Paradox of Perfection: Reframing Humanity Vis-à-vis Artificial Intelligence in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*

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Abstract:

Contemporary discourse on Artificial Intelligence often touts technological advancement as a move towards perfection, positing that Artificial Intelligence would be the key to perfecting human fallibility. On the other hand, discourse surrounding AI also has its fair share of cynicism and fear. This paper shall explore the theme of machine perfection in contrast to human imperfection as portrayed in the novel *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan. The paper shall explore and critique how moral ambiguity, emotional contradictions, and the capacity for error in human beings are distinctive traits of human identity and locate how McEwan's narrative challenges the notion of progress and technological utopianism by reframing imperfection as a defining trait of humanity's strength.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, perfection, human fallibility, paradox, machine.

Introduction

Not very long ago, Artificial Intelligence was predominantly considered to be within the realm of science and speculative fiction. Nowadays, it has become a part of mainstream discourse, with its impact felt or anticipated in the socio-political and economic discourses of everyday life as a revolutionary discovery that promises untold advancements. This discourse is often rife with the belief that technological advancements- Artificial Intelligence in particular- are a move towards perfecting the flawed human, a gateway for eliminating the limitations, the contradictions, the fallibility that embody the human being. On the other hand, there is also a wave of concern about the ethical dimensions of AI, which is often dealt with in creative works. In their work "Rewriting the Human: AI, Ethics, and the Crisis of Community in *Machines Like Me*", Jiangxue Xu and Min Zhou noted that "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" (1). In this regard, their observation provides a crucial shift from viewing the rise of artificial intelligence as a cautionary tale of technological dystopia to a more relational exploration of communal ethics in the posthuman context. AI often functions as a mirror in which human beings interrogate and speculate on our values, principles, flaws, and aspirations. Authors of science fiction and speculative fiction have long engaged with the subject of man and machine, and the possible course of the future that advancements in AI entail.

Ian McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me* (2019) is one such creative work that addresses the negotiation of AI and human existence. Set in an alternate London in the 1980s, where technological progress has advanced far more rapidly than its historical timeline, the novel centres on Charlie, an aimless drifter, his partner Miranda, and Adam, an android whose apparent perfection remains the focal point of tension in the novel. Adam's inclusion into the household is framed as a kind of triumph of technological advancements. His perfection and

error-free, consistent functioning are what technological discourse often purports AI will eventually achieve. However, in the novel, it is precisely this apparent perfection that leaves Adam unable to function well in inter-human relationships- his flawless reasoning and moral rigidity clash with the inconsistency and flexibility of human emotions. The paper will examine this paradox by exploring how Ian McEwan's narrative reframes human imperfection.

Machine "Perfection" and the Construction of Adam

Humanity's pursuit of the perfect machine and its conceptualisation is not a mere contemporary phenomenon but one that predates the conception of the very first line of code and subsequently the advent of modern technology. It was a dream rooted in the Enlightenment belief in reason above all else and in the process expresses the desire to do away with the vulnerability and imperfection of the organic human form. The Cartesian duality, as proposed by Descartes in his work *Discourse on the Method*, provided the foundational logic for this dream. He wrote:

> I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that 'I,' that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is. (75-76)

This framework provided the tools for separating the rational mind from the vulnerable body, and as a result, the human essence becomes pure information. In this regard, "This separation allows the construction of a hierarchy in which information is given the dominant position and materiality runs a distant second" (Hayles 12), which seamlessly evolved into the vision of doing away with the vulnerable "meat" of the body. This dream becomes the focal point in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*. At the heart of the story is Adam, a humanoid robot

designed as a prototype, one of twenty-five. The novel introduces Adam as a feat of technological marvel. A flawless and perfect machine capable of emotional and physiological feats that challenge human uniqueness.

McEwan's detailed description of Adam evokes an idealised version of what humanity would consider the perfect human being. "Our ambitions ran high and low – for a creation myth made real, for a monstrous act of self-love. As soon as it was feasible, we had no choice but to follow our desires and hang the consequences" (McEwan 1). The creation of Adam also evokes images of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which Miranda and Charlie noted in the novel, "not a monster like Frankenstein's, but this handsome dark-skinned young man coming to life. I said that what both creatures shared was a hunger for the animating force of electricity" (4). And as with Frankenstein's monster, Adam destabilises the natural order of human life. He represents the human desire for transcendence beyond the limitations of mortal shell, to achieve the idealised qualities of intelligence, morality, and beauty that we have always pursued. The aim "to escape our mortality, confront or even replace the Godhead with a perfect self" (1) forms one of the central narrative threads of the novel. Adam is the embodiment of this ambition, unburdened by moral inconsistency that plagues the human condition.

Contrary to the perfection embodied by Adam in the novel, the lived human experience requires a dramatically different approach than just perfection. When faced with the reality of human life, several facets of Adam's perfection clash with the flawed and contradictory behaviour of human beings. His programming is the combined effort of Charlie and Miranda. Charlie 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" (McEwan 22). In this way, 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" (22). This description conjures images of a child conceived by his parents, an image which Charlie

himself expressed: "In a sense he would be like our child. What we were separately would be merged in him…. We would be partners, and Adam would be our joint concern, our creation" (22). Despite Charlie's paternal feelings for Adam, the conscious act of selecting/curating his trait fundamentally contradicts the nature of child-rearing. A child is not a preconceived assemblage of information but a being whose identity develops as he/she grows older through experience.

Posthumanism often aligns with the view that information could be separated from its material substrate, a worldview that Katherine Hayles critiqued in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). She writes, "How, I asked myself, was it possible… to believe that mind could be separated from body? Even assuming such a separation was possible, how could anyone think that consciousness in an entirely different medium would remain unchanged, as if it had no connection with embodiment?" (1). By separating information from material instantiation, Adam loses the crucial bodily processes that often ground the human experience. His inability to understand "play" or moral ambiguity is a direct result of this. Playing is a child's preferred mode of information gathering. This form of intelligence is "highly adaptable and inventive, able to negotiate novel situations and landscapes with perfect ease and theorise about them with instinctive brilliance" (McEwan 179). He has data but lacks the embodied knowledge that comes with having a body that feels pain, thirst, hunger, grows, and ages with the mind. This ultimately leads to the failure of Adam, and the synthetics in particular "couldn't understand us, because we couldn't understand ourselves…. If we didn't know our own minds, how could we design theirs and expect them to be happy alongside us?" (299). This suggests that the very nature of what the designers of Adam and Eve sought to create in their aspirations is deeply incompatible with the messy reality of human existence. As Alan Turing positions it in the novel:

We create a machine with intelligence and self-awareness and push it out into our imperfect world. Devised along generally rational lines, well disposed to others, such a mind soon finds itself in a hurricane of contradictions. We've lived with them and the list wearies us. (180)

Moral Ambiguity, Emotional Contradiction and Limits of AI

One of the most notable characteristics of Adam is his rigid morality. He embodies ethics deeply similar to Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics. Kantian ethics prioritises duty to a rational maxim, most famously seen in his categorical imperatives: to act only on principles one could will as universal law, and to always treat humanity as an end in itself (Bordum 8). Adam perfectly embodies this belief. For Adam, "truth is everything" (McEwan 277), and his actions are driven by an ideology that is uncompromising and unbendable. From this point of view, deontological ethics may look like a robust framework for encoding moral agency into AI systems. A view that William D'Alessandro agrees with, stating, "Of the ethical frameworks taken most seriously by philosophers, *deontology* looks like an especially promising candidate for an alignment target" (1682). A closer examination, however, reveals several challenges and limitations. For instance, this rigid adherence to moral absolutes is presented as one of the main features of his moral superiority to human beings. Yet, throughout the novel, it is this very firmness that ultimately shows his inability to function smoothly in human society.

Miranda's court case, in particular, reveals that human morality is more often than not contextual in practice. It is later shown that Miranda had fabricated a testimony to put Peter Gorringe in prison. Miranda told Charlie that Gorringe had raped Mariam, a childhood friend of hers, which led to Mariam committing suicide. When Gorringe was declared not guilty of the charge, Miranda took it upon herself to serve out justice. She lured Gorringe into having a sexual encounter with her and later accused him of rape, which secured his imprisonment.

When Adam discovered Miranda's fabrication of testimony, he evaluated the situation through a moral framework that demands justice and truth as categorical imperatives. This state of mind allows him to reveal what he learned to the police without any moral dilemma. His reasoning is straightforward: concealing the truth is wrong; therefore, revealing it is right because, in the eyes of Adam and the law, Miranda is a criminal.

Here, Adam's morality, deeply rooted in "optimal" and "superior" reasoning, finds conflict in facing human contingency and contradiction. The inconsistency and flexible morality of humans find no ground to judge Miranda on her actions. The deed "is against the law, but it is ethically understandable, and Miranda has to do it in order to get justice and punish the murderer. Charlie knows how this happens, understands Miranda's lie.… Gorringe can also understand Miranda's actions" (Wang 142). However, in the face of this criminal act, Adam cannot be flexible in his judgment because "The Adams and Eves were ill-equipped to understand human decision-making, the way our principles are warped in the force field of our emotions, our peculiar biases, our self-delusion and all the other well-charted defects of our cognition". (McEwan 299)

The clash between Adam's emotional coherence and human emotional contradiction becomes especially visible when Mark enters their dynamics. He was first introduced in the novel when Charlie met him and his parents in a "fenced-in little swing park for children" (McEwan 47). He witnessed the boy's mother beating the poor child, noting "the woman leaped from the bench… grabbed the boy by his arm and smacked his bare legs. At the instant of his first cry, she smacked him again, and a third time" (47). The little boy, starved for parental attention, showed up at their house with a note in hand that read "you wanted him" (102). A human response, informed by empathy, intuition, and instinct, would be to recognise a child in need of comfort and care.

This is where Adam's emotional programming fails in practice. In her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto", Donna Haraway asserts "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs" (7). The cyborg is a being of blurred boundaries, but Adam's perfect logic is entirely separate from the messy biological confines of human life. His response is rooted in a logical assessment of facts and details, rather than emotion and compassion, as seen in Charlie and Miranda. He looks at the note and does not see the unspoken plea for care, the emotional starvation, and sees only the legal ramifications of taking the boy in. This leads him toward only one conclusion: the boy should be returned to his legal guardians. He lacks situated knowledge; his reasoning is not shaped by a specific, embodied history of pain, pleasure, or vulnerability. As a result, he fails to grasp the emotional and ambiguous situation regarding Mark and his parents. This suggests that human morality is often not a product of deduction or logic, but rather our capacity for empathy and our willingness to act on behalf of others, even when it is irrational to do so. As Charlie stated, when he confronted Mark's parents as he saw the boy's mother beating him, "There are some decisions, even moral ones, that are formed in regions below conscious thought." (McEwan 48)

Rather than suggesting that androids or machines should replace humans, the novel insists on a re-examination of human imperfection, not as a flaw in our design but as an indispensable characteristic of what makes us human. In this sense, *Machines Like Me* functions not as a cautionary tale about AI but as an introspection on the value of vulnerability, contradiction, and incompleteness in defining human identity.

Human Imperfection as Identity

Posthumanist perspectives on artificial intelligence often maintain an optimistic outlook on their integration into everyday society. Nevertheless, there remains a lingering concern for AI's capacity to destabilise societal structures and established norms of human

society. In their book *The Coming Wave* (2023), Mustafa Suleyman, co-founder of DeepMind and Inflection AI, along with Michael Bhaskar, warn of the dangers of unchecked AI research, stating that:

> I have long worried about not just the consequences of advancing AI but where the entire technological ecosystem was heading. Beyond AI, a wider revolution was underway, with AI feeding a powerful, emerging generation of genetic technologies and robotics. Further progress in one area accelerates the others in a chaotic and cross-catalyzing process beyond anyone's direct control. (9)

This tension comes about due to broader anxieties regarding AI and its consequences. Never before in the history of human beings has our identity been called into question; now, the widespread use of Artificial Intelligence has destabilised the long-held assumption of human identity and made room for a more open-minded re-examination of what it means to be human beings. While traditional humanism often defines the human as an autonomous, rational, and self-contained entity, postmodern and posthuman notions of identity destabilise this rigid definition by introducing different agents and deconstructing the traditional binary opposition of man/animal, natural/artificial. In the context of *Machines Like Me*, McEwan suggests that the moral agency of human beings is rooted in the flaws of our organic makeup. Human identity in the novel is defined through a fragmented and inconsistent view of the world.

Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) stated that "gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (9-10) and that "the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced.… Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative" (33). Just as gender is constituted through repeated acts of performance, so too

is human identity constituted through a performative engagement with imperfect contradictions. Adam's inability to "perform" humanity despite his superior reasoning and moral supremacy seems to suggest the necessity of imperfection in the human identity. The novel suggests that human beings are defined by their inconsistencies, their capacity for forgiveness, and their willingness to live with ambiguity. When Charlie learned of Miranda having sex with Adam, it did not take away his love for her, nor did learning of her deceitful encounter with the law change how he felt about her. Human emotion, in contrast to Adam's perfect emotional coherence, is contradictory and unpredictable.

Charlie and Miranda's relationship is filled with jealousy intertwined with affection, guilt mixed with longing, shame with desire. This relationship does not constitute a coherent system but resembles a tangled network of embodied feelings. Adam's "love", on the other hand, lacks this complexity. Being shaped by logic and rational thought, it lacks the messiness of real interpersonal relationships. Consequently, his love manifests as a perfect, obsessive, and logical sentiment rather than genuine. He analyses Miranda as a dataset and devises the best strategy to gain her affection, composing love poems/haikus for her. Yet, his poetry too lacks the uncertainty, the ambiguity, and the imperfection of a work of art. Ultimately, despite presenting his love as a perfect devotion, it reveals itself as a failure that cannot accommodate the messy, daily compromises that constitute a truly shared life.

If Adam's arc in the novel characterises the paradox of perfection, that being perfect is incompatible within the context of the human experience, then the human characters – mainly Charlie and Miranda – illustrate the redemption of human fallibility. In stark contrast to Adam's flawless logic and knowledge, they demonstrate errors and failures in their actions. These moral ambiguities, emotional volatilities, and cognitive biases constitute their identity. Charlie's characteristics in the novel lend credit to this argument. He is indecisive and passive in his own life. His relationship is a mess of miscommunication, unspoken anxieties stemming from raw,

unfiltered emotions. From Adam's logical and rational perspective, this could be seen as sheer inefficiency; a flawed algorithm that needs optimisation. However, it is through this state of mind-set that Charlie's human qualities emerge. His indecisiveness gives room for flexibility and the ability to navigate life's problems one at a time. His moral compromises, such as his reluctance to confront Miranda and her shady past, are not a result of cowardice in confronting the truth. It stemmed from a place of emotional intelligence that recognises the importance of careful navigation in a complex relationship; an understanding that truth is dangerous and should be approached carefully or not at all. His love for Miranda did not fade away despite his belief that Miranda cheated on him by having sex with Adam (irrespective of Miranda's conviction that Adam did not constitute as a person). This display of character acknowledges the flawed nature of human beings; the human tendency for error, and from that trait also comes the capacity for forgiveness. All these imperfections create a space for growth, learning, and emotional maturity, and signify the slow and sometimes painful construction of human life.

Miranda's narrative arc illustrates a powerful depiction of embracing a flawed process over a sterile and perfect outcome. McEwan presents her as a character marked by a deep moral transgression: the deliberate fabrication of a lie to deliver justice. It represents the human imperfection of a quest for justice distorted by personal trauma and turned into a cycle of self-destructive vengeance. Miranda's character is no paragon of virtue. Crucially, however, her humanity is not marked by her sin but by her capacity to endure the burden of her past and at the same time seek redemption through her relationship with Charlie. The integration of this dark and sordid past transgression into her sense of self demands a cognitive dissonance that Adam and his binary logic are incapable of processing. It requires an acceptance of contradiction in the human identity that is corollary to Herbert Marcuse's concept of "dialectic". According to this concept, "every being is contradictory in itself. In other words, everything that exists contains within itself its own negation" (Ocay 103). Essence is an

important aspect of this concept; it "denotes the unity or identity of being throughout the actual process of change" (103). As Marcuse writes, "When something turns into its opposite… when it contradicts itself, it expresses its essence." (125)

Where Adam's algorithmic processing requires a categorical classification: a victim or a villain, McEwan shows that Miranda is living proof of being both. Charlie's easy acceptance of this contradictory reality demonstrates that it is this capacity to hold opposing truths, and to offer forgiveness to the unforgivable in the name of love, that represents a quintessential aspect of human imperfection. It is not something that a purely logical mind can comprehend. The novel portrays these characteristics as an integral part of their human identity. Whereas Adam's perfection is a static and closed system, human imperfection is a dynamic and adaptive process. The human capacity for error that Adam's programming does not contain is a fertile ground from which creativity, forgiveness, resilience, and wisdom can grow. These human "flaws" are not merely accidental "glitches" or "bugs" in human biological programming, but are, in fact, the defining features of humanity.

Conclusion

Machines Like Me demonstrates the paradoxically flawed nature of perfection when applied to the human experience. Rather than projecting human ideals of perfection onto artificial beings, the novel could be read as an attempt at reconsideration of the value of imperfection as the defining trait of humans. Vulnerability, empathy, moral ambiguity, emotional contradiction; all these imperfect characteristics foster growth and provide fertile grounds for creativity to blossom. The narrative suggests that the flawlessness and consistent moral superiority displayed by Adam is incompatible with the human experience. Therein lies a paradox; that perfection becomes a destabilising and destructive force when placed in the context of human relationships.

Adam's presence as a destabilising factor in the novel reaffirms the necessity of imperfection as the foundation of human identity. In a world where technological advancements significantly outpace the human aging process, McEwan reiterate that the value of humanity lies not in transcendence beyond the human flaws, but in the acceptance of the imperfections that make up the human being. The paradox of perfection, then, is that it is only through imperfection that humans remain truly human.

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