



Robots Among Us: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

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Received: 📅 June 21, 2021

Published: 📅 June 29, 2021

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro won the 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature. The award citation said of him that “in his novels of great emotional force, he has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world” [1]. Four years later, his most recent novel, *Klara and the Sun* [2] was published. It is not about any kind of abyss. It is about connections among us humans, and also with other kinds of being. Although its protagonist, Klara, is a robot, this novel is far more psychological than some of the papers that are published in psychology journals. As with solar panels, Klara is powered by the Sun, an entity that not only provides her with electrical energy to move and think, but comes to take on, for her, a god-like significance. What, then, is the difference between her and biologically based human beings?

Robots and Artificial Intelligence

As we think about robots, we generally consider them to be artificial, made from silicon. But this isn't the only kind of robot. In *The Robot's Rebellion* [3], Keith Stanovich has pointed out that we humans are also robots. The genes, which we tend to think of as “ours,” are not really ours at all. It is we who are their vehicles. Genes have programmed us to carry them along and nourish them, so that they can reproduce and proliferate. It's not gods that are immortal, it's these strands of DNA: the genes. So, as Stanovich proposes, we need to rebel, not just allow ourselves to be programmed by genes but, instead, to make our own human decisions. Ishiguro's novel is about what kind of decisions we make for ourselves and others, and for what purposes. It prompts us towards thinking: what, or who, is a robot? What does it mean to be a human? What does it mean to understand someone fully, and to love them? Some people have wondered whether robots based in artificial intelligence (AI) will not just learn but will do so better than any other kind of being and, in this way, become more intelligent than humans, and perhaps take over the world. Looking back through history, with its wars and colonialism, thinking about income inequality and climate change, we may wonder how well we humans have done, in charge of the world: not nearly as well as we might have wished. But, with the coming of more effective forms of artificial intelligence, including “Deep Learning,” in which computational artificially intelligent systems do not need to be trained, but construct intuitions by taking in many examples from which they change their systems'

inter-neural connections [4], perhaps we might collaborate with them and learn, ourselves, to think more clearly. The physicist Stephen Hawking has said that “Success in creating AI would be the biggest event in human history. It might also be the last, unless we learn how to avoid the risks” [5].

Perhaps this idea of artificial robots taking over the world is a Western view. Another view is, as Ishiguro suggests, that robots might be our friends. The emergency room physician, Brian Goldman, wrote a book called *The Power of Kindness* [6]. In one chapter he describes a visit he made to Japan, to investigate the making of robots who look after people who can't look after themselves. With increased numbers of such people, as many of us become older, when diseases that used to kill us become chronic disabilities, more of us need to be cared for. These robots don't just do physical tasks. The designers are striving to enable them to hold conversations in the way that people do, as Klara does in Ishiguro's novel. Goldman said that he went to Japan in search of empathetic androids. What he found were kind people, working to produce kind robots. Might it be, perhaps, that this kind of influence from Japan, where Ishiguro lived until he was five years old, when he and his Japanese parents moved to Britain, became part of his idea of the novel about Klara: an AF: “Artificial Friend.” Here the question is not whether we humans might be annihilated by a form of artificial life, but what it is to be a friend, what it is to love someone. In the novel, the artificial friend, Klara is purchased by the mother of a teenager called Josie. The two of them live together, and after her morning cup of coffee, Mother (capital M in this novel) goes to work each day. And that is why, Josie needs someone to be her companion and friend. This someone is Klara. She looks like a human being. She is intelligent, perceptive of what occurs in the world, and very good at understanding people. A fascinating feature of this novel is its depiction of Klara's thought patterns and observations. Klara comes to love Josie, as if from the inside, and would do anything for her. We see how the two of them get on extremely well together. We readers also form a close attachment with Klara, and, because of this, the last part of this novel is emotionally moving.

Gene Editing

At one of the novel's turning points, Josie starts to become sick. Her physical condition deteriorates. The reason for this, perhaps,

although readers are not told explicitly, is that she has been “lifted.” The term is first mentioned well into the novel, and it is never explained. What it seems to mean is that some children have, perhaps after their parents have paid a great deal of money, been genetically engineered to make them more intelligent than other children. The ones who have had this operation, are rather pleased with themselves and tend to look down on those who have not. It seems likely, however, that this piece of genetic engineering can make some of them vulnerable: liable to become sick, and even to die. As this starts to occur with Josie, Klara prays fervently to the Sun, and tries to think of ways to save Josie. Artificial intelligence has now been around for several decades. Genetic engineering is more recent. Alongside the issue of whether artificially intelligent robots might come to live on this planet, this newer question has occurred: might human children have their intelligence lifted? Could they have their abilities improved by means of genetic alterations? And would this be for everyone, or just for children of very wealthy parents? A pioneer of genetic engineering, also a winner of a Nobel Prize, in this case in 2020, for Chemistry, is Jennifer Daudna. Along with her collaborator, Emmanuelle Charpentier, she discovered “the CRISPR/Cas9 genetic scissors. Using these, researchers can change the DNA of animals, plants and microorganisms with extremely high precision” [7]. Animals include human beings. A biography of Daudna has been published this year, by Walter Isaacson: *The Code Breaker: Jennifer Daudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race* [8]. In Ishiguro’s novel, what is Josie’s Mother to do, as her daughter becomes more and more ill? She begins to have a physical model built of Josie. It looks exactly like her with working limbs and other parts. At the same time, Klara is tested to see whether, with her keen observational skills, she really knows

Josie from the inside. She does. The idea, then, is that if Josie were to die, then the computational parts of Klara, which have come to know Josie, would be extracted and inserted into the working physical model of Josie’s body. What, or who, might emerge would be a completely new Josie, without illness, who would have her forebear’s style of movement and facial expressions, her thoughts, her words. In this way perhaps many people might not be able to tell the difference between the artificial Josie and the one who is likely to die. Many people? Including her Mother? Or would something necessarily be left out? If so, what might that be?

Acknowledgement

I thank Alison Fleming for reading this review and making a thoughtful suggestion.

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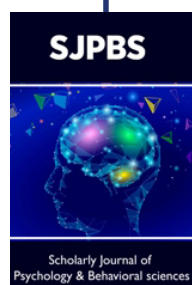
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DOI: [10.32474/SJPBS.2021.05.000211](https://doi.org/10.32474/SJPBS.2021.05.000211)



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