) and the author-function — the idea that "author" names a regulatory discourse that classifies texts rather than a person who creates them (Foucault, 2019) — to establish that the binary opposition between human author and non-human tool was already theoretically untenable before generative AI emerged. Henrickson's sociology of algorithmic authorship will extend this lineage, proposing a spectrum from authorship to generatorship as more analytically adequate than any binary classification (Henrickson, 2021).

The second strand is the **legal-copyright tradition**, which conditions authorship on demonstrable human creative originality. The paper will use this tradition to map the anthropocentric assumptions embedded in existing intellectual property frameworks and the doctrinal instability those assumptions produce when applied to LLM-generated outputs (Fenwick & Jurcys, 2023). Bajohr's concept of "causal authorship" — measuring the distance between human and machine agents in the generative process — will bridge the legal and philosophical strands, reframing the question from metaphysical status to causal and epistemic proximity (Bajohr, 2024).

The third strand is the **posthumanist-assemblage tradition**, which redistributes agency across material, technological, and institutional actors (Zeilinger, 2021). Adema's argument for processual and collaborative publishing models will represent the most radical normative extension of this position (Adema, 2021), while Israel and Amer's provenance-tracking framework will illustrate how transparency-based institutional responses attempt to operationalise accountability within distributed production contexts (Israel & Amer, 2022).

These strands will be held in productive tension. The framework will treat them as offering complementary partial responses to different dimensions of the same problem. The core constructs organising the analysis throughout — **epistemic agency**, **epistemic delegation**, and the **transparency-regulated continuum** — are derived from this synthesis and will be applied consistently across all sections.

3. Planned Structure of the Argument

The paper will develop its argument across five substantive moves toward the central thesis that authorship is best reconceived as a transparency-regulated continuum of human–AI epistemic delegation.

Move 1 — Establishing prior instability. The paper will open by demonstrating that authorship was already a contested concept before generative AI emerged, drawing on the poststructuralist tradition (Barthes, 2017; Foucault, 2019) and historical evidence of plural authorship functions (Behzadi et al., 2015). The legitimization paradox visible in non-mainstream writing communities (Fathallah, 2017) will illustrate that this instability is structural rather than novel.

Move 2 — Mapping legal and institutional pressure. The paper will examine how copyright doctrine and academic integrity frameworks respond to AI-assisted writing, showing that existing legal frameworks were not designed for spectra of agency (Fenwick & Jurcys, 2023), that AI governance scholarship remains fragmented (Birkstedt et al., 2023), and that the proliferation of institutional responses reflects the absence of a settled policy framework (Israel & Amer, 2022).

Move 3 — Identifying the shared point of failure. The theoretical synthesis will bring the three traditions into direct comparative dialogue and identify the convergent point at which each strains: where epistemic responsibility resides when text production is substantially delegated to a large language model. Bajohr's causal-distance model (Bajohr, 2024) and Zeilinger's posthumanist agential assemblage (Zeilinger, 2021) will be positioned as complementary rather than competing responses.

Move 4 — Proposing the synthesis. The paper will argue that a transparency-regulated continuum of epistemic delegation — calibrated to the degree of delegation rather than attempting to draw a binary line — is the most analytically coherent position available. This move will engage directly with Adema's more radical processual alternative (Adema, 2021) and explain why, in the context of academic integrity, concentrated epistemic accountability cannot be dissolved even when text production is genuinely distributed.

Move 5 — Deriving governance implications. The paper will conclude by translating the synthesis into implications for intellectual property, co-authorship credit, and scholarly accountability, framing disclosure of epistemic delegation as the operative standard to replace origin-based originality alone.

4. Anticipated Limitations and Risks

Scope limitation. As a theoretical review, the paper will synthesise existing frameworks rather than generating or testing empirical claims. The proposed synthesis will therefore remain a reasoned position rather than a demonstrated finding. The paper will acknowledge this explicitly

and frame the continuum construct as provisional, requiring empirical validation in subsequent research.

Search-coverage risk. The literature corpus will be bounded to peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2015 and 2025 across literary theory, philosophy of language, legal studies, and AI governance. This risks excluding relevant earlier theoretical work and very recent policy developments. To mitigate this, foundational poststructuralist sources (Barthes, 2017; Foucault, 2019) will be traced regardless of publication date, and the paper will note where rapid field development makes any review liable to partial obsolescence.

Publication-bias risk. Peer-reviewed databases tend to over-represent established Western theoretical traditions and under-represent practitioner-facing and non-Anglophone scholarship. The paper will acknowledge that the frameworks synthesised draw predominantly from Western literary theory and Anglo-American and Continental European legal traditions, flagging the absence of non-Western and multilingual academic writing contexts as a genuine gap rather than treating the synthesis as universally prescriptive.

Disciplinary skew. The evidence base will draw predominantly on literary theory, philosophy of language, and legal studies, with limited engagement with empirical research in educational psychology or higher-education pedagogy. The paper will direct future research toward qualitative and longitudinal empirical methods to address this gap.

Unaddressed counterarguments. The paper will engage directly with the objection that generative AI is merely the latest in a long sequence of writing technologies and that authorship has accommodated prior technological transitions without fundamental reconceptualisation. The response — that LLMs participate in the formation of propositional content rather than merely mediating expression — will be tested against the strongest available counterpositions, and the paper will acknowledge that scholars working from different disciplinary commitments may reasonably weigh the evidence differently.

Temporal obsolescence risk. Given the speed at which generative AI capabilities and institutional policy are developing, the paper will frame its claims at a level of theoretical generality sufficient to remain analytically useful across near-term policy changes, while acknowledging that specific governance recommendations may require revision as the landscape evolves.

5. Expected Contribution and Significance

The proposed paper will make three interconnected contributions.

Theoretical contribution. By placing the legal-copyright, poststructuralist, and posthumanist-assemblage frameworks in direct comparative dialogue, the paper will produce a map of the theoretical terrain that makes visible both what each tradition offers and where each falls short — more analytically useful than any single-framework account.

Conceptual contribution. The paper will introduce and defend the transparency-regulated continuum of human–AI epistemic delegation as a working construct for academic integrity governance. This reframing — from a binary human-versus-machine distinction to a graduated spectrum calibrated to the degree of epistemic delegation — will offer institutional policymakers a more tractable basis for formulating disclosure and attribution requirements, shifting the operative standard from origin-based originality alone toward transparency of AI participation (Rodrigues, 2025).

Field-level significance. The paper will contribute to an emerging interdisciplinary conversation spanning literary theory, legal studies, science and technology studies, and higher-education governance. By demonstrating that the instabilities generative AI exposes were already latent within existing frameworks, it will help reorient the debate away from crisis-framing and toward the more productive question of which theoretical resources are best positioned to guide institutional adaptation.

6. Proposed Timeline

The paper is planned as a single-semester BA term paper across four phases.

Phase 1 — Scoping and source acquisition (Weeks 1–2). Initial identification and retrieval of the core source corpus spanning literary theory, legal studies, posthumanist scholarship, and AI governance literature. The research question will be confirmed, the three analytical traditions delimited, and a reading schedule established. Approximately 30–40 sources will be identified for deep engagement; a further set will be mapped at abstract level to establish broader field context.

Phase 2 — Deep reading and framework development (Weeks 3–5). Close reading and annotation of the core corpus, with particular attention to the three theoretical traditions. The conceptual framework — centred on epistemic agency, epistemic delegation, and the transparency-regulated continuum — will be drafted and refined during this phase.

Phase 3 — Drafting (Weeks 6–9). Sequential drafting of all sections: introduction, literature review, theoretical synthesis, limitations, and conclusion. The argument structure will be tested against the strongest available counterpositions, and the synthesis section revised iteratively as the comparative analysis develops. A complete first draft is planned by the end of Week 9.

Phase 4 — Revision and submission (Weeks 10–12). Structural and line-level revision of the full draft, with particular attention to consistency of core constructs across sections, citation accuracy, and word-count constraints. Peer feedback will be sought during Week 10 where possible, and a final proofread completed before submission at the end of Week 12.

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