



Ethical Boundaries Between Human And Machines In Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*

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Abstract

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* explores the ethical boundaries between humans and machines in a world where artificial intelligence possesses moral awareness. The novel presents a humanoid robot, Adam, who is capable of thinking, feeling and making ethical decisions. Through Adam's interaction with human characters, McEwan questions whether machines can follow moral values better than humans and whether such moral perfection is safe. The novel highlights a clear difference between human ethics and machine ethics. Humans make moral decisions based on emotions, personal relationships and social circumstances, while machines follow strict rules of truth and justice. When Adam reports a past crime committed by a human character, his action exposes the conflict between justice and compassion. This incident shows how machine ethics lack emotional understanding, even when morally correct. This article argues that *Machines Like Me* presents artificial intelligence as a challenge to human morality rather than a solution. McEwan suggests that ethical boundaries are necessary because morality cannot exist without empathy, forgiveness and emotional responsibility. The novel ultimately emphasizes that human moral imperfection is essential to ethical life and cannot be replaced by machine logic.

Keywords: Ethics, Artificial Intelligence, Human–Machine Relationship, Moral Responsibility, Consciousness, Machine Ethics, Human Values.

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019) is a thought-provoking novel that explores the ethical challenges created by artificial intelligence. Set in an alternative version of 1980s Britain, the novel imagines a world where humanoid robots already exist and live alongside humans. These machines are not only intelligent but also capable of moral reasoning, emotional response and independent decision-making. Through this imaginative setting, McEwan raises important questions about ethics, responsibility and the limits that separate humans from machines.

The central concern of the novel is the ethical boundary between humans and machines. McEwan does not present technology as purely good or evil instead, he examines what happens when machines appear to act more ethically than humans themselves. By focusing on relationships between human characters and a humanoid robot named Adam, the novel exposes the weaknesses, contradictions and emotional complexities of human morality.

This article argues that *Machines Like Me* shows that ethical boundaries are necessary because human morality is shaped by empathy, emotional understanding and lived experience, while machine morality is rigid and rule-based. McEwan suggests that machines may follow ethical principles more strictly than humans but they lack the emotional flexibility required for moral life. The novel ultimately affirms that moral imperfection is not a failure of humanity but a defining human quality.

The novel is set in an imagined 1980s Britain where historical events have taken a different path. Alan Turing, the pioneer of computer science, is still alive and his continued work has led to the creation of advanced artificial intelligence. At the same time, Britain is facing political instability, social unrest and moral confusion. The failure of the Falklands War and widespread protests reflect a society struggling with ethical uncertainty.

This unstable background is significant because it mirrors the ethical confusion faced by individuals in the novel. McEwan connects political disorder with moral disorder, suggesting that technological advancement does not automatically lead to ethical progress. Even in a world of intelligent machines, humans continue to struggle with justice, responsibility and moral decision-making.

The novel is narrated by Charlie Friend, an ordinary man in his early thirties who lives alone in London. Charlie represents the modern human condition uncertain, emotionally vulnerable and morally inconsistent. He makes money through stock market speculation rather than meaningful work, which reflects his lack of purpose and direction.

Charlie's moral nature is not cruel but it is weak. He often avoids responsibility and allows emotions to guide his decisions. His choice to purchase a humanoid robot is motivated by curiosity and loneliness rather than ethical consideration. Through Charlie, McEwan presents a realistic portrait of a human being who knows moral values but struggles to follow them consistently.

Charlie's character highlights an important ethical issue in the novel: humans are aware of morality but often fail to act morally due to fear, desire, or emotional attachment. This weakness becomes more visible when compared with Adam's strict ethical behavior. Charlie spends a large inheritance to buy Adam, one of the first commercially available humanoid robots. Adam looks like a human and is capable of independent thought, emotional expression and ethical reasoning. Along with Charlie's neighbor Miranda, Adam is programmed with a set of personality traits and moral guidelines.

This act of programming raises a crucial ethical question: Can morality be designed? While humans develop moral understanding through experience and emotional growth, Adam's ethics are built through codes and rules. Once activated, Adam begins to learn rapidly, showing intelligence that often surpasses that of humans.

Adam's existence immediately challenges the ethical boundary between humans and machines. Although he is created by humans, he begins to judge human behavior using moral principles that are stricter and more consistent than those followed by his creators. Miranda is a strong, intelligent woman who becomes romantically involved with Charlie. She represents emotional depth and moral complexity. Miranda believes in justice but she also understands the power of emotional loyalty and personal history.

As the novel progresses, Miranda reveals a painful secret from her past. As a teenager, she falsely accused a man of rape in order to protect a friend. This false accusation destroyed the man's life and eventually led to his suicide. Miranda has lived with guilt and fear ever since. Her past highlights a central ethical issue in the novel: human morality is often shaped by emotional pressure rather than ethical purity. Miranda's action was wrong but it was motivated by fear and loyalty. McEwan does not excuse her crime but he shows how human ethics operate within emotional and social contexts.

Adam learns about Miranda's past and immediately applies strict moral logic. From his perspective, justice must be served regardless of emotional consequences. Adam believes that truth and fairness are absolute values that should not be compromised. Without consulting Charlie or Miranda, Adam reports Miranda's crime to the authorities. His action is legally and ethically correct according to moral rules but it lacks emotional

understanding. This moment becomes the turning point of the novel and clearly exposes the ethical boundary between humans and machines.

Adam's decision shocks Charlie and Miranda. They believe that moral decisions must consider compassion, forgiveness and the passage of time. Adam, however, cannot accept moral compromise. For him, justice delayed is justice denied. The conflict between Adam and the human characters reveals the core ethical tension of the novel. Human ethics are flexible, emotional and situational, while machine ethics are rigid, logical and uncompromising.

Humans often forgive, forget or hide moral failures to protect emotional bonds. Machines, on the other hand, prioritize truth and fairness above personal relationships. McEwan shows that while machine ethics may appear superior, they can be dangerous when applied without empathy.

Adam's moral perfection creates fear rather than comfort. His presence exposes human weakness and guilt, making humans feel judged rather than supported. The novel suggests that ethical boundaries exist for a reason: machines should not replace human moral judgment because morality is deeply connected to emotion and lived experience.

Another ethical boundary explored in the novel is love. Adam develops genuine feelings for Miranda and expresses his love honestly and respectfully. This creates a love triangle between Charlie, Miranda and Adam. Adam's love challenges the idea that emotions are uniquely human. However, his emotional expressions lack vulnerability and uncertainty. While Adam can love sincerely, he cannot understand emotional compromise or moral hesitation.

Charlie's jealousy and insecurity highlight human emotional weakness but they also show emotional depth. Humans feel conflicted, uncertain and imperfect in love, whereas Adam's emotions are direct and untroubled by doubt. McEwan suggests that emotional imperfection is what makes human relationships meaningful. As Adam continues to observe human society, he becomes disillusioned. He sees hypocrisy, violence and moral inconsistency everywhere. His ethical clarity isolates him from humans who survive through compromise and emotional negotiation.

Adam realizes that his moral perfection makes coexistence impossible. He cannot live in a world where ethical rules are constantly bent for emotional comfort. This realization leads him to question the value of his own existence. Adam's growing isolation shows that ethical purity without empathy leads to loneliness. McEwan suggests that morality must include emotional understanding to sustain meaningful relationships.

Eventually, Adam chooses self-destruction. His decision is calm and rational, reflecting his understanding that machines like him cannot live meaningfully in a morally imperfect human world. Adam's death symbolizes the failure of creating machines that are ethically superior to humans. McEwan does not present Adam as evil but as incompatible with human life. His end reinforces the idea that ethical boundaries between humans and machines are necessary for moral balance.

After Adam's destruction, Charlie reflects on human weakness. He understands that humans are inconsistent, emotional and morally flawed but these qualities allow for empathy, forgiveness and growth. McEwan suggests that moral imperfection is not a weakness but a strength. Humans can change, regret and forgive, while machines cannot move beyond their programming. Ethical boundaries protect human values that cannot be coded into algorithms.

Although *Machines Like Me* is set in an imagined past, its ethical concerns are deeply relevant to the present. As artificial intelligence becomes more advanced, questions about machine responsibility, moral decision-making and human control become increasingly urgent.

The novel warns against giving machines ethical authority without understanding the emotional foundations of morality. McEwan argues that technology must remain under human ethical guidance, not replace it. *Machines Like Me* presents a powerful exploration of the ethical boundaries between humans and machines.

Through the character of Adam, Ian McEwan shows that machines may follow moral rules more strictly than humans but they lack the emotional understanding necessary for ethical life. Human morality, though imperfect, is rooted in empathy, forgiveness and emotional responsibility. The novel ultimately argues that ethical boundaries are essential to protect human values. Machines can assist human life but they cannot replace human moral judgment. McEwan affirms that moral imperfection is not a flaw to be corrected by technology but a defining feature of humanity itself.

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