

## Dignity, healing, and virtue: Bioethical concerns in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never let me go*

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### Dignity, healing, and virtue: Bioethical concerns in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never let me go*

Bioethics. Utilitarian approach. Virtue ethics. Cloning. Clone narratives.

The article aims to examine bioethical concerns presented in Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*, focusing on the lives of cloned beings who become organ donors for non-cloned humans. The analysis addresses such ethical implications of cloning and organ donation as dignity, healing, care, and virtue. Through the lens of utilitarian and virtue ethics, the analysis focuses on the novel's portrayal of these characters, examining how these models function in the narrative and enhance its literary effect. Ishiguro's text highlights some of the bioethical concerns surrounding clone characters in fiction. The novel questions whether clone characters are part of a social transformation or if they are part of the existing distinction between nature and artifact. The bioethical understanding of human dignity is emphasized, as it is intrinsic to every human being.

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As a young discipline, bioethics has enabled the study of ethical issues not only in medicine and public health but also in areas of social and cultural interaction. In addition, through the use of (so far) fictional worlds, bioethics has allowed authors and readers to look at characters that are posthuman (enhanced beings, artificial beings, sentient robots, clones, etc.) with specifically bioethical issues in mind. Discussing bioethical concerns and opportunities presented in fictional works from 21st-century literature and/or popular culture requires a two-tier approach: the first is to draw on the existing bioethical debate through the prism of specific aspects of bioethics, e.g. reproductive rights or end-of-life care, and the second is to use the essence of this debate to offer a comprehensive look at characters, stories, plots, or narrative devices used in the fictional works in question.

This article will focus on characters who may not be considered “traditionally” human: the cloned beings in Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*. It will endeavor to offer a bioethical reading of the novel applying two specific models of bioethics: the utilitarian approach and the virtue ethics approach. The utilitarian approach assesses the morality of actions based on their overall utility or consequences. Virtue ethics incorporates the idea that in order to be virtuous, it does not suffice to do something simply because it is the right thing to do, but that it is often conditioned by motivation and various kinds of inclinations.

These two approaches provide a focused analysis of the text, even though Ishiguro’s novel invites the discussion of many other bioethical themes related to the ethics and morality of cloning and organ donation, including such issues as rights and welfare, the care model, Kantian ethics, rules-based common morality, and inherent morality, among others.<sup>1</sup>

*Never Let Me Go* is a novel that presents the lives of young characters who are cloned to become organ donors for other, non-cloned humans. The clones succumb to the physical strain of organ harvesting performed on them and die as a result. But it is their upbringing and education – mirroring fully human and traditional routines – which challenges the perception of them as only dehumanized beings. Looking at such aspects as dignity, healing, care, and virtue on the part of the clone characters in *Never Let Me Go*, I will try to analyze how the chosen bioethical models function in the narrative as well as how they enhance its literary effect.

## TWO BIOETHICAL APPROACHES: UTILITARIAN AND VIRTUE ETHICS

In bioethics, fictional characters who are not human – in the sense that they have not been born to a human mother – are subject to queries which have so far been reserved only to humans. As David DeGrazia and Joseph Millum suggest, these questions may include: “Is euthanasia, or medical mercy killing, ever justified? Do people have a moral right to health care? Is it permissible to involve animals in experiments that seriously harm them in order to benefit humanity?” (2021, 1–2) Such questions become relevant for the clone characters in Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, as well as in other posthuman fiction stories, where they apply to sentient beings (that are not always human). The novel also raises issues related to such concepts as “dignity,

quality of life, respect for life, vulnerability, human identity, economic utility, human rights, radical autonomy, progress in techno-science and survival of the fittest” – all areas with shifting meaning in posthuman environments (Pichardo 2018, 214).

R. M. Hare presents consequentialism as the most significant component of utilitarianism, claiming that the consequences of any act or deed define its moral quality (2009, 85). In the fictional world of *Never Let Me Go*, it is, of course, questionable whether the societal benefit of prolonging the lives of non-clones by means of organ donation justifies the suffering, sacrifice, and predetermined fates of the clone donors. Hare also suggests that the utilitarian approach posits that “the consequences that are relevant to the morality of actions are consequences that increase or diminish the welfare of those affected” and that welfare is the acquisition of “a high or at least reasonable degree of a quality of life which on the whole a person wants, or prefers to have” (86). He then highlights an important point – namely, that the utilitarian model takes this want or preference as applicable to beings with sentience, not just humans per se. Utilitarianism, especially when applied to the social setup of Ishiguro’s narrative, also addresses the importance of rules and their observation for the purpose of moral practice. This is valid despite the fact that it is not always possible to “predict the future well enough to be sure what act would maximize utility” (Hare 2009, 89).

By contrast, according to Justin Oakley, virtue ethics claims that “actions cannot be properly judged as right or wrong without reference to considerations of character” (2009, 91). This is particularly relevant for *Never Let Me Go*, which also addresses the issue of classical education, the role of arts and humanities in the development of a (virtuous?) character, and the complexity of culture and civilization. Oakley gives the example of an agent of “the virtue of benevolence [acting to provide] assistance to another [while also] acting from a genuine concern for the well-being of that person” (93–94). He further argues that because “virtues are intrinsic goods that are plural [...] the goodness of the virtues cannot be reduced to a single underlying value, such as utility” (95). Oakley’s account of the application of virtue ethics is mostly relevant to such issues as health, euthanasia, or general medical treatment – the contrast between justice and charity when treating a terminally ill patient (98). In Oakley’s view, taking a virtue ethics approach in medical care requires that patients “be told the truth about their condition, not because truth-telling maximizes utility, nor because patients have a right to know this information, but because this is what is involved in a doctor having the virtue of truthfulness, and a disposition to tell patients the truth serves the medical goal of health” (98). When applying virtue ethics, the emphasis is on good character and moral virtues. In the novel, the question is where the characters act virtuously – is there justice, charity, compassion, integrity, or justice?

Both of these bioethical models, however briefly introduced here, can be expanded as a tool for approaching Ishiguro’s narrative, moving beyond Cary Wolfe’s contention that bioethics is mostly restricted to the provision of guidelines and legal frameworks in medicine and healthcare (2007, 72). Reading *Never Let Me Go* through the prism of virtue ethics and/or the consequentialist aspect of utilitarianism applied

to cloned characters and their life and role in society allows for an exploration of such bioethically relevant issues as organ donation, creation of cells, tissues, organs or life itself, as well as societal choices made in the context of these issues.

### CLONE CHARACTERS AND THEIR DIGNITY

In his account of clone stories, John Marks quotes Valerie Hartouni, who reviews the most frequent objections to cloning as a series of bioethically relevant issues, including “eugenic implications; the potential to ‘commodify’ human life; the disruption of kinship structures; and the undermining of conventional understandings of individuality and identity” (2010, 337). Such categorization can then determine the role of clone characters in literary or cinematic fiction, subjecting them to what Melinda Hall calls “biological reduction” – a situation in which “behaviour and social phenomena can be explained through biological factors” (2017, 95). According to Hall, such “genetic determinism positions genetic cause as ruling over individual outcome” (95).

In Ishiguro’s novel, however, this is challenged in several ways. The first is the fact that the narrator and protagonist, Kathy H, is one of the clones and her account of the events – presented in a first-person limited point of view – is very much like a coming-of-age story. Consequently, the story reads like a tale about maturing individuals, set against the backdrop of a traditional English boarding school called Hailsham. When it is finally revealed that the main characters are clones, created and raised for the sole purpose of organ donation at a later stage of their lives, a process that will eventually lead to their demise, the readers have already established an Aristotelian identification with the characters. The expectation of a catharsis, in a dramatic sense, thus relies on their humanity and existential meaning:

Even though the students at Hailsham are clones, they are very much alive, with their individual personality, and the ability to think for themselves. The purpose of teaching them in Hailsham is, in a way, their way to give the human clones a reason to live. After all, humans need a purpose to live and it was shown that even though living in Hailsham is not how a normal human being would live, the students have constructed their own lives, making interpretations of things that occurred in their lives, able to articulate their thoughts, and become their own self over time. (Utami 2023, 236)

The clones’ dignity comes from the narrator’s cultured, compassionate, and empathetic presentation of the events and the character’s role in them, as well as from the humanistic approach taken to the clone’s upbringing and education. They are brought up in a community of their peers, in an academic environment where art plays a major role. Miss Emily, the head guardian at Hailsham, tells the clones that their teachers and guardians asked them to produce art not because they wanted to learn about the clones’ personalities, but because they tried to humanize their perception of the cloned students. As Miss Emily puts it, “we thought it would reveal your souls. Or, to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*” (Ishiguro, 255).

From a bioethical perspective, of course, the clones’ knowledge about their origin, nature, and purpose in life brings about a sentience that should radically shift their

perception of themselves, their role and place in society. Bioethically speaking, an absence of sentience should deem any harm caused by death irrelevant – an argument often used when discussing abortion, for example, that “pre-sentient fetuses are not harmed by death and so it is not wrongful for someone to exercise their right to control their body and terminate a pregnancy”, as DeGrazia and Millum argue (2021, 279–280). The sentience of clones, however, is a different matter and they are not only able to feel pain and understand such concepts as separation, anxiety, love, or death (just like a regular human would) but can also perceive these issues in a broader context, perhaps feeling the urge to protest and resist.

Nonetheless, the clones’ reaction to their cruel fate – being brought up very much like humans to end up like dutiful organ donors without any rights – is very moderate and seemingly dignified. They accept their destiny without any protest and with quiet, peaceful resignation (Schillings 2016, 139). The driving force behind the characters’ action in the second part of the story is the chance to be granted a “deferral”, a kind of pardon that would spare them the obligation to start donating organs. But upon learning that there is no such thing, that “there’s definitely nothing [...] [no] deferral, nothing like that” and that their life “must now run the course that’s been set for it”, the clones assent to the reality with no objection (Ishiguro 2005, 261):

“So, what you’re saying, Miss,” Tommy said, “is that everything we did, all the lessons, everything. It was all about what you just told us? There was nothing more to it than that?” “I can see,” Miss Emily said, “that it might look as though you were simply pawns in a game. It can certainly be looked at like that. But think of it. You were lucky pawns. There was a certain climate and now it’s gone. You have to accept that sometimes that’s how things happen in this world. People’s opinions, their feelings, they go one way, then the other. It just so happens you grew up at a certain point in this process” (261).

The resignation and lack of resistance is not dissimilar to the cloned characters in Kate Wilhelm’s science fiction novel *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* (1998) – the cloned male or female siblings always kept together in groups, lacked creativity, and could not survive on their own (193). In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones’ passivity is the result of their traditional, very conservative upbringing in Hailsham, where they might be taught to find creative outlets of their minds in art but are strictly supervised and instructed to be well-mannered. Ishiguro’s exposition of the characters’ inability to change the course of their fate thus mirrors the ideology of genetic reductionism and perhaps offers a critique of conservative values in general.

### CLONES AS HEALERS, CARERS, OR VICTIMS?

Just as in *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, in which cloning is justified because it is the only way to preserve the human genome (and thus human life as such) in a harsh postapocalyptic environment, Ishiguro’s novel suggests an alternate world or country (possibly the United Kingdom) where cloned individuals are helping non-clones either save or prolong their lives. The text never reveals the details of this social contract, but the readers learn that a system (guardians-carers-donors) has been established in order to maintain a production of organs to be harvested. In a bioethical sense, this reflects the care approach, elaborated in more detail, for example, by Rita

C. Manning, who postulates that “care involves a basic human capacity to recognize and respond to the needs of others” (2009, 105).

Though this is a more complex issue, which cannot be summed up in a single statement, it is a common theme running through the narratives of numerous works of literature, especially those featuring a “mad scientist”, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), or H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). In the former, Victor Frankenstein’s motive is originally noble and virtuous – he wants to get rid of illnesses and human suffering, even to “banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!” (Shelley 2012, 42) In the process, as it turns out, Frankenstein loses control over his actions while he plays God – he struggles with the ethical implications of granting the creature a human life because he fears its otherness and the potential consequences. Doctor Moreau, on the other hand, has never had a noble purpose and seems to be only a sadistic and cynical experimenter with human subjects. The bioethical concerns are tremendous and the consequences disastrous.

In Ishiguro’s novel, we do not see the “mad scientists” who are responsible for the situation or know anything about the social contract which enabled the cloning of organ donors. The story only reveals the system of guardians, carers, and the donors themselves. More than a system aimed at responding to the needs of others, it is a system based on suspicion and mistrust. However, the concern related to bioethically improper conduct, or even fear, is strongly present in the narrative – “shadowy objects in test tubes” (Ishiguro 2005, 256) is what the clones are referred to by the non-clones, suggesting a dark, mysterious, almost Gothic species. They become outsiders, creatures with fully human features, both physical and mental, who are feared by the “normals” in exactly the same “way as people are afraid of spiders and things” (263).

The clones’ role in society, despite its noble and beneficial context, is to sacrifice their existence for the sake of others. This existence is expensive and valuable because they are provided with a good upbringing and solid education. However, because they are not considered to be actual humans, their function and sacrifice does not raise moral or ethical concerns in the society. In other words, the social majority does not “adopt a position of preferences [which would be] morally unacceptable by the weighted judgments” (Conti and De Souza 2021, 722). When the clones die after having donated many organs, their death is not considered the end of a horrid abuse of a sentient, living individual, but only a fulfilment of their role. Indeed, their physical death is referred to as “completion”, suggesting, somewhat ironically, an achievement, not a demise. This makes the clones in the story fully objectified and instrumentalized because their lives are reduced to a physical existence.

Ishiguro’s text presents a story that is told quietly, almost reservedly, even though the bioethical issues are very worrying, disturbing, if not outright shocking. The clones’ predetermined lives, their constant supervision and control, and their passivity – this all reflects on their lives which are presented as fully human, serving an apparent altruistic purpose which is, paradoxically, commanded by the clones’ lack of free will. Their action is set amongst what Tiffany Tsao calls the “horror of the purpose-driven life” (2012, 223).<sup>2</sup>

The clones in *Never Let Me Go* are cared for, brought up, educated, and then used to assist in the treatment, care, and healing of others, but the incentive for such humane acts is rooted in a solely utilitarian purpose:

The lines between clone and human-recipient and between carer and donor are, of course, blurred and crossed: humans who are not clones become hybrids in order to live (and eventually die) and carers themselves eventually become donors. But it is not love that enables this crossing. The love that is supposed to make all the difference supports the cutting pain of the difference it intensifies: clones may be like humans in their demonstrated capacity for emotion, but this resemblance does not defer their ends, and carers cannot cross the line of refused empathy dividing carer from donor. (Casid 2012, 129)

Therefore, within the fictional world of Ishiguro's novel, it is the consequentialist bioethical approach that is more resonant in the motivation to create, bring up, and use the clones – all stages in the process of preparing them for the purely physical act of organ donation – while at the same time treating them like human subjects who are subjected to civilized and cultured education.

### CLONES AS VIRTUOUS AND CHARITABLE CHARACTERS

*Never Let Me Go* is instrumental in showing the lack of a genuine purpose, a real and true care or interest to act virtuously – which is the essence of virtue ethics – both on the part of the clones themselves (because they are given no option) and that of their guardians, for whom the biological reduction of the clones to a dehumanized “commodity” provides an ethical excuse. In consequence, they repeatedly express their repulsion at the clones. Miss Emily, the head of Hailsham, for example, explicitly highlights this feeling: “We are all afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Hailsham” (Ishiguro 2005, 264). This apprehension reflects what John Marks calls “bioethical alarm”, a feeling caused by “a fear of the uncanny”, relating the juxtaposition of the familiar and unfamiliar to Sigmund Freud's idea of the uncanny represented by the existence of *doppelgängers* (Marks 2010, 341). It is difficult to apply virtue ethics to a group of individuals who are known to be produced by copying what has already existed before, perhaps many times over.

The existence of a cloned school of individuals dehumanizes them in the eyes of their guardians and the non-cloned population outside of Hailsham because, as Mads Rosendahl Thomsen argues, “one or two clones do not seem uncanny, but 50 to 100 identical humans would probably disturb most” (2015, 68). However, the clones themselves do not feel dehumanized, on the contrary, the readers are invited to follow Kathy's narration – which is direct, empathetic, imaginative, and psychologically astute – as if they were reading any human story. When Miss Emily says: “Look at this art! How dare you claim these children are anything less than fully human?” (Ishiguro 2005, 256), the novel suggests that the virtue of the clones' characters lies in their very human ability to create art, think about it, assess its relevance, and understand its potential to establish connections between beings.

However, it is not only art and the humanities-based education the clone characters receive which humanizes them; it is also their ability to withstand and deal with

the absence of familial connections – which they collectively replace with solidarity with each other, creating ties through mutual understanding rather than genetic or cultural belonging. This is not always successful, as the non-existence of biological family represents “[a] loss of the medium through which they interconstitutionally construct themselves as individuals” (Shaddox 2013, 459).

The bioethical implications are obvious here – the clones struggle to define their identity because of the conflicting attitudes to who they are and what choices they can (and cannot) make. On the one hand, they are considered to be non-human, shunned by the social majority despite their charitable action, feared for their otherness. On the other hand, the narrative is an emotionally and psychologically strong presentation of their human character:

I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it's just too much. The current's too strong. They've got to let go, drift apart. That's how it is with us. (Ishiguro 2005, 277)

When one of the main characters, Tommy, utters these words at the end of the novel, he is about “to complete”, to die donating his organs for the last time. His poetic and metaphorical account of the predestined lives, ruled by biological reductionism, communicates a very human appeal – the desire to belong, to be part of a social structure, to resist any predetermining forces defining our lives. The clone characters in the novel share this human appeal and are depicted “as loving and sensitive individuals, even if they are not accorded the status and rights of citizens within the dystopian political system that has brought them into being” (Whitehead 2011, 56).

As John David Schwetman posits, *Never Let Me Go* is a novel that effectively portrays the lives of humans who are clones, and whose experience is “almost unrepresentable” because they are “the radically dehumanised other” (2017, 423). Schwetman also highlights the novel's contemporaneity because it addresses “these experiences at a moment when humanity finds itself in a state of disruption from advances in surveillance technology and our global economic system's insistence on standardisation and control of increasingly diverse aspects of our daily lives” (423). Overall, Ishiguro's text presents virtue-oriented characters whose humanity is both questioned and upheld in the narrative.

## CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* challenges the concept that what we consider to be living things are beings established and rooted in nature, alongside Mark Sagoff's conjectures that “the advance of biotechnology throws into confusion the settled distinction between nature and artifact” (2005, 69). Can clones in fiction become representatives of a new type of literary characters or will they shift the focus “from engagement in contemporary social discourse and practices to a more general reflection on existential and ethical issues related to the future of humanity” (Pisarski 2021, 14)? Are clone characters part of the “social transformation” in which natural human (though cloned) beings will contribute to “a genetically improved society



of Homo sapiens” (Suwara 2021, 82)? The bioethical concerns raised in Ishiguro’s text highlight the fundamental bioethical understanding that “human dignity is intrinsic to every human being, by the simple fact of being, with no need for any other kind of recognition. Hence, human dignity emerges as a basic ethical foundation, on which bioethical principles and their application must be based” (Conti and De Souza 2021, 723).

The numerous questions emerging from the bioethical background lead to the recognition that clone characters in fiction might establish conditions and start interactions resulting in bioethical dilemmas and “complex situations because there are no entrenched answers and because they involve many disciplines and different types of knowledge”, consequently acknowledging that such situations and issues “cannot be easily resolved [and that] they force us to raise the expectation bars and push us to search for deeper understanding of the human condition” (Cicovacki and Lima 2014, 266). In *Never Let Me Go*, this is manifested by the attitude of the clones themselves, whose passive response to their fate reflects the passivity of conservative humans who raised them.

The mere fact that the clones are portrayed as very human (and are indeed indistinguishable from non-cloned characters for a substantial part of the narrative) instills in the reader a sense of perception that would be attributed to regular human characters. The readers do not see any social danger which would justify the cloning of people for organ donation, and there is no “direct existential threat or a slow decay of the current order” suggesting the need for such conduct (Tomašovičová 2021, 33). The clones are portrayed as regular human adolescents facing a conservative system of education – in a narrative told by one of them in the style of a coming-of-age novel. This is why *Never Let Me Go* succeeds in “breaking away from existing discourses of existential alarm” and offers a story, plot, and characters that highlight important bioethical concerns (Marks, 333).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> More on the other bioethical themes, see Beauchamp and Childress 2013; DeGrazia and Millum 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> This is a recurring theme also in many popular and recent works of cinema and streaming television, such as *Westworld*, *Ex Machina*, or *Orphan Black*. Humanoid androids and/or clones are portrayed as beings under constant surveillance, created to live in predefined roles, often exploited and oppressed.

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