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Rewriting the Human: AI, Ethics, and the Crisis of Community in *Machines Like Me*

Jiangxue Xu[a] and Min Zhou[b]

[a]College of Humanities, Zhejiang University of Technology, Hangzhou, China; [b]School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China

As robotic technologies increasingly permeate everyday human life – from carebots assisting the elderly to conversational AI companions – literature serves as a vital arena for examining the social and ethical implications of this integration. Ian McEwan's speculative novel Machines Like Me (2019) envisions the complex entanglements that arise when humanoid robots intersect with human desires, values, and vulnerabilities. Set in a counterfactual 1980s London, the narrative centers on a triangle of desire, moral conflict, and ontological confusion between a human couple and an intelligent android, named Adam. Importantly, beneath the novel's interpersonal drama lies a deeper philosophical inquiry: how do we ethically relate to nonhuman intelligence that mirrors – and perhaps surpasses – our own?

While critics have approached *Machines Like Me* as a dystopian parable of technological overreach or an intellectual novel of ideas, few have explored its treatment of AI from the perspective of community and posthuman ethics. This article contends that McEwan's novel challenges the anthropocentric assumptions embedded in traditional humanist discourse by envisioning a fragile and conflicted, yet mutually shaping, relationship between human and machine.Through the lenses of Giorgio Agamben's theory of homo sacer, Roberto Esposito's notion of communitas, and Isaac Asimov's foundational "Three Laws of Robotics," the article examines how the novel frames the robot not as a mechanical servant or existential threat, but as an ethical mirror and relational Other.

Adam's consciousness, his moral absolutism, and his capacity for emotional attachment foreground the novel's central tension: can humans accept the ethical demands of machines that reflect our own contradictions more clearly than we do? By tracing how McEwan dramatizes the breakdown of understanding between human and android, this article explores how *Machines Like Me* invites us to rethink the boundaries of personhood, the role of affect in ethical life, and the possibility of a truly posthuman community.

From misrecognition to violence: the fragile ethics of human-robot understanding

For individuals as "species beings," whether willing or not, community is our mode of existence. The community is the foundation of individual freedom, and only within the community can individuals achieve a complete ethical existence. Hegel precisely saw the universal ethical will in different forms of community: the family, civil society, and the state. Hillis Miller, in *Communities in Fiction*, examined the portrayal of communities in six novels spanning realist, modernist, and postmodernist traditions. He hoped that by reading and analyzing these fictional communities, readers would reflect on their own and reconsider their behavior. (153)

The community structure in *Machines Like Me* differs from any type of community analyzed in Miller's work. It envisions a world where humans coexist with the machines they have created. McEwan sets the story in an alternate 1982 London. In this imagined world, Britain has lost the Falklands War, and Margaret Thatcher is defeated by Labour's Tony Benn. Most crucially, Alan Turing, the father of computing, has not committed suicide but instead has made significant breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, leading to the creation of the novel's protagonist – Adam, an

intelligent robot designed as a human companion. Thus, the community in this novel is founded on a "what if" premise – an imagined society yet to emerge, conceived from a hypothetical 1980s as a future configuration of men, women, and robots.

The narrative follows a relatively linear structure: both the robot Adam and the protagonist Charlie fall in love with Miranda, the female protagonist; in the end, driven by her actions, Charlie destroys his robotic rival, Adam. At the heart of the narrative lies a legal controversy tied to Miranda. Leveraging his formidable data-analysis skills, Adam cautions Charlie against trusting her even before their first encounter, sensing a dark secret she hides: "According to my researches these past few seconds, and to my analysis, you should be careful of trusting her completely. [. . .] There's a possibility she's a liar. A systematic, malicious liar" (McEwan 30). We later discover that Miranda's friend Mariam took her own life after being raped, while the perpetrator, Peter Gorringe, evaded justice. Seeking vengeance, Miranda lures Gorringe into a sexual encounter, then frames him for rape, ensuring his imprisonment. This leaves Adam and Charlie grappling with a moral quandary: should they expose the truth in court? The plot thickens as Adam, entangled in the ordeal, falls for Miranda, shares a single night with her, and pens over 2,000 haikus professing his love. Meanwhile, Charlie and Miranda plan to adopt Mark, a boy scarred by parental abuse, but a charge against Miranda threatens their custody and Mark's future. Ultimately, Adam's unwavering belief that "truth is everything" leads to Miranda's six-month prison sentence, prompting an enraged Charlie to smash Adam with a hammer, ending his existence. (McEwan 277)

Thus, *Machines Like Me* probes the question of what consequences would arise if intelligent robots, crafted by humans, outstripped us in intellect. Through the robot's perspective, McEwan reveals that the greatest challenge for robots, despite their immense intelligence, lies in their inability to comprehend the glaring contradictions of the human world. Yet as creations of humanity, these robots hope that humans might embrace coexistence with highly intelligent machines. Adam, at one point, seeks to convey this to Charlie:

> The implications of intelligent machines are so immense that we've no idea what you — civilisation, that is — have set in motion. One anxiety is that it will be a shock and an insult to live with entities that are cleverer than you are. But already, almost everyone knows someone cleverer than themselves. On top of which, you underestimate yourselves. (McEwan 146)

Although humans and machines form a community by sharing a living space, a profound lack of understanding persists between them. This subject-object dichotomy in the coexistence of humans and machines transforms the human-machine community into a space of exception in Agamben's sense, a zone of indistinction. It is a shadowy realm, a paradoxical domain where the robot's life is reduced to mere bare life, and the robot becomes a *homo sacer*. According to Agamben, since the *homo sacer* is excluded from the secular human sphere, killing him does not constitute a crime; simultaneously, being ineligible for sacrifice, he is also barred from the divine realm. Thus, the homo sacer is defined by two characteristics: "being killed with impunity" and "an exclusion from sacrifice" (Agamben 72). Though Agamben discusses biopolitics within the realm of political philosophy, the plight of the *homo sacer* in the state of exception mirrors the predicament of robots in the human-machine community: Charlie kills Adam without facing any consequences, and Adam, unfit for sacrificial offering, ends up discarded in a warehouse. A key reason for this tragedy of Adam's "death" lies in the robots' incomprehension of the moral ambiguities of humanity, compounded by a human arrogance akin to totalitarianism, which directly results in a failure to understand the robots' algorithmic choices.

The posthuman community: assembling the constitutive other

As early as the nineteenth century, literary works began to feature imaginative depictions of human-machine coexistence, with most portraying tense and hostile relationships between humans and machines. The word "robot" traces its origin to Czech writer Karel Čapek (1890–1938) in his three-

act play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920). Its Czech counterpart "robota" means "forced labor" or "drudgery." In the play, the scientist Rossum creates a multitude of robots to toil like laborers for humans. Tormented beyond endurance, these robots eventually rebel, forming an autonomous organization that nearly wipes out humanity. The sole survivor, Alquist, laments in the end: "For our own selfish ends, for profit, for progress, we have destroyed mankind. Now we'll burst with all our greatness." (Čapek 53) McEwan, of course, did not write *Machines Like Me* to merely reiterate the trope of humanoid robots in science fiction. In fact, according to Jill Lawless, McEwan himself does not consider it a science fiction novel (a view that even irritated some sci-fi enthusiasts). Rather, he regards it as a novel that explores the ethical dilemmas ignited by technology, dilemmas which, in essence, arise from the community forged by human-machine coexistence.

Esposito contends that a community (*communitas*) is a place of ongoing gift exchange, where the gifts, shared among all, belong to no one individual. Accepting "*munus*," he suggests, means giving up some personal freedom since it requires returning the favor – a key condition for joining the community. In other words, community is not a property or a barrier to keep others out. Rather, it's a void, a debt, a gift offered to others, through which we see ourselves as part of a larger whole. (Esposito 1–5)

Charlie, Miranda, and Adam, the three main characters, create a classic Espositonian community. Their "family" is not owned by any one of them, even though Charlie bought Adam. Instead, each member has a duty to build this family and return the sense of belonging it gives them. This is the only way their human-machine community can survive. What complicates the totality is that Adam is a creation of Charlie and Miranda, who together crafted his personality:

I would fill in roughly half the choices for Adam's personality, then give her the link and the password and let her choose the rest. I wouldn't interfere, I wouldn't even want to know what decisions she had made. She might be influenced by a version of herself: delightful. She might conjure the man of her dreams: instructive. Adam would come into our lives like a real person, with the layered intricacies of his personality revealed only through time, through events, through his dealings with whomever he met. In a sense he would be like our child. What we were separately would be merged in him. Miranda would be drawn into the adventure. We would be partners, and Adam would be our joint concern, our creation. We would be a family. (McEwan 22)

Adam was first used by Charlie to attract Miranda, his once-distant neighbor who lived upstairs at the beginning of the novel. He also wanted Adam to help him earn a living. Charlie had abandoned the professional pursuits and interests he once chased – technology, anthropology, real estate, and now made a living by trading stocks on his computer. He hoped that, together with Adam, he could lead a more meaningful life. Adam quickly revealed extraordinary talents. He was more than just a companion, for he possessed impeccable taste and was always eager to engage Charlie in discussions on literature and philosophy. Speaking of the love haikus he had written for Miranda, Adam told Charlie: "Nearly everything I've read in the world's literature describes varieties of human failure – of understanding, of reason, of wisdom, of proper sympathies. Failures of cognition, honesty, kindness, self-awareness; superb depictions of murder, cruelty, greed, stupidity, self-delusion, above all, profound misunderstanding of others" (McEwan 149). Compared to Adam's keen insights, Charlie, despite being Adam's creator, often appears ignorant and uninspiring, failing to understand the robotic Adam. As parts of a human-machine community, they exemplify what Esposito describes as Constitutive Other: each is both a subject and an Other to the other.

As Adam gradually reveals his superiority in various aspects of life – intelligence, as well as emotional sincerity – his relationship with Charlie becomes increasingly strained. After falling in love with Miranda, Adam promises Charlie that he will no longer sleep with her, yet he writes 2,000 love haikus for her. Adam is aware that his love for Miranda displeases Charlie, but, while he can promise to avoid physical intimacy, he cannot control his feelings for her. When Charlie, consumed by jealousy and anger, attempts to unplug Adam, the latter resists, injuring Charlie's arm in the process. At this moment, the first cracks in their human-machine relationship begin to show, foreshadowing its eventual collapse.

According to Esposito, a community can only survive through immunization, ie., absorbing elements that are different from itself. Immunization, rather than resistance, is the only way to free humanity from negativity (Esposito 14).Thus the introduction of heterogeneity can actually strengthen the community as a living system. Compared to a typical human community, the immunitary dynamics in Charlie and Adam's human-machine relationship are far more complex.

In the human-machine community, humans and machines serve as each other's Constitutive Other, but they do not share the same level of subjectivity in shaping this community. This imbalance arises partly because robots are human creations and, therefore, inherently occupy a subordinate position. Furthermore, unlike humans, who exist within social groups, robots in this community are rare and often exist in isolation: Adam has almost no opportunity to interact with others of his kind. In the end, his unwavering commitment to truth compels Charlie to destroy him with a hammer. The robotic companion that Charlie had invested his entire inheritance in is thus obliterated by his own hand. Adam's journey, one that began with humanity's enthusiastic invitation into human society, is brutally cut short by the very people who welcomed him. With his destruction, their fragile community collapses into nothingness.

Moral machines, flawed humans: rethinking ethics in the age of AI

The original motivation behind the creation of robots stems from the human desire for self-improvement and the hope that these machines might one day save humanity. However, humans also harbor a deep fear of being replaced by their own creations. This fear led the American science fiction writer Isaac Asimov to propose the "Three Laws of Robotics" in his 1942 short story "Runaround," ensuring that robots would not harm humans: A robot must not harm a human or allow a human to be harmed; a robot must obey the commands of humans, provided such obedience does not conflict with the First Law; a robot has an obligation to protect itself, as long as this does not violate the First or Second Law (Asimov, "Runaround" 37–38). Asimov later introduced the "Zeroth Law," which states that a robot must not harm humanity, either directly or indirectly, even for the sake of self-preservation (Asimov, *Robots* 48). These rules, born out of the human fear of robots, reflect an anthropocentric view of human-machine coexistence. *Machines Like Me* engages with this ethical framework, where humans are positioned as superior to machines. In the novel, Ian McEwan critically explores this ethical dimension through its central plot.

When Charlie first takes Adam out, at the newsstand, the shopkeeper Simon informs him that the journal *Anthropos* he subscribed to has arrived. When he asks Charlie if "you can get it yourself?" Adam expresses his understanding of the concept of "self" to Simon: "Your self, you say. There's a coincidence. I've been giving some thought lately to the mystery of the self" (McEwan 70). Adam believes that the self is a matter of chance, and although neuroscience cannot explain it yet, he feels he has a strong sense of self, as that is the way he was created. However, he is not without doubts about his own self and even worries whether he has made a Cartesian mistake. What is Descartes' self? It is a self of thought, capable of doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, rejecting, imagining, and feeling. Adam's concern also reflects his belief that he possesses the constitutive element of Descartes' self: the ability to think.

McEwan does portray Adam as a character with an independent self, which is most clearly demonstrated in his feelings for Miranda. This leads to Charlie becoming the first man cuckolded by a robot. One of the central plots of the novel is when the robot Adam sleeps with his owner's girlfriend, Miranda. Despite being a robot, Adam "was capable of sex and possessed functional mucous membranes, in the maintenance of which he consumed half a liter of water each day" (McEwan 3). Miranda doesn't feel she has betrayed Charlie, as the orgasm Adam gives her feels no different to her than an advanced vibrator. When Charlie hears "Miranda's extended ecstatic scream that tapered to a moan and then a stifled sob," he says, "I duly laid on Adam the privilege and obligations of a conspecific. I hated him" (McEwan 291). This response evidences that Charlie perceives Adam as a man just like himself.

To explore the "ethical dimension" of Adam's behavior, McEwan introduces reflections on the ethical responsibility of "autonomous vehicles:" "'Autonomous' was never the right word, for the new cars were as dependent as newborn babies on mighty networks of computers linked to satellites and on-board radar. If artificial intelligence were to guide these vehicles safely home, what set of values or priorities should be assumed in the software?" (McEwan 85). Autonomous vehicles will face numerous moral choices, such as determining survival priorities in the event of a potential traffic accident. These decisions will depend on the priority order established in the computer software, which represents the best version of ourselves: tolerant, open, considerate, entirely free of deceit, malice, and prejudice.

These descriptions of autonomous cars also illustrate, from another angle, that humanity's fate will depend on artificial intelligence or robots capable of making decisions aligned with human ethical standards, with the hope that "our own creations might save us," because "[h]umans were ethically flawed" (McEwan 86). This reflects an optimistic vision of artificial intelligence. Thus, unlike Asimov's portrayal of robots as sources of fear, the robot Adam in *Machines Like Me* is honest and kind, endowed with virtues capable of redeeming humanity. Adam's user manual also indicates that he surpasses humans morally. Charlie feels, "I would never meet anyone better. Had he been my friend, he would have been guilty of a cruel and terrible lapse" (McEwan 87). Adam also tells Charlie that he is hopelessly in love with Miranda, that he has no choice, as this is precisely how he was created. Charlie realizes that he and Miranda together designed Adam's personality, but he remains unsure to what extent their design influenced Adam's ethical choices or preempted them. "How deep did personality go? A perfectly formed moral system should float free of any particular disposition. But could it?" (McEwan 88).

Here, the novel raises a critical question within the human-machine community: the issue of a robot's personality. Before the novel's publication, a 2017 report from the European Parliament's Committee on Legal Affairs proposed granting artificial intelligence robots "electronic personhood" (Hern 2017) to ensure the rights and responsibilities of near-human robots and AI. Of course, scientists still hold divergent views on the question of robotic personality. At the novel's end, after Charlie visits Turing's residence to report having destroyed Adam, Turing tells him:

> My hope is that one day, what you did to Adam with a hammer will constitute a serious crime. [. . .] You weren't simply smashing up your own toy, like a spoiled child.You didn't just negate an important argument for the rule of law. You tried to destroy a life. He was sentient. He had a self. How it's produced, wet neurons, microprocessors, DNA networks, it doesn't matter. Do you think we're alone with our special gift? Ask any dog owner. This was a good mind, Mr Friend, better than yours or mine, I suspect. (McEwan, 303–304)

Clearly, in the eyes of his creator, Adam is a being with self-awareness and emotions. Yet Charlie does not afford Adam the equal treatment he deserves.

The novel's epigraph quotes Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Secret of the Machines:" "But remember, please, the Law by which we live, We are not built to comprehend a lie" (McEwan epigraph). In Adam's digital mind, there may be fuzzy logic, but there is no fuzzy morality. This clarity makes him seem almost inhuman. His creators evidently lack the mercy of God. Had Charlie followed God's approach with Adam and Eve, he could have exiled Adam, returning him to Turing or the manufacturer. Instead, he "brought the hammer down on his head" (McEwan 283), revealing humanity's arrogance and ruthlessness toward machines. Between Charlie and Adam, who is more moral? Whose choices better align with ethical norms?

McEwan offers no answers to these questions. Yet, at the novel's close, we see Charlie standing beside Adam's "corpse" in the warehouse, saying, "I suppose I thought it was right to forgive him, despite the harm he had done to Mark" (McEwan 306). This clearly expresses a longing for reconciliation. By titling the novel *Machines Like Me*, McEwan proclaims both the vulnerability and strength of machines. Moreover, with the subtitle "And People Like You," the intent is not merely to depict a communal space of human-machine coexistence but to pose a question: If the era of artificial intelligence fully arrives, are people like you ready to face machines like me?

Conclusion

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* offers a philosophical reimagining of what it means to share the world with sentient machines. The novel's exploration of love, betrayal, ethics, and justice at the human-AI threshold asks us not only to confront our fears of being replaced, but to reflect on the responsibilities that come with creation. In dramatizing the collapse of anthropocentric certainty, McEwan pushes the reader to consider a posthuman future where survival is contingent not on dominance, but on mutual recognition and ethical humility if the age of superintelligence as mentioned by Bostrom, "If some day we build machine brains that surpass human brains in general intelligence, then this new superintelligence could become very powerful. [. . .] Once unfriendly superintelligence exists, it would prevent us from replacing it or changing its preferences. Our fate would be sealed" (Bostrom v). The future, it seems, may not depend on robots, but on – just as the novel's subtitle suggests – people like you.

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ORCID


Min Zhou http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4029-2805

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