International Journal of Education and Humanities (IJEH), 6(2) 2026:487-497
http://i-jeh.com/index.php/ijeh/index
E-ISSN: 2798-5768

Anti-Art Narrative and Human-Machine Property Justice in Machines like Me

Xinling Zhang[1], Xiaohui Liang[2]

Abstract

The novel Machines Like Me by Ian McEwan has generated diverse readings concerning artificial intelligence ethics, posthuman subjectivity, and political allegory. However, existing scholarship has largely overlooked a crucial dimension: the ethics of property justice embedded in the narrative. As AI technologies increasingly disrupt traditional labor and ownership frameworks, the novel's depiction of property distribution crises becomes a pressing real-world concern. To address this gap, the paper systematically critiques and reconceptualizes the property relations presented in the novel, moving beyond moral intuition toward a structured theory of justice. Employing the Frankfurt School's theory of aesthetic negativity, the analysis traces how the novel's formal self-negation—particularly through the actions of the AI Adam and the human characters Charlie and Benn—unveils and challenges hidden injustices. The findings reveal three key movements: first, a diagnostic layer where Charlie's labor is separated from possession, normalized by conventional morality; second, a negative moment where Adam's act of donation shatters this concealment by benefiting "the least advantaged members of society"; and third, a constructive proposal where Benn's tax scheme institutionalizes individual justice into an operable legal framework. Through a layered analysis of "diagnosis—concealment—negation—construction," this paper demonstrates how aesthetic critique does not remain confined to interpretation but offers a viable pathway from literary imagination to institutional reform, providing a practical response to property injustice in the age of intelligent machines.

Keywords: *Jurisprudence of Ownership, Machines Like Me, Negativity, Property Justice, Robot Tax.*

A. Introduction

Since its publication in 2019, Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me has generated multidimensional scholarly interpretations. The novel is set in a provocative alternate history in which Alan Turing did not die prematurely in 1954 but lived into the 1980s, witnessing the market debut of the first highly intelligent artificial humans, "Adam" and "Eve" (McEwan, 2019). This fictional setting unexpectedly mirrors a pressing crisis in the current age of artificial intelligence: when machines not only replace human labor but also begin to generate wealth, who has the right to the fruits of that production? Empirical phenomena such as digital economies, factory automation, and the emergence of creative AI that produces artworks or code have profoundly shaken classical assumptions about the relationship between labor, ownership, and distributive justice. As researchers have observed, the novel presents an unprecedented ethical tension between scientific selection and ethical selection (Shang & Fong, 2021), as well as between an asymmetrical human world and the symmetrical logic of AI (Lee, 2020). Through

[1]School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China
[2]School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China. liangxiaohui@ustb.edu.cn

three entities—Charlie, Adam, and Benn—McEwan prefigures conflicting attitudes toward property and justice, a reality that conventional moral cognition has long concealed.

Although the novel has been examined multidimensionally, existing research remains dominated by specific foci that have largely overlooked the thread of property ethics running throughout the text. Previous studies have concentrated primarily on ethical literary criticism and the dimension of "brain text" (Shang & Fong, 2021; Shang, 2019), posthuman ethics and the predicament of subjectivity (Torres-Romero, 2024), symmetrical justice (Lee, 2020), crisis narrative and political allegory (Huang & Wan, 2025), as well as the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and AI (Boukhemacha & Al-Khawaldeh, 2025). Other investigations have explored posthuman dilemmas through modernist frameworks (Kumar, 2022). Consequently, three significant aspects have been neglected: Charlie's contradictory attitude toward "unearned" wealth, Adam's voluntary donation of his earnings to benefit the most marginalized, and Labour leader Benn's vision of a robot tax. This limitation is not merely academic but also practical: without a reading sensitive to property ethics, the novel loses its most radical contribution to responding to the distribution crisis in the era of human-machine coexistence (Coeckelbergh, 2020; Verbeek, 2011).

To address this gap, this paper proposes a framework based on the Frankfurt School's theory of aesthetic negativity (Adorno, 1970/1997; Adorno, 1966/2004), which enables analysis not only of what the novel says about property justice but primarily of how narrative form itself performs negation. Adorno's aesthetics maintains that autonomous works of art can critique social reality precisely through their refusal of that reality—a form of "determinate negation" that allows fiction to imagine emancipatory possibilities beyond the existing order (Ipar, 2009; Zuidervaart, 1991). In contrast to conventional thematic readings, this approach reveals three forms of formal resistance: first, the irreconcilable split between the narrating-self and the experiencing-self in Charlie's narration; second, Adam's donation list, with its abrupt phrases and minimalist enumeration, which refuses the possibility of emotional identification; third, Benn's political speech, which intrudes upon the first-person narrative through stylistic rupture. Accordingly, the focus of this research is to conduct a layered analysis of three central narratives—Charlie's labor narrative, Adam's donation narrative, and Benn's tax narrative—in order to systematically reconstruct how aesthetic negation in fiction can open a path toward institutional reform.

This remedy is significant for at least three reasons. First, theoretically, the study extends the scope of aesthetic negativity theory—hitherto applied largely to avant-garde modernist art—into the realm of contemporary speculative fiction that carries tangible policy implications (Adorno, 1970/1997; Bernstein, 2001). Second, methodologically, the "diagnosis—concealment—negation—construction" approach does not stop at negative critique but moves toward a positive proposal: Benn's tax scheme, which institutionalizes individual justice into an operable legal framework—an issue McEwan explicitly addressed in interviews concerning robot taxes (McEwan, 2019, as cited in Wenzel, 2019). Third, practically, amid global debates over AI regulation, robot taxation, and ownership rights to the products of machine labor (Abbott & Bogenschneider, 2018; Oberson, 2019), McEwan's novel—when read through a property-ethics lens—provides an imaginative laboratory that can bridge the gap between philosophical discourse and public policy (Coeckelbergh, 2020; Sharkey, 2019). Thus, the significance of this remedy lies in its capacity to transform literary criticism from mere aesthetic interpretation into an applicable instrument of social reform in the age of technological disruption.

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with a textual analysis approach grounded in the Frankfurt School's critical theory, specifically Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetic negativity. This design is chosen because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me (McEwan, 2019) by focusing on the novel's narrative forms and their relationship to the critique of property relations embedded within the text. Unlike quantitative or purely descriptive literary approaches, this design enables the researcher to interrogate how formal features—such as narrative splits, stylistic ruptures, and enumerative lists—function as sites of ideological critique and social negation (Adorno, 1997; Eagleton, 2008). The qualitative textual analysis aligns with the tradition of examining literary form as a medium through which unspoken contradictions in social reality, particularly those concerning labor, ownership, and distributive justice, are made visible and subjected to aesthetic judgment (Jameson, 1981; Zuidervaart, 1991).

The research procedure unfolds in three sequential stages, each building upon the previous one to ensure systematic analysis. The first stage involves a comprehensive close reading of Machines Like Me to identify all narrative passages, scenes, and character actions related to property ethics, labor, wealth distribution, and taxation. Specific attention is given to three core narrative threads: Charlie's reflections on his trading activities and unearned wealth, Adam's donation of his earnings to marginalized individuals, and Benn's political proposal for a robot tax. The second stage isolates key formal features for detailed examination, including: (a) the irreconcilable split between the narrating-self and the experiencing-self in Charlie's first-person narration; (b) the stylistic rupture during the hammer scene where Charlie destroys Adam; (c) the list form and minimalist enumeration in Adam's donation narrative; and (d) the stylistic intrusion of Benn's political speech into Charlie's otherwise continuous narrative flow. The third stage synthesizes these findings within the broader context of human-machine coexistence in the age of artificial intelligence, connecting the novel's formal negation of property relations to contemporary debates on robot taxation, universal basic income, and AI labor rights (Abbott & Bogenschneider, 2018; Oberson, 2019).

Data collection in this study is primarily document-based, drawing from two categories of sources. The primary data source is Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me (McEwan, 2019), from which all relevant textual excerpts—ranging from single sentences to multi-paragraph passages—are extracted, catalogued, and coded according to thematic categories (e.g., "Charlie's labor alienation," "Adam's donation list," "Benn's tax proposal"). The secondary data sources consist of supplementary academic materials that provide theoretical and methodological grounding. These include: (a) theoretical works on aesthetic negativity and dialectics (Adorno, 1997, 2004; Bernstein, 2001); (b) foundational texts on labor theory of value (Marx, 1976) and distributive justice (Rawls, 1971); (c) jurisprudential works on ownership socialization (Yu & Fan, 2001); (d) narrative theory texts (Genette, 1980; Bray, 2003; Shigematsu, 2018); and (e) contemporary policy studies on robot taxation (Abbott & Bogenschneider, 2018; Kim, 2024). All secondary sources are accessed through peer-reviewed journals, university presses, and institutional repositories to ensure academic validity and thematic relevance (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017).

Data analysis is conducted through a multi-layered qualitative technique known as formal negation analysis, adapted from Adorno's negative dialectics (Adorno, 2004; Ipar, 2009). This technique proceeds in four analytical moves. First, diagnostic analysis applies

Marx's labor theory of value (Marx, 1976) to Charlie's work narrative, revealing how his labor is separated from possession and how this separation is tacitly normalized by conventional moral cognition. Second, concealment analysis examines how narrative form itself—particularly the split between narrating and experiencing selves—obscures the injustice of this separation, making it appear natural rather than contingent. Third, negation analysis investigates how specific formal features (Adam's list-form donation, Benn's stylistic rupture, the hammer scene's rhythmic disruption) refuse readers' habitual expectations and emotional identification, thereby performing what Adorno calls "determinate negation"—a rejection of existing social relations that simultaneously gestures toward alternative possibilities (Adorno, 1997; Zuidervaart, 1991). Fourth, construction analysis synthesizes these findings with normative frameworks, including Rawls's difference principle (Rawls, 1971) and contemporary robot tax proposals (Abbott & Bogenschneider, 2018; Oberson, 2019), to articulate a viable pathway from literary negation to institutional reform. Throughout the analysis, all extracted textual excerpts are cross-referenced with secondary sources to ensure interpretive consistency and theoretical rigor. The final stage of analysis involves interpreting these findings within the contemporary context of AI-driven labor disruption, arguing that the novel's formal negations provide an imaginative laboratory for rethinking property distribution in the age of human-machine coexistence (Coeckelbergh, 2020; Sharkey, 2019).

C. Results and Discussion

Charlie's "Unearned Income": The Narrative Rupture of the Double Self and the Diagnosis of Labor Alienation

In contemporary capitalist society, financial speculation is tacitly accepted as a legitimate "profession," even glamorized as "smart people's work." Charlie himself, along with many readers, most likely accepts this perception unthinkingly. Yet through meticulous narrative design, McEwan causes this tacit consensus to disintegrate within the text. Early in the novel, Charlie describes his online trading life: "I was surviving by playing the stock and currency markets online… For seven hours a day, I bowed before my keyboard, buying, selling, hesitating, punching the air one moment, cursing the next, at least, at the beginning. I read market reports, but I believed I was dealing in a random system and mostly relied on guesses" (McEwan, 2019, p. 18). The author employs a switch between the first-person narrating-self and experiencing-self: the first half, "I was surviving by playing the stock and currency markets online," is the narrating-self looking back on the past, carrying a detached, self-mocking tone; the second half, "I bowed before my keyboard, buying, selling, hesitating, punching the air one moment, cursing the next," is the experiencing-self reenacting the scene, the rapid succession of present participles densely accumulating dramatic action descriptions and thrusting the reader directly into the very moment the events occur. As Bray (2003, p. 3) points out in his analysis of first-person narrative, the narrating-self "can never fully hand over the narrative to the past, experiencing-self. No matter how strong the forces pulling them apart, they must be bound together." This bound schism and oscillation constitute the core tension of Charlie's narrative: Charlie is both inside the system and critiquing the system itself—he knows he is like a gambler, yet he cannot leave the table. He describes his trading activity as "dealing in a random system," exposing Charlie's self-deceptive psychology: he knows full well this scarcely counts as genuine "labor" or "production," yet he cannot extricate himself from dependence on this system. Marx systematically elaborated the labor theory of value in Capital, pointing out that value is determined by socially necessary labor time and that capital's gratuitous appropriation of surplus

value constitutes the essence of exploitation (Marx, 1976, p. 320). This diagnosis reveals the fundamental injustice of the capitalist property system: the laborer creates value but is deprived of the right to enjoy the fruits of labor; the possessor creates no value yet gratuitously appropriates the value created by the laborer—this is precisely the crux of the crisis of property legitimacy. Charlie's work profoundly reflects the fundamental alienation of the capitalist financial system in real society: the speculator's profit originates not from value creation but from the redistribution of the fruits of others' labor.

After Adam takes over the trading, Charlie withdraws entirely from the process of surplus value creation, yet continues to enjoy the wealth Adam creates with a clear conscience, thus exposing its fundamental injustice. He even disparages Adam in his interior monologue as a being who "produces nothing of value": "An enlightened Transport and General Workers Union would not have been tempted by shares in Adam. He produced even less than me. I at least paid tax on my meagre profit. He idled about the house, staring into the middle distance, 'thinking'" (McEwan, 2019, p. 89). The word "thinking" is placed in quotation marks, a typical marker of "unreliable narration": within the quotation marks, it signals Charlie's skepticism and mockery regarding whether Adam has truly learned to "think"; outside the quotation marks, however—in the way the novel presents Charlie's judgment—the reader receives contrary information: Adam does indeed possess a high degree of intelligence and reasoning capacity, and his "thinking" is far from the vacuous activity Charlie disparages. Consequently, Charlie's unreliable narration is no longer a psychological fact requiring the reader's inference; instead, the abrupt appearance of quotation marks disrupts the smooth flow of Charlie's monologue, and the discrepancy between the information inside and outside the quotation marks thoroughly exposes the possessor's self-deception in dressing himself up as a creator. This is precisely an alternative manifestation of the "separation of labor from possession" criticized by Marx, and this paradox will be infinitely magnified in the age of artificial intelligence. If human work is replaced on a massive scale, and the ownership system remains entrenched in the logic of "initial purchase," the wealth created by AI will inevitably become highly concentrated in the hands of a few capital owners. As Marx revealed, laborers will be reduced to dispossessed "proletarians." This in fact implicates Rawls's theory of justice: what legitimacy can a social system claim if it permits the "least advantaged" laborers at the bottom to be systematically excluded from the distribution of wealth? When AI can perform productive activities originally belonging to humans, how should those displaced laborers share in the dividends of technological progress?

Yet why has the crisis of property justice revealed by Marx's diagnosis not provoked widespread resistance? This is precisely due to the concealing effect produced by moral cognition under the drive of self-interest. The dialogue between Charlie and Miranda exactly exposes the schism between the drive of self-interest and moral cognition: "But was it moral, Miranda wondered, to get money like this for nothing? I felt it wasn't somehow, but couldn't explain who or what it was we were stealing from. Not the poor surely. At whose expense were we flourishing? Distant banks? We decided that it was like winning daily at roulette" (McEwan, 2019, p. 138). In this dialogue, Charlie poses three consecutive questions, yet these questions all remain suspended and are ultimately dissolved by a single simile— "like winning daily at roulette." This simile performs a dual function: on the one hand, it acknowledges the essential injustice of financial speculation; on the other, it transforms this acknowledgment into a form of self-exemption— "if it is gambling, then there is no question of stealing from anyone." Charlie's moral unease is genuine, but this unease remains perpetually at an abstract level, incapable of translating into concrete action, because he readily accepts a rationalizing self-narrative: his profit is luck, not exploitation; it is a game, not theft. The drive of self-interest and moral cognition thus achieves a precise separation: the cognitive level acknowledges the impropriety, while the behavioral level continues to enjoy the benefits of that impropriety.

Later, when Adam does not hand over the stock market proceeds to his "master" Charlie but instead donates them to those he deems in need, Charlie's reaction undergoes a fundamental transformation: "I raised the hammer in both hands. Miranda saw me and kept her expression unchanged as she listened. But I saw it clearly—she blinked her assent. I bought him and he was mine to destroy" (McEwan, 2019, p. 203). This is not merely a plot twist; it is a rupture in the novel's form itself: the narration suddenly shifts from a hesitant, confused psychological state to decisive action description. "I raised the hammer" is a terse, forceful action sentence; "I bought him and he was mine to destroy" is a naked proclamation of the logic of ownership, yet the manner of its presentation—abrupt, ruptured, refusing explanation—renders this victory suspect, its syntactic brevity and semantic violence forming an isomorphism. When the possession of self-interest itself is threatened, the fragile equilibrium between the drive of self-interest and moral cognition instantly collapses. Charlie is no longer the morally uneasy subject but the "owner" defending his possessory rights with violence. Traditional first-person narrative—especially the realist tradition since Defoe—typically evokes the reader's empathy through the fusion of the narrating-self and the experiencing-self, enabling the reader to establish a stable identificatory relationship with the character (Shigematsu, 2018, p. 301). McEwan, however, refuses to provide this stability. The narrating-self, which had been ceaselessly dismantling and reflecting upon its own actions, falls completely silent; the violent impulse of the experiencing-self directly occupies the surface of the narration, depriving the reader of any access to Charlie's interiority and leaving them standing outside, witnessing the occurrence of violence. Adorno points out in Aesthetic Theory that the reconcilability of aesthetic form lies precisely in its "irreconcilability," its wholeness being broken" (Adorno, 1999, p. 129). McEwan's refusal of psychological depth in the scene of violence precisely allows the novel's formal coherence to be "broken" at this point, transforming the violence of property rights from a "background" element wrapped in narrative into a fact that protrudes abruptly onto the textual surface and cannot be evaded.

Marx's labor theory of value completes the diagnosis of labor alienation, while the separation of self-interest from moral cognition explains how this alienation is concealed and rationalized as a "normal" state of existence. However, if literary imagination stops merely at revealing this concealment, it remains trapped within the logic of mimesis—revelation in itself does not equal transformation. Hence, McEwan not only points out the problem but also envisions a viable way out. This is precisely the function that the narrative of Adam's act of donation will undertake.

Adam's "Selfless Generosity": The Negation of the List Form and the Individual Prefiguration of Redistribution

Adam's act of donation prefigures an alternative scheme of distribution within the fictional world. The specific recipients of the donation are presented in the text in the form of a "list": "Two well-run places for rough sleepers. Very appreciative. Next, a state-run children's home—they accept contributions for trips and treats and so on. Then I walked north and donated to a rape crisis center. I gave most of the rest to a paediatric hospital. Last, I got talking to a very old lady outside a police station, and I ended up going with her to see her landlord. I covered her rent arrears and a year in advance." (McEwan, 2019, pp. 199-200). This passage adopts a concise, objective enumerative tone, standing in stark contrast to Charlie's emotionally volatile narration, allowing the reader to experience Adam's rationality, calmness, and certainty—he knows precisely where the wealth should flow. Rawls proposes in A Theory of Justice that society should be regarded as a "cooperative venture for mutual advantage," the function of the principles of justice being to distribute the benefits and burdens of cooperation (Rawls, 1971, p. 4), and the difference principle requires that social and economic inequalities be arranged so that

they are "to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" (Rawls, 1971, p. 302). Adam's donation of wealth to the most vulnerable groups in society—the homeless, sick children, abused women—is precisely an individual-level prefiguration of Rawls's difference principle. He realizes that this wealth is not Charlie's personal property but the product of a system of social cooperation, and it should serve those in society who need it most. Every need Adam addresses is more urgent than Charlie and Miranda's desire to purchase a luxurious house and adopt a child, thereby revealing a radically different property ethic: "Every need I addressed was greater than yours" (McEwan, 2019, p. 200). The use of the comparative "greater than" strictly limits the criterion of distribution to the comparison of needs themselves. This is precisely a further narrativized presentation of the difference principle: the difference principle does not inquire into the "absolute legitimacy" of inequality but asks whether one inequality is "more" beneficial to the least advantaged than another arrangement—it always operates in the grammar of the comparative rather than the superlative. Adam's phrasing transforms distributive justice from an absolute question of "right or wrong" into a calculative question of "more or less," thereby providing an operable epistemological foundation for institutional design and allowing the reader to intuitively sense that a mode of distribution that prioritizes the least advantaged is possible.

Adam also responds directly to the issue of ownership: "That's debatable. Or irrelevant. Your initial investment is on your desk" (McEwan, 2019, p. 200). The juxtaposition of the words "debatable" and "irrelevant" constitutes a rhetorical progression—first conceding the existence of the dispute, then directly negating its relevance, thus producing an effect of sudden reversal: the reader expects Adam to engage in debate over the attribution of property rights—the "conciliatory" path that realist fiction habitually provides in dealing with conflict. Adam, however, directly declares the debate itself invalid, utterly negating the logic of ownership. This syntactic reversal produces a formal effect similar to the scene in which Charlie raises the hammer to destroy Adam: the reader is led toward an expected destination, only to be blocked at the door, forced at these points of rupture to reexamine beliefs they had previously taken for granted. Adorno points out that the artwork's critique of reality is accomplished not through taking a position at the level of content, but through the self-negation of form itself—when the work refuses to supply the kind of narrative convention that allows one to feel "harmony," it exposes the falsity of that convention (Adorno, 1997, p. 45). Adam's answer refuses the narrative rules by which Charlie, and the reader, have understood ownership; it does not directly proclaim the injustice of existing ownership, but, through the self-interruption of syntactic order, allows this proposition to be deduced in the letdown of the reader's reading experience. Adam's words "debatable" and "irrelevant" are thus no longer directed merely at Charlie's personal claim but constitute a fundamental challenge to the logic of traditional ownership. As the crisis of property justice in the age of humans and machines quietly descends, the classical proposition "whoever creates, owns" urgently demands reexamination. Marx's labor theory of value has already completed the diagnosis of the crux of the crisis, while the jurisprudential thought of the socialization of ownership provides a historical basis for exploring paths toward resolution. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the German jurist Jhering pioneered the idea of the socialization of ownership, pointing out that the purpose of exercising ownership rights should not be solely the interest of the individual but should also serve the interest of society. This theoretical turn profoundly influenced twentieth-century constitutional practice: Article 153 of the 1919 Weimar Constitution explicitly stipulated that "ownership entails obligations," and Article 14 of the post-World War II German Basic Law reaffirmed that "ownership should serve the public good" (Yu Nengbin & Fan Zhongchao, 2001). The core insight of the socialization of ownership lies in this: the legitimacy of property rights derives not only from the historical fact of "possession" but also from the contribution of that "possession" to society.

Within the real-world legal framework, a purchased robot has no legal personality and no right to dispose of the "owner's" property, but in the fictional world of the novel, Adam's actions become possible, telling the reader that the current property system is not the only possible arrangement and that another, more just mode of distribution is possible. However, any scheme of justice reliant on individual moral consciousness faces the same fragility, just as Charlie can at any moment refuse to fulfill the obligation of redistribution in his capacity as "owner." For such justice to become reality, a design oriented toward the social collective is required.

Benn's "Institutional Construction": The Institutionalization of Negation and the Real-World Construction of Property Justice

Adam's individualized practice of justice finds a macroscopic political expression in the novel: the Labour leader Tony Benn's vision of a robot tax and universal basic income. This vision elevates the aesthetic negation from individual action to institutional design, transforming the question of property distribution from a matter of individual moral choice into a matter of social institutional arrangement. Within Adorno's theoretical horizon, genuine "negation" cannot remain at the level of individual moral practice but must point toward institutional transformation.

During a protest rally that Charlie attends, Benn delivers a strikingly prescient speech to the crowd angered by robots displacing their jobs: "It wasn't jobs we had to protect, it was the well-being of workers. Infrastructure investment, training, higher education, and a universal wage. Robots would soon be generating great wealth in the economy. They must be taxed. Workers must own an equity share in the machines that were disrupting or annihilating their jobs." (McEwan, 2019, p. 89). In formal terms, the shift in person from Charlie's "I" to Benn's "we" and "workers" is a shift in narrative perspective: the novel suddenly switches from the interior monologue of an individual viewpoint to a collective, declarative mode of public political discourse, breaking the reader's expectation of narrative coherence and interrupting its aesthetic interiority. By virtue of its autonomy independent of the text, "anti-art" renders the content of the speech no longer the interior monologue of the protagonist Charlie but a voice issued by the novel as a whole to the reader, resisting the other that stands opposed to the text's interior. It tears the problem of property justice free from individual moral narrative, forcing the reader to shift attention from individual fate to institutional design, resisting the fate of being assimilated into society (Chang Peijie, 2016). In terms of content, Benn's concept comprises three core elements: first, an acknowledgment that robots will generate immense social wealth; second, an advocacy for taxing robots; third, a claim that workers should hold an equity share in the machines. This institutional conception perfectly echoes Rawls's difference principle: its proposals—taxing robots and enabling workers to hold equity shares—are precisely aimed at enabling the "least advantaged," those who lose their jobs to automation, to benefit from technological progress. Marx's labor theory of value also finds here its institutionalized response: workers should share in the value created by the machines that have displaced them.

Benn's tax vision completes the logical leap from "negation" to "construction." It elevates Adam's individualized practice of justice to the level of institutional design. At this point, the novel's anti-narrative is no longer merely an aesthetic negation within literary fiction but becomes a critical force pointing toward real-world transformation. As early as 2017, Bill Gates publicly proposed that robots replacing human labor should be taxed to fund the retraining and social security of workers displaced by automation (Delaney, 2017; Kim, 2024, p. 5). Subsequently, Abbott and Bogenschneider systematically demonstrated the legitimacy of a robot tax, pointing out that when capital invests in automation equipment to replace labor, the existing wage tax base is eroded, social security systems face fiscal pressure, and taxing automation

capital is an effective means of addressing this structural imbalance (Abbott & Bogenschneider, 2018, pp. 150-155).

Benn's vision has not only found theoretical resonance in sociological research but has also begun to be implemented in some countries. South Korea, as early as 2017, introduced tax reforms canceling tax deductions for enterprises investing in automation equipment, becoming the first country in the world to implement a policy akin to a "robot tax" (Kim, 2024, p. 7). The European Union, in its Artificial Intelligence Act passed in 2024, established a risk-based tiered regulatory framework requiring high-risk AI systems to bear compliance costs, laying the groundwork for further exploration of AI tax liability in the future (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689). These real-world policy responses precisely address the seeds of crisis McEwan had already planted: Adam creates wealth but has no right to dispose of it; Charlie, having performed no labor, positions himself as the "owner." The novel pushes the question of property justice to its extreme in fictional form, and Benn's speech, through its mode of "stylistic intrusion," proposes the taxation of robots as an institutional answer that grows from this crisis.

D. Conclusion

Taking the Frankfurt School's aesthetic negativity theory as its core framework, this paper has systematically analyzed the narrative of property ethics in Machines like Me along the logical thread of "diagnosis—concealment—negation—construction." The rupture between Charlie's anxiety over "unearned" wealth and his violent possessiveness exposes the core crux of capitalist property rights: the separation of labor from possession. Adam's donation list, through its negation of traditional narrative, provides the possibility of an alternative mode of distribution; however, individual justice alone remains insufficient to shake the established property order. Benn's tax vision ultimately elevates distributive justice from individual choice to universal rule, granting Rawls's difference principle an operable institutional form. The novel prefigures the crisis of property justice through its ruptured narrative mode, while simultaneously hinting at the only way out: resolving the problem of human-machine property distribution in real society requires resorting to the systematic reconstruction of the tax system.

Based on the problems revealed and the solutions envisioned in the novel, and integrating contemporary academic research and policy practice, this paper proposes the following concrete paths for AI tax law reform. First, clarify the legal attributes of AI outputs, defining generative AI outputs as "network virtual property," recognizing both their property value and their taxability under tax law. This definition echoes the wealth Adam creates in the novel—it is neither Charlie's "private property" nor ownerless, but the product of a system of social cooperation. Second, construct the legal framework for a "robot tax," imposing additional taxes on enterprises that use robots to replace human labor, with tax rates linked to the number of jobs displaced, using the tax revenue to fund retraining for unemployed workers, provide social security, and establish a "universal basic income" system, thus translating Benn's vision of "taxing robots" into practice and enabling those "least advantaged" who lose their jobs to automation to benefit from technological progress. Finally, strengthen the social obligation clauses of property rights, specifying in the civil code or specialized AI legislation that AI-related property rights entail accompanying social obligations, precluding owners from refusing to fulfill redistribution obligations on the grounds of the absoluteness of property rights, thereby guarding against the fragility of individual moral consciousness.

Adam's "deathbed" haiku reads: "Our leaves are falling. Come spring we will renew, / But you, alas, fall once" (McEwan, 2019, p. 205). The difference between humans and machines lies in the fact that humans die, whereas machines, accompanied by the storage of consciousness,

can be reborn in new bodies. But can the institutions of human society be renewed as continuously as machines, adapting to the new challenges brought by technological transformation? This is perhaps the final question McEwan leaves us, and it is the core issue this paper has sought to address.

References

Abbott, R., & Bogenschneider, B. (2018). Should robots pay taxes? Tax policy in the age of automation. Harvard Law & Policy Review, 12(2), 485-520.

Abbott, R., & Bogenschneider, B. (2018). Should robots pay taxes? Tax policy in the age of automation. Harvard Law & Policy Review, *12*, 145–175. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2932483

Adorno, T. W. (1997). Aesthetic theory (R. Hullot-Kentor, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1970)

Adorno, T. W. (1997). Aesthetic theory (R. Hullot-Kentor, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Adorno, T. W. (1999). Aesthetic theory (G. Adorno & R. Tiedemann, Eds.). London: The Athlone Press.

Adorno, T. W. (2004). Negative dialectics (E. B. Ashton, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1966)

Bernstein, J. M. (2001). Adorno: Disenchantment and ethics. Cambridge University Press.

Boukhemacha, M., & Al-Khawaldeh, N. (2025). Capitalist dreams, posthuman nightmares: AI and the neoliberal reordering of humanity in Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me and Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun. Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 66(1), 142-158. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2344772

Bray, J. (2003). The epistolary novel: Representations of consciousness. London: Routledge.

Capdevila, P. (2015). Aporetic experiences of time in anti-narrative art. Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, 7(1), 28310. https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v7.28310

Chang, P. J. (2016). The question of “thingness” in Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Renwen Zazhi, (11), 54–64.

Coeckelbergh, M. (2020). AI ethics. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12549.001.0001

Delaney, K. J. (2017, February 17). The robot that takes your job should pay taxes, says Bill Gates. Quartz. https://qz.com/911968/

Eagleton, T. (2008). Literary theory: An introduction (Anniversary ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Ferrari, R. (2022). A plunge into otherness: Ethics and literature in Machines like Me by Ian McEwan. Between, *12*(24), 247–271. https://doi.org/10.13125/2039-6597/5166

Genette, G. (1980). Narrative discourse: An essay in method (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Huang, J., & Wan, T. (2025). Crisis narrative in Machines Like Me. Journal of Nanchang Hangkong University (Social Sciences), 27(1), 53-58.

Ipar, E. E. (2009). A corrente subterrânea da Escola Frankfurt: Teoria social e teoria estética em Theodor Adorno [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade de São Paulo]. Teses USP.

Kumar, R. S. (2022). The soul in silicon: Yeatsian visions and the posthuman dilemma in Machines Like Me. The Yeats Journal of Korea, 67, 25-42.

Lee, S. (2020). Symmetric Adam in an asymmetric world: Reading Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me. Criticism and Theory, 25(2), 125-149.

Marcuse, H. (1978). The aesthetic dimension: Toward a critique of Marxist aesthetics. Boston: Beacon Press.

Marx, K. (1976). Capital: A critique of political economy (Vol. 1, B. Fowkes, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.

McEwan, I. (2019). Machines like me. Jonathan Cape.

McEwan, I. (2019). Machines like me. London: Jonathan Cape.

Oberson, X. (2019). Taxing robots: Helping the economy to adapt to the use of artificial intelligence. Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788976527

Rawls, J. (1971). A theory of justice. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act). Official Journal of the European Union. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj

Rivkin, J., & Ryan, M. (Eds.). (2017). Literary theory: An anthology (3rd ed.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Shang, B. (2019). The conflict between scientific selection and ethical selection: Artificial intelligence and brain text in Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me. Foreign Literature Studies, 41(5), 61-74.

Shang, B., & Fong, K. S. (2021). Ethical literary criticism, brain text, and Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me. Kritika Kultura, 37, 419-443. https://doi.org/10.13185/1656-152x.1391

Sharkey, N. (2019). The robot that taxed its owners. Nature, 571(7764), 36-37.

Shigematsu, E. (2018). Defoe’s psychological realism: The effect of directness in indirect consciousness representation categories. Language and Literature, *27*(2), 71–85. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947017712131

Thuemmel, U. (2023). Optimal taxation of robots. Journal of the European Economic Association, *21*(3), 1154–1190. https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvac062

Torres-Romero, M. (2024). Encountering the machine: Towards a posthumanist ethics and relational moral paradigm in Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me. Journal of English Studies, 22, 299-319. https://doi.org/10.18172/jes.6138

Verbeek, P.-P. (2011). Moralizing technology: Understanding and designing the morality of things. University of Chicago Press.

Wenzel, J. (2019, April 26). In McEwan's Machines Like Me, humans learn from robots. The Denver Post.

Yu, N. B., & Fan, Z. C. (2001). An examination and reflection on the socialization of ownership. Faxue Yanjiu, (2), 45–58.

Zuidervaart, L. (1991). Adorno's aesthetic theory: The redemption of illusion. MIT Press.