

Human Morality and the Artificial Intelligence in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*

Devilal

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

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Abstract: *Ian McEwan has always been interested in the exploration of various shades and nuances of human nature through the fictional accounts of different human experiences in his compelling narratives. One such example is his thought provoking recent novel Machine Like Me that speculates the dynamic and dialectic relationship between man and the advanced machines like AI. The present paper attempts to shed light on the ethical considerations in different choices and decisions made by the AI robot Adam and his human counterparts Charlie and Miranda putting emphasis on the flawed and compromised nature of human morality in comparison to the intact and unwavering moral framework of the machines that surpass the humans not only in intelligence and efficiency but also in moral and ethical considerations holding a mirror to what man is as a bundle of inherent contradictions. Unlike other science fiction works that predict the potential threat of artificial intelligence, McEwan's fictional android behaves far better than the human characters and steadfastly adheres to the notions of truth, justice and rationality. This paper would analyse the different motivations behinds moral choices made by both man and machine in different circumstances in the novel.*

Key Words: *Artificial Intelligence, Man, Machines, Morality, Justice, Contradictions*

Ian McEwan is a contemporary British novelist and short story writer who has been actively writing since 1975 on various issues the western society is undergoing after the World War II encompassing cold war politics, fall of communism, Berlin wall, Iraq war, 9/11 attacks etc. that have profoundly influenced the globalised society in the latter half of the 20th century and the earlier decades of the 21st century. He explores all sorts of problems, challenges and opportunities of the modern man in every succeeding novel. *Machines Like Me* deals with one such issue of the current boom in the technology of artificial intelligence and machine learning and its effects on the different aspects of human life. McEwan reimagines the age old human wish of creating a genius that is smarter, more intelligent and capable than themselves and that surpasses them not only in intelligence, cognitive and affective efficacy, and dexterity but also in conscientiousness and moral reasoning. Such superintelligence reiterates the very philosophical question – what it is to be a human and what it is that makes us different from the other species. His novel is an attempt to answer these questions and emphasises on the need to look back and look again on some of the recurring patterns of human behaviour that show the inherent flaws and uncanny contradictions in our very nature.

Morality is one of the central aspects of human social behaviour that fosters a culture of cooperation and collaboration among the human species and it has sustained the human life since time immemorial. Across societies, there are certain codes of conduct of right and wrong behaviour that are expected to be followed for the collective well-being of the human kind. Despite being somewhat selfish committed to pursue self-interests, the humans are still capable of empathetic, generous and selfless actions; and there is a dichotomy of choices between

preferring the self and others in a given situation. However, morality and ethics are not absolute in terms of human nature, but relativist, or rather they are situational and contextual. The moral position held by an individual stands variable in view of the person, thing and idea in context and his/ her choices can be compromised as per convenience. Ian McEwan highlights this moral compromise in *Machines Like Me* and raises questions about teaching such complicated and variable ethical considerations to an artificial intelligence used in robots and auto-driven vehicles. McEwan's humanoid robot is hypothetically more rational, truthful, judicious and ethical than his human counterparts underlining the different sorts of faults and fallacies in human conduct.

Machines Like Me revolves around a love triangle among Adam, a very advanced robot; Charlie, the narrator of the novel; and Miranda, his upstairs neighbour and girlfriend; and it explores different dimensions of human-machine relationship. Charlie purchases Adam paying huge money that he had inherited from his mother in pursuit of his curiosity about these emerging technological wonders and shapes Adam's personality jointly with Miranda selecting different preferences for certain tasks to be performed by him. Adam is fully plausible and functioning artificial mind capable to act, to think and to feel like the humans and can perform all sorts of cognitive, emotive and physical actions. In the very first place, just after getting activated Adam warns Charlie of Miranda's suspicious character and her nefarious past which Charlie reacts and rejects though remains somewhat sceptical about her. And, to his amazement, Miranda once convinces Adam and they make love together in her bedroom which was overheard by Charlie; and it ushers a row between the lovers as well as between Adam and Charlie. But the robot simply states that he cannot help it as it was designed by Miranda and she asked and forced him to be intimate with her. Despite being committed to Charlie, Miranda has a one night stand with Adam driven with curiosity and excitement as "I was curious, she said. I wanted to know what it would be like" (95). And when Charlie rebukes Adam for his transgression, Adam simply expresses his apologies but reminds that he is actually in love with Miranda. Sensing jealous and insecure on being cuckolded by Adam and loss of Miranda, Charlie just tries to deactivate Adam by pressing the kill switch which Adam then stops him from and warns of not doing the same in future. So, both the human agents choose what they feel convenient and purposeful for them not bothering whether it would be ethically right or wrong.

Adam and his human friends differ in opinions when Mark arrives there at Charlie's flat and; being driven with emotions, both Miranda and Charlie adore the little child and she starts entertaining him and playing with him. But, Adam remains quite critical of her indulgence in Mark and warns the probable criminal charges if they persist keeping him with them without the permission of the authorities which he thinks should be instantly informed. Miranda feels indignant about it and asks Adam to keep his mouth shut up. However, to their surprise and sadness, two women from the child care department visit them and take the boy away as Adam had already informed the authorities because he does follow the norms and believes that both Miranda and Charlie should also do the same. Charlie realises "I discovered that during the kitchen romp Adam was in direct contact with the authorities. It wasn't unreasonable of him, but he did it without telling us" (110). But, Miranda feels deeply hurt and infuriated over Adam's too rational and lawful behaviour which the humans can easily mould as per comfort. Thus, the human actors in the novel act merely with their intuition and emotions in a self-serving manner irrespective of what is morally and legally correct while Adam's stance is pretty objective, disinterested and lawful. He behaves in a highly regarded and idealistic manner serving what is right and moral. Casey Dorman says:

McEwan knows (and Alan Turing would have too, if he had survived) that human thinking is circuitous, self-serving, inaccurate, and inefficient, and humans expect the same from one another and wouldn't want it any other way. The AIs don't understand this, and, like Adam, apply their logic to situations, expecting humans to act and react the same way.

When Charlie comes to know that Adam can play on the stock market marvelously and can earn him lot of money, he employs Adam on his desk and let him work on the stock market. And to their wonder, Adam makes thousands of pounds within a short span; and the selfish Charlie just purchases new stuff and plans buying a new house in a posh area of London and settling with Miranda and Mark there. But, one evening Adam just takes the money and, to their oblivion, donated it to decent causes like the old age home, child care home, rape victims' home etc. Both Charlie and Miranda feel devastated and losing hope of buying a new house and beginning a new and luxurious life. They both chide Adam for this reckless decision and Charlie says "We were going to buy a new house. The money was ours" (272). So, the machine is far more caring, generous and empathetic in dealing with different sort of issues while the humans in his vicinity, just behave in an erratic, impetuous, selfish manner.

Another such instance of human moral transgression occurs when Adam comes to know that Miranda, in her past, had falsely accused Peter Gorringer of rape and got him prosecuted with false testimony. Though, Miranda rationalises her stance as she revengefully did it for doing justice to her deceased friend Mariam Malik who had been raped by Gorringer and who later committed suicide. Charlie is deeply moved with her narrative and his love for her even grows more and he upholds all what she did, even though it violated the law and he says "Miranda had to lie to get justice. But truth isn't everything" (277). However, Adam does not endorse her position and believes that she deliberately caused imprisonment to an innocent man for the crime he did not commit and her act is a gross mistreatment of law and miscarriage of justice. He states that she must atone for her wrongdoings and face a court trial as he has prepared the complete record of Mariam's case and confessions of both Gorringer and Miranda when all the three of them visited Gorringer at his apartment in Salisbury. Sensing Adam to be a threat to their life together and marriage prospects, Charlie slammed his head with a hammer trying dismantling him to evade the court trial and Miranda's punishment. But, for their shock, Adam tells them that the police had already been handed over with the file and might be on their way. He asserts "What sort of world do you want? Revenge, or the rule of law. The choice is simple" (277). Thus, this very episode sheds light on the malleability and variability of human conception of lawfulness and morality while the artificial mind programmed with keeping in mind what is true, just and legal in actual and he acts in a judicious and lawful manner believing in the rule of law. Marking the man and machine difference to moral positions, Roberta Ferrari states:

Adam uncompromisingly insists on Miranda's paying her debt, so that an unbridgeable gap opens between his moral inflexibility on the one hand, and human relativism, on the other, with Charlie ready to empathize with his girlfriend's behaviour and justify it. (262)

In the afore-mentioned scenes and situations, the human characters are torn with feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, jealousy, capriciousness and avariciousness; and behave to fulfill their own purposes. On the other hand, the robot, Adam always holds a moral and ethical position even though it seems cold, apathetic and too rational. Thus, Ian McEwan highlights the inherent contradictions of the human nature where we, human always adore great values like truth, justice, honesty, objectivity and rationality but in our day to day life, we fail to enact them and rather show falsity, deception, intuitive and immoral behaviour. McEwan puts

emphasis on the need to reconsider the psychological makeup of the human beings while designing new technologies of robotics and machine learning. As the master of AI, Alan Turing remarks in the end of the novel:

I think the A-and-Es 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.... They couldn't understand us, because we couldn't understand ourselves. Their learning programmes couldn't accommodate us. If we don't know our own minds, how could we design theirs and expect them to be happy alongside us? (299)

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