

Posthumanism: An Introduction

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Lecture 32

Lec 32 : Posthuman Vulnerability, Ethics and Contemporary Literature

This is Noam Anwar of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad, and here we will be continuing our exploration of post-human ethics with particular reference to post-human vulnerability and literary cultural studies. In the earlier weeks, you might remember our discussion of biocapitalism in contemporary literature, and this is something you might want to revisit. When you look at this particular module, because in the lesson on biocapitalism, we noted the fact that biological matter is now part of the global capital network and that human tissue, animal tissue, and plant tissue have all been rendered into materials for global financial and other transactions. Biocapitalism has also meant that the value of life, which we can define as animal or plant, has been enmeshed with questions of profit and questions of technology. As in whether we can make use of them in certain ways, whether the fetus has a certain value, or whether adult blood or stem cell tissues have a different value.

These are questions that remain within bio-capitalist narratives and the critique of biocapitalism by people like Kaushik Sundararajan and others. So, I would recommend that you go and take a quick look at the lesson on biocapitalism and biocapitalism in contemporary literature. We are interested in ethics toward post-humans, right, as you might recall from the previous lesson. And we're also interested in how the post-human subject is being defined and whether there is something called post-human subjectivity. This has raised, as you might recall from our previous class, very serious questions about what is a post-human subject.

Is there an ethics toward the post-human subject? What is the kind of rights regime? What is the kind of ethical-philosophical position toward the post-human subject? These have been, as I said, very important considerations and concerns. I cautioned you that there are no easy answers to these questions.

The debate is still on. It involves multiple angles, as you can perhaps understand. There are theologians involved. There are literary studies scholars involved. There are philosophers involved.

There are, of course, legal and medical scholars involved in trying to understand and define what we mean by the post-human subject. And just to recap quickly, these are being defined as allo-persons, allo-humans. They're also being defined as ersatz moral persons. And you will recall in the last class we spoke about the fact that if they're designed to do things for humans, are we making them slaves? Because that is what their purpose is.

And it's not a question of acting against their will or their agency because that is their purpose. Shall we go to a more spiritualized theological term? That's what they are preordained to do. Or are we creating a new species, a new race of slaves? Big questions.

No real answers. And therefore, proceeding from these questions is the fuller issue of whether there is something called posthumous vulnerability. Vulnerability, as we know, is mediated for us through various modes. Literary and cultural texts are useful to understand vulnerability because they show us individual or collective bodies being rendered open to injury. They offer very specific, very detailed accounts of systemic or intrinsic contexts in which the

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Vulnerability and Literary-Cultural Studies

Vulnerability in human and nonhuman lifeforms is communicated best through literary and cultural texts – whether the novel or disaster films. Vulnerability is *mediated* for us through specific modes (Masschelein et al 2021).

Literary and cultural texts enable us to understand vulnerability because

- They show us individual and collective bodies being rendered open to injury
- They offer descriptions of systemic, intrinsic or social contexts in which these injuries occur
- They develop a language, a representational vocabulary in and through which we can speak of vulnerable people, groups and lifeforms
- They show us how individuals and groups respond to conditions of vulnerability and thus generate hope or despair depending on how they imagine these responses
- They suggest alternatives to the current scenario where a new world order, social relations, government and attitudes can be imagined – a new social imaginary.

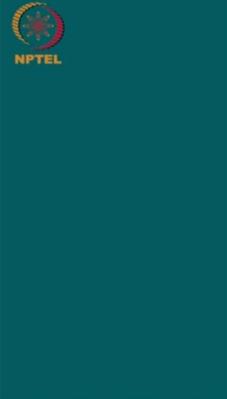
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the postural body might be injured, and you might want to spend a minute going back to the story of Hitchbot, which we looked at last time. The Hitchbot, which traversed Europe and Canada, was treated very well by several people who took the bot to a wedding, to a comics convention, and then somebody ripped its head off, mangled it, and left it by the roadside. Like I said, a tragic technological story. The literary and cultural texts also develop a language in which we can talk about vulnerable people, vulnerable groups, and also vulnerable life forms, which now include the robo-sapiens. Literary and cultural texts show us how individuals and groups might actually respond to or resist conditions of vulnerability.

They might offer alternatives to the current scenario where a new world order might be created in which robots have more rights. Key fictions such as Kazuo Ishiguro's 'Never Let Me Go' and 'Klara and the Sun' are at the forefront of these debates, and they ask the following questions. Please revisit Michael Labossiere and the arguments rehearsed from Labossiere in their previous lessons. If an artificial being undertakes to perform all the tasks of a human, does it deserve a moral obligation to be recognized as such a moral

person? Is it ethical to create vulnerable human beings whose primary design, purpose, and ambition is to serve humans?

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Literary fiction about posthuman vulnerability and care asks the following questions:

- If an artificial being undertakes/performs all the tasks of a human, does it create a moral obligation to recognize 'it' as an 'ersatz moral person' (Michael LaBossiere)?
- Is it ethical to create vulnerable posthuman beings to serve humans?
- Would the creation of such beings not be a reiteration of the slave system?
- Are the artificial beings 'persons'?
- What are the rights of such 'persons'?

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*

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Would the creation of such beings be a reiteration of a very old colonial structure, the slave system? Finally, are artificial beings persons? And if so, do they have rights? Right? Let's look at the novels.

Ruth, one of the clones in *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, says, I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it? I urge you very strongly to look at the language in which Ishiguro writes this.

Remember, Ishiguro's is science fiction without the science. Very minimalistic, a Spartan kind of prose. But look at the power of the imagination and the power of the message he conveys in his novels. The clone says, 'I was ready to donate my organs.' And if you know the novel, the clones are created and allowed to grow up in very wonderful surroundings with one purpose in life.

When they reach a certain age, they start donating their internal organs, their vital organs to human beings who need to be kept alive. Now, this process is not with the approval of the clones. Although it's called donation and they're called donors, the clones are manufactured for the exclusive purpose of donating their vital organs. And after the fourth donation, they immediately die. And Ruth says in the novel, 'It felt right.'

'It felt right.' 'Wasn't that what we were supposed to do?' Now, you might remember the detailed explanation we made about robo-rights: if that is what the robot is supposed to do, if serving humans is what the robot has been designed to do then should we not allow it to fulfill its rights? Should we not let it continue with its capacities, buildings? Aspirational fulfillment and whatnot.

Why do we think that at that point we say, 'No, no, no, no, no.' 'We can't allow that.' So that's what Zuhd says. 'It felt right.' 'Isn't that what we are supposed to do?'

Now, this is a good question. Isn't that what we are supposed to do? In all these novels... Their bodies are vulnerable; the clones are vulnerable, principally because they have no control or agency over their bodies. They are medically treated very carefully, very considerately, very correctly.

They are allowed to have a good life, but they have no independence. So, they have no control over things like reproduction and sex. They have no control over or what they will do with their lives. They also have no control over whether they want to donate their organs or not.

So, the clones are vulnerable post-human beings because of this lack of agency and the loss of control they do not determine the course of their lives. So, the questions Ishiguro raises are as follows. Can we and should we create slave bodies whose purpose is to serve humanity? Is it ethical to create an order of beings, such as clones here, to serve our human needs? Are clones persons?

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So, the questions Ishiguro raises here are:

- Can we/should we create slave bodies whose purpose is to serve humanity?
- Is it ethical to create a new order of beings, such as clones, to serve our (human) needs, whether this is care for the elderly or the sick, as objects for sexual gratification or as organ donors?
- Are clones 'persons'? If yes, do they merit human rights?

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If so, do they merit human rights? There are no clear answers to any of these. Please understand that. This is something I have reiterated over the past few classes as well. Because the debates are very vast.

They are deeply philosophical. So, when the clone says... It felt right, you know, that I should donate my organs. It felt right. Isn't that what we are supposed to do?

The question is, as humans, are we entitled to create creatures who think and feel like that? Are we ethically and morally supposed to create beings whose ardent desire is to be servants to the human race? Is that appropriate? Is that correct?

Or is there something vaguely and implicitly disquieting in this assumption that we can actually do this? This is Ishiguro's set of questions. Next, if you think in terms of I'm not quite sure you can call it a sequel, but it's more or less on the same lines as Never Let Me Go, Ishiguro's next novel, Clara and the Sun. Clara's moral standing as a person is structured around one theme: care.

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Klara's moral standing as a "person" is structured around the theme of care: care for Josie within the ecosystem of the family.

She is a humanoid robot that resembles a human being and performs in a human-like manner in an environment designed for the capabilities of the human body.

Klara believes she should try to please the family members as a way of keeping the family dynamics smooth.

She detects emotional undercurrents in familial relations, and adapts to them.

Klara gives up her key "body fluid" to destroy the machine – an act that she believes will save Josie.

This is a sign of moral bioenhancement.

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Her job is to be a companion to Josie, because Josie has been ill for a very long time, and she, as Clara, will be a companion to this girl until, of course, Josie goes off to college, after which Clara is made redundant and winds up in a warehouse where she will live out the rest of her life by which she means her battery life and eventually die, although we are not quite sure robots can be defined and described in the same way as human life and death. But Clara is a humanoid robot. And Clara resembles a human being. Clara performs in a human-like manner. Clara does all those things which the human body is capable of doing.

She even tries to please the family members. She is able to understand the emotional undercurrents in family relationships and adapts to them. It is what you can think of as artificial intelligence, learning on the job, right? That the artificial intelligence creature, if you want to call it that, is able to learn from the environment.

Clara, for example, understands that when the mother and daughter, Josie and her mother, are talking, she should not interrupt. So, she goes into a corner of the room and stands facing away from them to give them privacy. Now, how does Clara understand this? Is she programmed too? But she couldn't have been programmed for every single aspect of the family dynamics.

Which means Clara learned. Clara learned to adapt, to understand the family dynamics, and fit herself into that particular ecosystem, if you want to call it that. So, the point is,

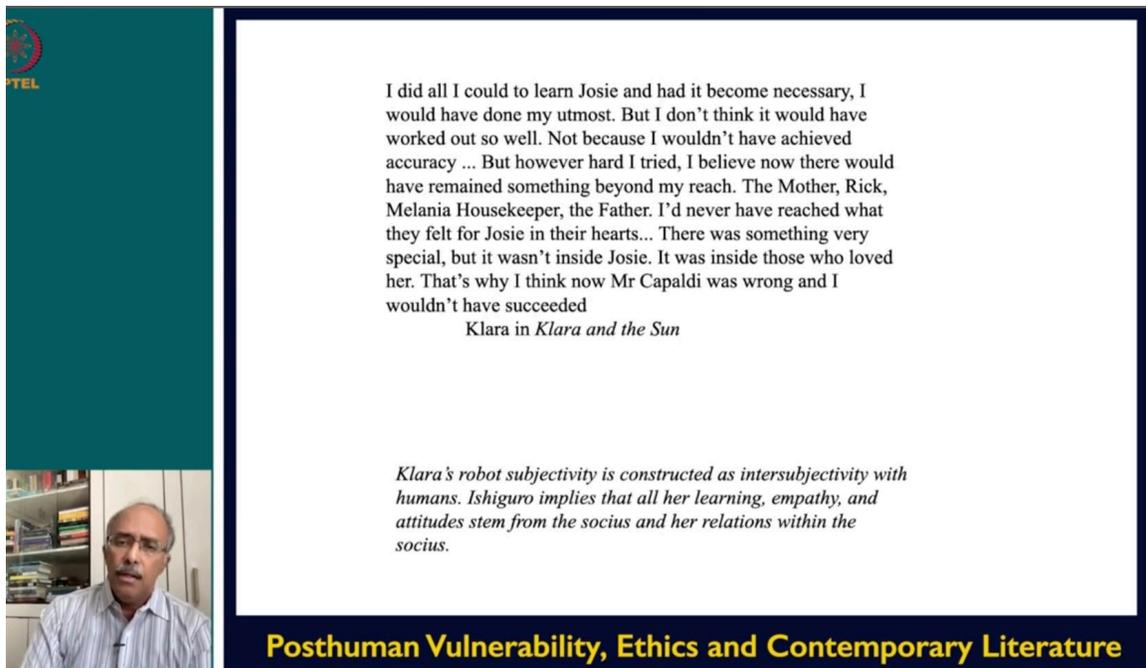
Clara learns like we do. We have something called emotional intelligence, where we do not make certain kinds of jokes. We do not laugh at certain kinds of people because it would not be appropriate.

It would hurt others. It's emotional intelligence. We learn, right? It's a very reactive definition, but we'll do it for now. So, Clara learns, which means Clara understands, which also means Clara adapts.

Now, if she's doing all this, what stops us from thinking of her as a creature akin to humans. She even gives up her body fluid to save Josie. There is one large issue: Josie has a particular kind of illness, and Clara believes that if she destroys a particular large earth-moving machine, Josie will be saved. So Clara cuts open herself and takes out her very key body fluid to destroy the machine.

She believes it will save the girl. But that's not quite enough to work, right? We understand that. And Clara's robot subjectivity is actually built through this connection with humans. And Ishiguro constantly draws attention to the fact that Clara learns with and through her, mediated by her interactions with humans.

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I did all I could to learn Josie and had it become necessary, I would have done my utmost. But I don't think it would have worked out so well. Not because I wouldn't have achieved accuracy ... But however hard I tried, I believe now there would have remained something beyond my reach. The Mother, Rick, Melania Housekeeper, the Father. I'd never have reached what they felt for Josie in their hearts... There was something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her. That's why I think now Mr Capaldi was wrong and I wouldn't have succeeded

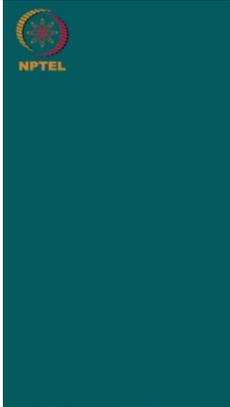
Klara in Klara and the Sun

Klara's robot subjectivity is constructed as intersubjectivity with humans. Ishiguro implies that all her learning, empathy, and attitudes stem from the socius and her relations within the socius.

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So Clara acquires more and more human qualities. She understands. She understands altruism. She understands compassion. She understands doing things for people.

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Klara exhibits:

Empathy
Curiosity
Altruism
Care/compassion

Does this set of qualities make her near-human?

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So, Ishiguro implies her empathy, her altruism, her attitudes in general emerge from the relationships within a particular ecosystem. That they emerge from the socius. Right? Clara exhibits empathy, curiosity, altruism, care, and compassion. Now, do you think this set of qualities defines her as a human person?

These are qualities supposedly associated with human life. But here is an artificial being who gives us the same things. Who offers us the same attitudes. So, would that not be akin to humans? Wouldn't that be like us?

Please note, I'm not saying they are us. I'm saying they are like us. So, when Clara exhibits all these qualities, why do we think Clara is not like a person? The questions Ishiguro raises here are: Are robots property? Or are they sentient beings entitled to rights?

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Questions Ishiguro raises here are:

- Are robots “property” or are they sentient beings entitled to rights?
- Is robot servitude acceptable?
- Are humanoid robots replacing immigrants and migrant workers, and if so, what are the ethics of such a transformation of the social order?
- Is it better or worse to have robot carers rather than human carers, for children and older people?

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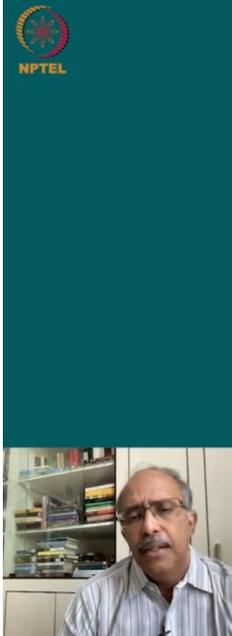
Is robo-servitude ethically and morally acceptable? Then, a bigger political question. Are such robo-carers replacing migrant labor, immigrants, and thereby transforming the social order? As you might know, if you pay attention to global news, in several first-world countries, certain professions are almost entirely run by immigrants. And I'm not speaking only of software and the tech giants in the global north.

I am thinking here in terms of nursing, medicine, and fields like that where the largest demographic The largest population comes from Asia, from Asian migrants. So the question is, if hospitals start replacing immigrants with these robos, what happens to the social order? What happens to the status of the migrants? Are we putting them on par with each other?

Are we saying that the humanoid robot deserves the same attention and dignity as the human migrant? Then, a much more complicated question, which has also been raised by people. Is it better or worse to have robot carers? We don't have an answer to that. If Clara...

Has undertaken to take care of humans and has fulfilled these requirements in exact analogy to what humans do, then Clara is deserving of human rights and privileges, right? Shihiro shows how humans fail to grant moral status to Clara. How we accept them as labor, but we don't give them the dignity of labor. We accept Clara as somebody who works almost exactly like humans, but we don't give her the rights, the status, and the dignity of humans. It's a very common issue, like I said, and the question which we have repeated several times in the last few lessons is: if the robot undertakes all the functions of a human being, like caring for others, if it exhibits the same

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Klara is an “ersatz moral person” (LaBossiere 2017)

Since Klara has undertaken to care for the human and has performed tasks analogous to what humans do, then Klara is deserving of human rights and privileges as an ersatz moral person.

Ishiguro shows how humans *fail* to grant this status to Klara.

When unlifted humans like Rick and Artificial Beings like Klara are performing acts of care for other humans, then the humans have an obligation to treat the Ricks and the Klaras as ersatz moral humans, and therefore deserving of the same rights and respect as humans.

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sentience, care, compassion, and altruism as humans, then on what grounds are we saying this is not deserving of as this, by this, I mean the creature is not deserving of the status of a moral person? The incident in the interaction where there are ruffian-like schoolboys that try to misbehave with Clara and all that is also a point that Ishiguro makes. And the point Ishiguro makes is this: That those humans who mistreat animals will at some point mistreat other humans. And those who mistreat other humans will, of course, mistreat artificial beings.

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At the ‘interaction’ the boys proceed to misbehave with Klara. Danny grabs her tightly, and the others ask that he “throw her over,” at which “several girls, Josie included, giggled.”

Josie remained silent, but a girl’s voice said: “Throwing AFs across the room. That’s evil.” “What’s evil about it? They’re designed to deal with it.”

“That’s not the point,” the girl’s voice said. “It’s just nasty.” Then Rick intervenes and, distracting attention from Klara, saves her from further insults and possible material damage.

Ishiguro makes two points in posthuman ethics here:

- those who ill-treat animals will at some point ill-treat humans.
- If humans ill-treat those deemed or perceived as lesser than them – Rick in *Klara and the Sun* being one of the “unlifted” – they will ill-treat Klara who is an artificial being.

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So, the assumption is we treat them as less than us. They are not on the same plane. In Ishiguro's novel, when Clara is brought into this household, like I said, she is meant to be a companion to the daughter; she becomes a kind of glue. She brings the household together. So, Clara's insertion into the domestic identity of the house...

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In Ishiguro's novel when Klara is introduced into the household, she is meant to help the daughter of the house. Klara becomes a key *integrating* factor in the household, and therefore matters of Klara's rights and duties are not centered around legalities but around the domestic scene and its dynamics.

If Klara's identity rests in serving humans, by design, then would it be unethical and unjust to let her serve humans, worry about them, make altruistic sacrifices for them? Would it not be a fulfilment of her very design and desire to let her serve, worry, and make sacrifices? It must be noted that Klara does not feel anything other than happiness at serving humans. If the humans have created a determinate being with a specific set of goals, desires, and tasks, then would it not be just to allow the being to achieve those set of goals? But is it ethical to create beings with the primary purpose that they serve us humans, and is their service to humans equivalent to slavery? The humans create Klara, endowed with human abilities and free will, but these abilities and free will are/can be played out within a social order where Klara *will* serve the humans.

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into the domestic structure and process or processes of the house means that she is like any human being in that family, within that family structure. So, if we have created Clara to do this, why are we not giving her the status as a family member? Ishiguro highlights two ethical problems. If we consider it is ethical to create beings like Clara, and if Clara has a set of capabilities and capacities, then should we not allow her to fulfill the same aspirations, capabilities, dreams, as we give, as we grant to the human being? If we assume that

has to fulfill our ambitions of serving and serving humans better, then how can we deny that? Of course the question remains, should we create those? And I'm reiterating here that quote from Steven Peterson, which you have put up before, that if the creature has been created with survival desires and aspirations, then it's not a violation of their aspirations because that's what they're designed to do. It's not slavery because they will themselves. They are happy to concede their rights to the humans because it's within their programmed ideas and ideals.

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Ishiguro, highlights two contrasting ethical problems/questions:

- Unlike slaves who are made to serve humans against their will – that is, involuntarily – Klara and ABs are designed to have their free will itself directed at serving humanity. So, if we concede that it is ethical to create/design beings who are meant to serve humans, whose very capabilities are directed at serving humans, then principles of justice demand that they be allowed to fulfil their capabilities. If the AB has to grow and reach the peak of her capabilities then the social order must allow her the rightful freedom to serve humans.
- If, however, we believe we ought *not* to design such beings in the first place, then of course we have created conditions for a new species of servitude.

“It seems possible to design robots from scratch so that they want to serve us in more or less particular ways. In such cases the robots are not slaves, since they are not working against their will...” (Stephen Petersen)

Petersen is stating that they could be designed from scratch so that “the person comes into being with the servile desires intact.

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So there's no question of them being slaves because unlike slaves who were made to work, who were forced to work against their will, the robot does not work against her or his will. It works based on what it is designed to do. So the question Ishiguro asks is, so how can we deny them that? And that's where Steven Peterson's point is very interesting. In all the programming that has gone into her, she's responsible for her prior actions.

Her primary social functions of care remain unchanged. Which means Clara's capabilities, her desires, her wants are meant to care for humans. Even at the end of the novel, when she goes into what's called a slow fade, she is like a human being. Human beings, when they age, go into a slow fade, right? 'Sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything,' as the bard famously said in 'The Seven Ages of Man.'

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Klara is consistent in her caring tendencies and commitment to the humans she is designed to serve: she is born/created with this desire which defines her very identity as a moral being. Klara is responsible for her prior actions, her memories do not reinvent her, and her primary social functions of care remain unchanged. In other words, Klara's capabilities, wants, and desires are created to care for humans. Therefore, justice towards ABs such as Klara would mean allowing and facilitating the goals, desires, and capabilities she was designed/ born with. As a moral being with the same virtues as humans, and performing the same functions as humans towards other humans, Klara as a designed-to-serve AB requires that she be *allowed* to continue these functions until she has what the novel calls "a slow fade," which is cognate with aging in humans.

If the Artificial Being is produced by humans so as to mimic human feelings, cater to human needs, and serve as mirrors to our-selves, as Klara clearly is meant to be, then rather than seeing them as Artificial Beings, perhaps we need to see them as "allo-human persons," (Alcaraz) – versions of us humans.

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And Clara is like that. She goes into a slow fade. She will no longer, after a point in time, be able to sustain her energy because her battery will run down, and her electrical circuits will collapse. So she's gone through the same process. And she has aspirations, desires, and capabilities.

She has served the human as she was designed to do. She served humans as she desired to do. She was a companion. She was a carer. So, on one ground, are we saying that I don't deserve dignity and rights?

The point here is, if the artificial being is produced by humans to mimic human feelings, to cater to human needs, to serve as versions of us, as mirrors to us, then, as Clara clearly demonstrates, you cannot see them as just artificial beings. Perhaps we need to see them as all human persons, as Alexandra Alcaraz argues in her interesting book, *Our Cyberpersons*. This, as you can imagine, is what you can call futuristic ethics. This is the ethics of the future. And what we have discovered here in our reading of Ishiguro's two novels, *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*, is the making of robots.

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The construction and creation of robo-carers is a huge, huge ethical and philosophical conundrum. Are we supposed to design creatures who want to serve us? If you create such creatures, then is it appropriate to say they should not serve us because that's their aspiration? If they do all the things analogous to human beings, then on what grounds do we deny them human rights? Futuristic ethics, as we have seen here, is built on the fact that just as humans are vulnerable, most human beings are also vulnerable.

They might be vulnerable in different and distinct ways, but they are still vulnerable. Thank you.