

Nurture and the Machine: Willful Delusion in *Klara and the Sun*

*Bernadette Waterman Ward**

ABSTRACT: Katsuo Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun* illustrates the moral risks of rejecting biological parenthood for imaginary perfections apparently put within our grasp by technology. His protagonist is a docile young teen, morally enervated as her mother cherishes an imaginary version of the child, concretized in an android. Ishiguro goes beyond common literary tropes about the dangers of rejecting nature and the power of machines; he suggests that our egotistical illusions, served by obedient machines, pose the real risk. Technology merely enables alienation from reality. Dismissing natural goodness blurs our sense of order and promotes social destruction. Academics should resist delusive theory, insist upon the moral value of concrete truth, and never cooperate in denying physical reality.

IN *KLARA AND THE SUN*, the novelist Katsuo Ishiguro confronts parental power over children's lives—from the viewpoint of a machine. Ishiguro won the Nobel prize for literature in 2017. His earlier novel *Never Let Me Go* featured children cloned so they could grow up to die as organ donors, dissected to order. His 2021 novel, *Klara and the Sun*,¹ examines a subtler, but barely less deadly, utilitarianism. The main

* Bernadette Waterman Ward earned her Ph.D. from Stanford University. Her research interests include Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Henry Newman. She was tenured at the State University of New York before admiration for the Core Curriculum brought her to the University of Dallas in 2000. She has written *World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Catholic University of America, 2002) *Eliot's Angels: George Eliot, René Girard and Mimetic Desire* (Notre Dame, 2022) and dozens of articles on both nineteenth-century British writers and twentieth-century Americans. She is on the editorial boards of *The Hopkins Quarterly* and the *Newman Studies Journal*. She is a member of the board of directors for both the Newman Association of America and University Faculty for Life.

¹ *Klara and the Sun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021).

character's mother drifts toward preferring death for her children over damage to her own self-image; and the child, Josie, accepts it.

Josie's "artificial friend" android, named Klara, narrates the story, from the midst of a culture eerily like ours: "a near-future world where emerging technologies like A.I. and gene-editing have transformed and divided society."² Anxious parents subject their children to gene-altering treatments called "lifting" to assure them entry into elite colleges and a life of secure privilege. The genetic alteration sickens and sometimes kills the child. Young Josie's family has already lost her sister to this genetic engineering. Josie's father "was once an expert engineer before losing his job, and now lives in some kind of anarchist community with other expendable people."³ Josie's mother divorced him and has custody. Against his objections, she is "lifting" the surviving child, Josie. Educated by online classes because of the health risk, Josie can socialize with few actual humans. Klara, Josie's "artificial friend," is programmed to nonjudgmentally fulfill her purchaser's desires and attend to the well-being of the purchaser's child.

Klara cannot rebel against Josie's mother. Josie is similar; although she has secrets from her mother, she avoids challenging her mother's lies about her sister's death. As the distance between them grows, she more desperately wants to be what her android already is: her mother's perfect disciple. That means: get into a good college or die trying, like the real-life highschoolers in Palo Alto, America's most elite school district. As of 2019—pre-pandemic—a quarter of them admitted to being suicidal, crushed by parental ambition and the emptiness of their privilege.⁴ Inevitably, Josie finds herself preferring Klara, who strives to make the girl get well after her mother has accepted that Josie will die.

"Lifted" teens' mothers arrange "interaction meetings" to train their cruelly competitive offspring in social skills. Mothers sit in the next room,

² Dan Stewart, "Kazuo Ishiguro on How His New Novel *Klara and the Sun* is a Celebration of Humanity," Time.com, 0040781X, 3/2/2021. Accessed by Academic Search Complete.

³ William Lombardo, "Losing Ourselves: Why the Prospect of Loving Machines is So Sad," *The New Atlantis* 65 (Summer 2021), 111.

⁴ (<https://evolvreatment.com/blog/palo-alto-teen-mental-health/>) Accessed November 2021.

gossiping about the failed nerve of inferior, “unlifting” parents. They flatter themselves for the “courage” to “lift” the genetically altered children. Josie’s only human friend, an unlifted boy named Rick, once satirizes Josie’s acquiescence by pretending to speak for her: “I wish I could out and walk and run and skateboard and swim in lakes. But I can’t because my mother has Courage. So instead I get to stay in bed and be sick. I’m glad about this. I really am.” (131) Josie is furious at the accuracy of the satire; but it is simply the case that Josie is gradually, with less and less resistance, buying into an illusion that she knows to be deadly. Josie’s mother justifies “lifting” by claiming the girl is ambitious—but Ishiguro shows Josie pursuing academic achievement inattentively, albeit dutifully, to buy her mother’s approval and affection. She is barely interested in academics herself.⁵

Haunted by the death of Josie’s sister, which devastated her emotionally, the mother shrinks from the risks of affection. Josie seems to be rapidly nearing death when her mother buys Klara. The mother commands Klara to precisely imitate Josie’s peculiar walk, voice, and gestures. She hires a technician to give Klara all of Josie’s external characteristics. He mocks those who “keep believing there’s something unreachable inside each of us. Something that’s unique and won’t transfer. But there’s nothing like that, we know that now.” He comforts Josie’s mother: “The second Josie won’t be a copy. She’ll be the exact same and you’ll have every right to love her just as you love Josie now” (207). Revulsion seizes Josie’s father at any temptation to accept the substitute for his daughter. He doesn’t even believe his ex-wife can deceive herself as the technician hopes—but, horrifically, Josie is blandly cooperative. Once she learns that her mother wants her replaced by Klara, Josie just asks that the robot have her bedroom and be given liberty to go where she pleases. Some critics fully approve of Josie’s mother, finding her parental relationship sensible, logical, necessary, even “one of mutual tenderness and care.”⁶ Ishiguro shows the woman consumed by career and status, possessions and reputation—and therefore desperately repelling the idea that she ought to feel guilt. She knows it is the norm to express love for

⁵ Ishiguro repeatedly shows Josie treating her online tutor with utter indifference, while ‘unlifted’ Rick, in contrast, eagerly seeks engineering knowledge.

⁶ Lombardo, 112.

one's offspring, but she also wishes to transfer her affection to a safer place than a mortal human. Josie's mother repeatedly raises the girl's expectation of some affectionate gesture, and then crushingly withdraws; in the most vivid scene, she invites her child on a picnic, then accuses her of manipulatively concealing her physical deterioration and takes the robot on the picnic instead. Josie's need for comfort seduces the child into embracing her mother's pursuit of status, alienating her from her virtuous friend Rick.

Josie's education into estrangement is the result of a lack of mutual well-wishing between a parent and child. Nurture is always mutual; we find in our children what we know already in ourselves. Children can imitate and enjoy what their parents like. They are born eager to imitate their elders.⁷ Parents imitate their children, too: smile responds to smile, nuzzle to nuzzle, nonsense sound to nonsense sound. Eventually, we share sense, too. Then we can delight in showing them the world we know and having the children show us our world anew. Nurture is gift on both sides: instinct perfected in love with the full participation of the mind. At best, children learn to enjoy good things that the adults savor. Parents at best wish the children the happiness of virtue and beauty tested by generation after generation: culture, in short.

What we develop as culture shapes nurture, certainly—but the process of nurturance itself is no more a cultural construct than the Himalayas are. The exchange of regard and information flows from our sharing physical life with the children we beget. The words *nurture* and *nature* are both rooted in the physical facts of motherhood; *nature* has its root in the Latin word for birth, and *nurture* in the Latin word for breastfeeding. In describing the origin of affection, C.S. Lewis starkly reminds readers that a mother “must give birth or die. She must give suck or suffer.”⁸ The compulsion of biological instinct actually creates, between parent and child, a moral relation of trust, of wishing each other well, of teaching each other to enjoy good things. Parents pass on the experience of how to live to those they are raising up to

⁷ See Andrew M. Meltzoff and M. Keith Moore, “Newborns Imitate Adult Facial Gestures,” *Child Development* 54 (1983), 702-709. Accessed at http://ilabs.washington.edu/meltzoff/pdf/83Meltzoff_Moore_ChildDev.pdf. June 12, 2017. Imitation of human expressions has been documented as normal for infants before twelve hours of age.

⁸ *The Four Loves*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), 42.

be their equals and successors. Ishiguro described in an interview his characters' hunger for this in *Never Let Me Go*, "in a primeval sense," in terms of their human "genetic line. They feel they belong in the tides of humanity's generations."⁹ The moral center of *Klara and the Sun* reveals how Josie is trained to exist, like a machine, without this relation of mutual benefit. Machines are not our equals as children are. Despite chatter about artificial intelligence, we give our androids skills and information, but not friendship. It is true that machines can find out what we enjoy, usually with the manufacturer's purpose of selling more of our pleasures to us, but we can't invite them to share our pleasures.

Parents can fail to appreciate their children's insights and fail to care about them. Children, perilously, are not programmed to unfailingly share their parents' preferences. They can challenge their parents' narrative about their own excellence. Ishiguro carefully parallels the android's methodical functioning to Josie's flickering life as her mother turns away from caring and flees to the delusion that a child may be a technologically produced possession rather than a begotten fact of nature to be accepted. By making Josie an early teen, old enough to understand, Ishiguro unmasks our current technocratic indifference to a child's human equality.

Contact with physical truths teaches us to live as subject to realities that we did not make, under an order to which we must conform. This obedience is universally human. Humanity's earliest religious texts enjoin respect for parents and obligations to children, recognizing the honor owed to our bodies and the processes that the philosopher Hans Jonas calls "the phenomenon of life." The ideal of living according to nature, and suspicion of human depravity, imbues the literature of healthy cultures. In the West, the evil of rebellion against that ordered universe has been a major literary theme, surging especially in the Faust narratives that emerged from the scientific revolution. Until very recently, medical and agricultural innovators carefully insisted that they merely refined natural powers, as in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*: "Yet nature is made better by no mean/ But nature makes that

⁹ Kazuo Ishiguro and Sebastian Groes, "The New Seriousness: Kazuo Ishiguro in Conversation with Sebastian Groes," Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis, eds., *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 260.

mean” (4.4.88-89). Not only our literary but our political life is imbued with this recognition: American founding documents assume that all mankind reveres “Nature and Nature’s God.”

From the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, writers in English were particularly sensitive to the honor due to the natural world. *Frankenstein* early and loudly sounded the note of alarm, when the hideous, murderous monster, because he is frustrated by his unnatural loneliness, threatens the man whose filthy arts brought him into being: “You are my creator but I am your master.”¹⁰ Tolkien presents the evil wizard Sauron as nearly a machine: “He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment.”¹¹ Even now, little as people actually go outside, environmentalism has powerful cachet.

After World War II, the familiar trope changed from a focus on outraged nature to the power of the domineering machine itself. The Atomic Age stirred imaginations with machines that would rebel and turn on us, like the menacing computer Hal in *2001: a Space Odyssey*. Post-apocalyptic dystopias abounded, as did threats of nuclear winter after the expected Mutually Assured Destruction. Now we are more numb to nuclear threats, and we do not fear our ubiquitous and comforting machines. Ishiguro sees this. His Klara is not ugly or murderous; she is gentle, agreeable, cooperative, and perceptive. Not the machines’ harsh rebellion but our softness is the danger Ishiguro perceives.

As the Internet shapes our opinions, our phones surveil us, and androids effloresce—like COVID warning dogs, self-driving cars, and the ubiquitous Alexa—Ishiguro seems part of the Romantic tradition. Certainly he is following the Wordsworthian—ultimately Aristotelian—reverence for the world as our senses encounter it. But there is another strain of Romanticism. William Blake, a major Romantic poet, willingly rejected physical reality to construct his own in his elaborate “prophetic books,” especially *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. There he presents conversations with a literary devil he befriends and admires, who urges him to invert traditional values. Blake attacks the religious tradition with an imagined conversation between

¹⁰ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. Candace Ward (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), 122.

¹¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973) 76.

his speaker and the ancient prophet Isaiah, who denies having seen God, but is convinced that he was right to say he heard God because “honest indignation”—accusation-- is the voice of God. Then Blake asks:

“ ‘Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so?’

He replies: “All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains.”¹²

Blake admired Milton’s Satan, who said, “The mind is its own place and, in itself can make a heav’n of hell, a hell of heaven.”¹³ Similar contempt for the uncontrolled over the imagined world runs from Blake through Shelley, Emerson, Whitman, Wilde, and Wallace Stevens—to our own Metaverse. As twentieth-century philosophers relished the so-called “naturalistic fallacy,” opposing any attempt to define goodness in terms that are not arbitrarily constructed,¹⁴ our technology made that redefinition seem eminently possible. Ishiguro examines the effect of such technological power upon our souls.

In Ishiguro’s novel, fear of shame impels the flight to unreality. As readers gradually, alarmingly, awaken to the meaning of her actions, Josie’s mother descends into willful delusion and cruelty from fear of others’ disdain; everyone important admires the lifters’ so-called “courage.” Shame also was the basis of the “right to privacy” that won abortionists long legal dominance in America. Now shame spurs corporate America to celebrate not merely men without chests, in Lewis’s metaphorical Platonic sense, but women without breasts, in a concrete, surgical sense. How many who mouth the slogans truly believe that a castrated man is a woman—or a woman with

¹² William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 13, in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 38.

¹³ *Paradise Lost* I: 254-255 in *Paradise Lost: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: W. W. Norton and Co, 1975), 13.

¹⁴ It was in 1903 that the philosopher G. E. Moore introduced the idea of the “naturalistic fallacy”—having “disposed of” the idea that there is any connection between the idea of good and nature, he comments, “[I]f we recognise that, so far as the meaning of good goes, anything whatever may be good, we start with a much more open mind.” G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, 1922), 20. (accessed via Project Gutenberg).

some plastic inserts is a man? Yet doctors obediently falsify the sex of patients, sometimes with disastrous results. They drug and mutilate children who do not comprehend the long-term consequences, in order to champion the lie that bodies are completely subordinate to the mind. The children will forever live barren, estranged from “the tide of humanity’s generations.” We have lost many freedoms in order to prevent vocal resisters of reality from feeling shame. Humiliation is painful; unjust public scorn is hard to bear; but the real defensive passion which erupts into oppression and violence is roused by shame that one knows is deserved.

Merited self-hatred underlies the fear of shame in Josie’s mother. Having driven her firstborn to death, she shrinks defensively from admitting that there is anything wrong with her actions. She calls her child’s horrified father a “fascist” when he tries to turn aside the obsession with college credentials by pointing out that there are “many different ways to lead a decent and full life” (228). Instead, she repeats the behavior that killed her daughter to prove to herself that she does not consider it evil; and then she buys a docile robot replacement child who will not challenge her self-image by dying.

Ishiguro firmly locates the moral danger which Klara poses in the relation between parents and children—in our generative powers. Conception and birth connect us with generations we did not make, and descendants whom we can love but never control. Fear of uncontrollable responsibility fosters the myth that sexual indulgence is liberating. Two Western generations have suffered from the widespread illusion and the resulting cruelty to children. Many, ignorant of its Marxist origins, fiercely embrace a post-Freudian notion of a sexual utopia “without fear and misery.”¹⁵ But its theorists deliberately hoped to disrupt prosperity and stable families for the sake of fomenting revolution.¹⁶ Legions of academics

¹⁵ Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” from: Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 95-137. Accessed at <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/publications/1960s/1965-repressive-tolerance-fulltext.html>

¹⁶ Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, North Carolina: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020) 32-34, 89-93.

embrace the conviction that tradition has simply seized upon one arbitrary idea of good and that another, better notion will arise if the first is destroyed. Yet the relativism stops at means—there is a strong conviction that the power of lust is the most dependable destabilizing agent.¹⁷ C.S. Lewis prophetically wrote in a novel about “an accursed people, full of pride and lust . . . each lies with a cunningly fashioned image of the other . . . Their real children they fabricate by vile arts in a secret place.”¹⁸ Behind Ishiguro’s fictions lurk the crimes against the innumerable children frozen in embryonic form, rejected by ancestors who accept only children of utopian perfection. Ishiguro explores how children threaten their parents with disappointment.

Parents and children should be united by humility before nature, and mutual self-giving in the face of it. Failure of this unity threatens the structures that limit violence. Palo Altan suicides are much like the destruction of embryos, and like abortions committed to keep life narratives perfect—not all abortions, certainly. Too often the life narrative at stake is the father’s or the grandparent’s, not the aborting mother’s. Thus grow the myths that we beget things that are not fully human until we imagine them to be so; that sexual union is unrelated to the generation of families; that one’s sex is assigned and not innate. Recourse to reality is needed to stop the mayhem and the slaughter. In *Klara and the Sun*, unreality has proceeded until even the boundary between machines and humans is blurred. Human beings contend with androids—as rivals for jobs, housing, or even theater tickets (238). The French anthropologist René Girard, in 1972, recognized that consequent on erasure of boundaries is a reaction: “to ‘anticipate’ violence by lashing out first.”¹⁹ In Ishiguro’s novel, America is crumbling into violence such that street gangs and expert engineers struggle in a ghastly equality (228-9).

Ishiguro’s presentation of Klara represents the risks of rejecting the begotten for things humanly imagined: the Metaverse; the chosen surgically

¹⁷ Agosto del Noce, “The Roots of the Crisis,” 137-156 in *The Crisis of Modernity*, tr. Carlo Lancelotti (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 138-139.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy Tale for Grownups* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 273-74.

¹⁹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 54.

imposed “gender”; the denial that what a man and a woman conceive is a human child. It is a recognition, in gentler form, of the danger George Orwell described in *1984* when he imagined that truth-telling itself was under attack:

“Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality, was tacitly denied by their philosophy. The heresy of heresies was common sense. . . . Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.”²⁰

Sadly, Orwell’s *1984* unthinkingly uses the trope of childless lust to represent liberation, like so many intellectuals of the twentieth century and beyond. Certainly, sex puts us in touch with something uncontestably fundamental—but to reject its generative function ignores the biological reality at the root of that psychological significance. The consequent destabilization of family life corrodes our religion, our academic and political freedoms. It has disastrous effects on young lives. The violence of cancel culture ensues, as those who fear shame cannot endure a challenge any more than Josie’s mother can allow Josie to resist being left behind during her android picnic. All dissent looks like competition to Josie’s mother (94-95). Similarly, cancel culture disciplines university professors into docile silence, or, worse, self-delusion in the face of untruth. But universities have value only from the good done by honest knowledge; they must reject convenient delusion. The threat is not our powerful machines—Hal, or Frankenstein’s monster—but ourselves, who are corrupted by refusing realities of nature. Freedom to adhere to the truth is the most fundamental freedom.

The academic life appeals to contemplative spirits who seek peace. We must learn to live without safe places—to accept scorn, damaged reputations, and worse. We must consider ourselves prisoners of war in the battle for truth. The war against truth is a real war, even a violent war in 2022. Severe temptations urge us to lie—to keep a job, avoid a lawsuit, even escape being called “unsafe” or “mentally ill.” We must find those of like mind to support us when we fall; but such fellowship under duress is like nurture. It infuses a kind of joy. We have something real to share, no delusion. A culture that denies reality is a deeply unhappy one; ignorance crushes freedom and induces despair. We must withstand the cultural pressure to accept the

²⁰ George Orwell, *1984*, Part 1, chapter 7, (Signet 1962, p. 64) <http://www.george-orwell.org/1984/6.html>.

unreality--like Rick, and like Josie's father, despite their banishment from the ranks of the elite. Ishiguro's work urges us to take courage.