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Perspectives & Commentaries

The Return of Human Judgment: Why Interpretation Still Matters in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence can summarize, translate, classify, synthesize, and produce interpretations that are fluent and plausible. This development encourages a misleading question: what work will remain for human scholars when machines perform so many intellectual operations? This commentary argues that the more consequential question concerns responsibility that cannot be reduced to generation. Drawing on hermeneutics, recent work on generative AI and epistemic agency, and debates over academic authorship, it distinguishes four epistemic levels: information, synthesis, interpretation, and judgment. Information concerns what can be retrieved; synthesis organizes materials; interpretation situates meaning in context; judgment evaluates significance and accepts responsibility for a claim. These levels can be connected without becoming interchangeable. The article develops two propositions. First, plausible language generation is not equivalent to historically and culturally adequate interpretation. Second, generation can be distributed, but accountability cannot. Human scholars therefore retain a distinctive role in framing questions, criticizing sources, choosing interpretations, and defending publication. The goal is a human–AI division of epistemic labor in which AI expands possibilities while human epistemic ownership remains attached to reasons, significance, and conclusions.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Humanities; Human Judgment; Interpretation; Human Agency; Epistemic Responsibility

1. Introduction: The Wrong Question about AI

Generative AI has made several scholarly operations remarkably inexpensive. A researcher can request a synopsis of a debate, compare passages across languages, generate possible classifications, or ask for alternative explanations in seconds. Such capabilities create genuine opportunities for the humanities, especially when they support large-scale comparison and help scholars move between archives, languages, and interpretive traditions (Krakowski, 2025; Wise et al., 2024). They also invite a familiar question: what will remain for humans to do?

The question is poorly framed. It treats scholarship as a bundle of detachable tasks and assumes that the value of a task is exhausted by the production of an output. Humanistic inquiry, however, is not only a process of producing sentences about cultural objects. It is a practice of deciding what deserves attention, what counts as relevant evidence, which context changes a meaning, and which interpretation can be defended before a community of readers. Those decisions are intellectual and normative at once.

The central claim is that generative AI's capacity to produce information and plausible interpretations shifts scholarly value toward contextual evaluation, significance, and accountability. The argument distinguishes information, synthesis, interpretation, and judgment as related but non-equivalent levels. It then uses hermeneutics to clarify situated understanding, examines why authorship remains tied to responsibility, and considers linguistic diversity alongside epistemic conformity. The principle is concise: generation can be distributed; accountability cannot.

2. Information Abundance and the Problem of Meaning

Generative systems reduce the cost of producing linguistic material. They can reproduce relevant-seeming passages, condense texts, translate expressions, and propose patterns for investigation. Yet these operations should not be collapsed into a single category called knowledge. A useful conceptual sequence is information → synthesis →

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interpretation → judgment.

Information is material that can be retrieved, represented, or communicated. Synthesis organizes it by grouping, comparing, or paraphrasing. Interpretation asks what it means in a particular historical, cultural, or argumentative setting. Judgment evaluates whether that interpretation is adequate, significant, and worth defending. The sequence is cumulative in practice but not automatic in logic. More information does not guarantee better interpretation, and a comprehensive synthesis may simply make an inherited assumption harder to notice.

This distinction matters because generative systems are optimized for plausible continuation and responsive presentation, not for the human purposes that make a claim significant. Hicks et al. (2024) argue that the language of "hallucination" can obscure this asymmetry by suggesting that a system attempts to represent a world and occasionally perceives it wrongly. A fluent output can look like testimony even when no truth-oriented standpoint stands behind it.

Corpus-based discourse research illustrates the consequence. In replication cases, ChatGPT assisted with categorization but produced generic categories, false inferences, and altered data, raising repeatability and integrity problems (Curry et al., 2024). Abundance therefore increases the burden of selection, criticism, and explanation: Why should this material count, and for what purpose?

3. Interpretation, Context, and Humanistic Knowledge

Hermeneutics provides a vocabulary for answering that question. Gadamer's account of understanding emphasizes that interpretation is historically effected: readers approach texts from within traditions, questions, and horizons that shape what can become intelligible (Gadamer, 2004). Understanding is not the extraction of a detachable message from a neutral container. It is an encounter between situated concerns and the claims of a text. Ricoeur similarly treats interpretation as a movement between a text's relative autonomy and the world it opens for a reader (Ricoeur, 1976). Meaning is neither whatever the reader wishes nor a mechanical property waiting to be decoded.

These ideas do not establish that machines can never contribute to interpretation. They establish a standard for assessing that contribution. An AI system can map recurring phrases, propose analogies, or bring a comparison into view. But a possibility becomes an interpretation only when situated in relation to a question, a corpus, a history of usage, and criteria of adequacy. The same expression may carry different force in a legal document, a religious text, a colonial archive, or a work of fiction. Context helps constitute what the meaning is.

Recent work on generative AI in the humanities makes a parallel point in methodological terms. Piper (2026) argues that theory should guide problem formation, construct definition, evaluation, and iteration rather than be added after computational analysis. Noller (2024) likewise describes AI as an extension of human purposes embedded in relations among algorithms, databases, and lifeworlds. These accounts suggest why the most serious danger is not always an obvious factual error. It may be plausibility without depth: a response that is linguistically coherent, culturally recognizable, and insufficiently attentive to the historical conditions that make an interpretation defensible.

4. Judgment, Accountability, and Human Agency

Judgment begins where alternatives must be weighed without a complete rule. A humanities scholar may have several plausible readings of a poem, archive, image, or historical episode. The task is to decide which reading best explains the evidence, what it reveals, and why its consequences matter. That decision is inseparable from accountability because published interpretations enter social worlds and shape representation.

Generative AI can produce candidate arguments, summarize positions, and expose researchers to unfamiliar formulations. It cannot answer: Why was this evidence selected? Why was this interpretation preferred? What alternatives were rejected? What are the limitations? Who assumes responsibility? Moffatt and Hall (2024) connect AI's exclusion from the author byline to this inability to accept responsibility. Formosa et al. (2025) show that authorship, creatorship, responsibility, and disclosure are distinct, so fluent contribution cannot settle the matter.

The point is not that intellectual labor must remain individual. Scholarship has long been distributed across assistants, editors, translators, archives, instruments, and teams. The distinction is between distributing operations and distributing responsibility. A researcher may delegate a search or translation while retaining the obligation to inspect and justify the result. Generation can be distributed; accountability cannot.

Human agency here is not a final spell-check after the real thinking is over. Wu et al. (2025) describe epistemic agency as active participation in setting goals, evaluating claims, and justifying knowledge. A scholar who accepts a model's framing without examining its assumptions has not retained agency merely because a human clicked "submit." One who interrogates outputs and rejects a convenient interpretation may use substantial machine assistance while remaining accountable.

A reasonable counterargument holds that this demand is institutional conservatism. If AI outperforms individuals in retrieval, comparison, or candidate explanations, requiring a human arbiter may preserve expensive habits. The objection is persuasive when judgment means intuition insulated from evidence. It is weaker when judgment means publicly articulable reasons. Scholarship requires someone who can state the grounds of a decision, revise them in response to criticism, and bear its consequences. Accountability is a relation among agents, evidence, and affected publics, not a by-product of fluent output.

5. The Risk of Interpretive Homogenization

Generative AI may diversify expression while narrowing the space of recognizable interpretations. Because systems are trained on patterned language and rewarded for useful-seeming responses, they often favor formulations that are statistically likely, culturally legible, and conventionally acceptable. This tendency does not mean that AI always produces the same answer or that it inevitably destroys creativity. It identifies a mechanism through which linguistic novelty can coexist with epistemic conformity.

The danger is especially visible in humanities work, where an interpretation's value may depend on a difficult, marginal, or historically unfamiliar perspective. A system can smooth away the friction that signals a different conceptual vocabulary. It may translate an unfamiliar category into a dominant one, present disagreement as a balanced list, or turn a contested history into a polished summary. Wise et al. (2024) emphasize that writing scholarship must treat AI as a challenge to authorship and academic integrity while still engaging its possibilities. UNESCO's human-centred guidance likewise places agency, cultural and linguistic diversity, and plural expression at the centre of responsible use (Miao & Holmes, 2023).

The appropriate response is observation and institutional design rather than a sweeping claim that AI eliminates originality. Scholars should ask which sources are made salient, which languages are treated as central, what kinds of ambiguity are resolved too quickly, and whether the system's suggestions reinforce familiar disciplinary frames. Diversity must be evaluated at the level of questions, concepts, and evidentiary relations, not only at the level of surface style.

6. Toward a Human–AI Division of Epistemic Labor

A constructive approach assigns tasks according to epistemic risks and advantages. Generative systems are useful for retrieval support, preliminary synthesis, translation assistance, comparison, alternative-hypothesis generation, and stylistic revision. Their value is greatest when they enlarge attention without silently deciding what the field means. Krakowski (2025) argues that human agency determines the organizational and ethical outcomes of adoption.

Human scholars should retain final authority over question formation, source criticism, contextual interpretation, methodological justification, significance, normative judgment, and conclusions. These activities are not untouched by tools: search interfaces influence questions, translation changes textual texture, and suggestions redirect arguments. Influence should be inspectable. Piper's (2026) theory-first approach is practical: specify the object, construct, model's role, and evaluation criteria before treating output as evidence.

The normative principle of human epistemic ownership names this arrangement. Ownership does not mean producing every word or idea without assistance. It means reconstructing the path from question to conclusion and defending the reasons that connect them. It also means disclosing material AI assistance where venue conventions require it. Moffatt and Hall (2024) and Formosa et al. (2025) show why transparency matters: authorship assigns credit, authority, and responsibility, not merely textual production.

The strongest version of this approach is neither "AI as author" nor "AI as mere tool." Human–AI collaboration is a situated practice in which systems expand possibility while humans preserve answerability. The scholar should be able to state what the system did, which outputs were rejected, how sources were verified, and why the interpretation is warranted. Such documentation protects the interpretive space in which disagreement, revision, and plural meaning remain possible.

7. Conclusion

The central transformation brought by generative AI is that information and provisional synthesis are becoming abundant, while the reasons for treating one interpretation as significant remain difficult to automate. The distinction among information, synthesis, interpretation, and judgment clarifies the stakes. These activities can be connected in a workflow, but generation supplies neither historical context nor responsibility.

Humanistic scholarship should neither romanticize solitary authorship nor delegate epistemic authority to fluent systems. It should build collaboration in which AI broadens comparison and possibility while scholars retain ownership of questions, reasons, and conclusions. Credible judgment matters because it can be situated, challenged, revised, and defended. This responsibility also gives the humanities a public role: to keep distinctions among evidence, meaning, and significance visible when automated fluency encourages their collapse. It calls for institutions that reward documented reasoning, source criticism, and intellectual pluralism rather than polished output alone. The preservation of this capacity supports a plural public culture in which disagreement remains inquiry, not noise, and interpretive difference remains intellectually productive. AI can expand possible interpretations, but human scholars remain responsible for deciding which ones they are prepared to defend.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Shuting Yang is the sole author and was responsible for the conceptualization, analysis, writing, and final approval of this commentary.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were generated or analyzed for this commentary.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Not applicable.

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The author declares that generative AI tools were used solely for literature search and translation assistance. The author takes full responsibility for the conceptualization, analysis, writing, and final content of this commentary.

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