

Literature in Bioethics and Bioethics in Literature

Jana Tomašovičová
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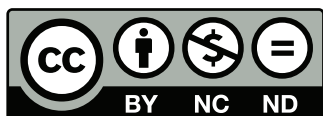
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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the relationship between literature and bioethics has intensified. Initially, it was mostly reflected from the perspective of the traditional biomedical, doctor-patient relationship. But today, bioethics is an interdisciplinary field that on the one hand works closely with the natural sciences and biomedicine, while interacting with the cultural sciences, arts, and humanities on the other. As opposed to the traditional topics of medical ethics, modern biotechnologies have introduced brand new themes to literature, such as gene editing, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, neurotechnological interventions in the brain, organ transplants, enhancement of human capabilities, or euthanasia. All of these are compelling motifs for literary and cinematic adaptations and can become examples of new shared discourses as well as the emergence of new research aspects, for example, narrative bioethics.

Along with the accelerated development and application of new biotechnologies, we are confronted with new life situations and moral dilemmas, for the solution of which we often lack adequate interpretational models. In many cases, the principles of traditional normative ethics are insufficient to address new, emerging problems, which prompts the exploration of other suitable methodological approaches. The authors of this book focus on exploring the relationships between literature and bioethics and reveal their extraordinary potential to foster critical thinking, moral action, and the formation of visions for the development of society. They not only examine how literature reflects and addresses bioethical dilemmas, but also analyse how the literary treatment of these dilemmas and the anticipation of their possible solutions can help shape, refine, and deepen the bioethical discourse. The individual studies in this volume confirm that the development of narrative skills is becoming an important part of a broader bioethical reflection which can strengthen the moral competencies needed to solve complex moral issues.

The book consists of eight chapters. The author of the first chapter, Ivan Lacko, uses the American writer Jodi Picoult's novel *My Sister's Keeper* (2004) to address issues related to the application of preimplantation genetic diagnosis when conceiving a child who, owing to her genetic fit becomes a suitable donor for her gravely ill sibling. Lacko interprets this strong literary narrative from the point of view of three bioethical approaches – utilitarian ethics, virtue ethics, and care ethics. He discusses the importance of personal autonomy and the fragile nature of maintaining it, the challenge of taking moral responsibility for one's

actions, and the difficulty in ethical decision-making by parents and doctors in complex moral situations. The author reflects on the numerous promises of new technology as well as the considerable risks associated with its practical application.

In the second chapter, Tomáš Károly focuses on the use of social robots in healthcare. He first traces the current development of robots based on advances in artificial intelligence and robotics, noting that, in addition to surgical procedures, technology is already being used in healthcare for diagnosis, prediction, and prevention. Károly pays special attention to social robots that could serve as companions for lonely people, patients with dementia, babysitters for children, or even psychotherapists. This raises a number of bioethical questions, to which the author seeks answers by means of philosophical, ethical, and literary analyses. In doing so, he explores the connections between sci-fi stories and current technological development in the real world.

Adam Škrovan, the author of the third chapter, shifts the attention from the frequently discussed theme of the relationships between humans and machines in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) to the question of genetic enhancement – a topic that is also strongly present in the novel. The enhancement procedure, referred to as *lifting* in the novel, allows the author to analyse potential consequences of genetic enhancement and its effect on individuals and society as a whole. The analysis confronts us with possible changes not only on the level of individual people, but also regarding such issues as social coexistence and social exclusion.

Two chapters of the book are dedicated to the topic of euthanasia. In the fourth chapter, Bogumiła Suwara uses two artistic works to reflect on euthanasia. She analyses the aspect of death denial in Edson Oda's movie *Nine Days* (2020) and presents the difficult decision-making whether to try to get relief from excruciating pain through euthanasia or palliative care on the backdrop of the novel *How I Didn't Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It* (2021) by the Polish writer Mateusz Pakuła. The author conducts her analysis from two perspectives, noting how the topic is approached in bioethical discussions and, at the same time, how these discussions influence the interpretation of film or literary works.

In the fifth chapter, Peter Fraňo offers a comparative analysis of selected bioethical issues related to the current discussion on euthanasia and compares these with two descriptions of suicide in Roman literature. His ancient sources include *De Viris Illustribus* by the Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos and the letter collection *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* by Seneca. Fraňo's analysis

focuses primarily on the examination of three issues – the type of illness in question, a clear formulation of the will to die, and the assistance of a doctor and/or philosopher. Based on these, he identifies parallels and differences between ancient and contemporary approaches to a voluntary termination of life brought about by persistent and intolerable pain.

Numerous contemporary authors have sought inspiration in ancient stories and myths preserved in the oldest works of our culture in order to understand recent phenomena. When discussing human enhancement today, authors present both stronger and weaker arguments, primarily seeking to support the idea of reinforcing cognitive, emotional, or physical abilities. Matúš Porubjak, the author of the sixth chapter, uses the story about the creation of the first woman – Pandora – to extend the bioethical discussion by an innovative aspect. He not only points out the facets of enhancement implicit in the myth of Pandora, but also argues that Pandora was deliberately created as a highly complex social being. In the author's view, her creation brought about fundamental social improvement for humanity, which can serve as a powerful inspiration for guiding our visions of human enhancement.

In the seventh chapter, Denisa Mišinová focuses on Young Adult dystopian literature, which she perceives as suitable experimental material to examine various moral dilemmas related to genetic modification, emotional manipulation, or technological control. Young Adult dystopias are becoming increasingly popular among young readers and, if appropriately incorporated in the educational process, could serve as a useful tool to develop critical thinking and the shaping of a moral character and value systems in young people. The author tests her opinions on the backdrop of the debate on whether morality is inherent or acquired.

In the last chapter, Jana Tomašovičová examines the relationship between reinforcing narrative abilities and increasing moral competence. The moral competence of relevant actors in moral action is, alongside ethical expertise, an important part of decision-making in major moral cases. The author bases her reflections on the works of the moral philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, according to whom a detailed interpretation of the moral dilemmas depicted in literary texts and the ways of resolving them stimulates moral imagination, which is a preparation for moral action. These considerations support the narrative approach in bioethics. Its significance does not lie in replacing rational ethical argumentation, but in complementing it, because it can shape and strengthen the moral competence necessary for moral reasoning.

Drawing on their analyses, the authors of the chapters concur that literary works which feature ample bioethical themes are an important medium to reflect on past experiences and to anticipate and test future possibilities for the use of the latest biotechnologies. The contribution of literature to bioethics is indispensable. It creates sufficient space for a detailed reflection and discussion of the possible positive and negative consequences of technological applications, confronts us with alternative concepts of moral action, and develops narrative abilities that shape and reinforce our moral competence. In addition, bioethics is an inexhaustible source of inspiring motifs, attractive themes, and moral dilemmas for literature, which, thanks to its artistic treatment, attracts greater attention and provokes reflection among the broader cultural public. And this is especially important today.

Jana Tomašovičová and Bogumiła Suwara

The Ethics of Care and Consequence: A Bioethical Reading of Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*

Ivan Lacko

Abstract: The novel *My Sister's Keeper* (2004) by popular American writer Jodi Picoult offers a literary exploration of several bioethical dilemmas. Through the story of Anna Fitzgerald, who was conceived through preimplantation genetic diagnosis to be a genetic match for her sister Kate, who suffers from leukaemia, the book provides a thought-provoking view of consequentialist justification for genetic engineering. It also offers literary material to further discuss the relevance of individual autonomy. By raising critical questions about the ethical limits of medical interventions and the moral responsibilities inherent in the intersection of science, family, and identity, Picoult's novel can serve as a case study that bridges literature and bioethics and presents the implications of current bioethical issues. This article will endeavour to use Jodi Picoult's novel as a bioethical case study, offering an analytical view at how various bioethical theories apply to Picoult's narrative, characterization, and overall literary effect. By integrating such theories as consequentialism, care ethics, and virtue ethics, this article offers a critical reading of *My Sister's Keeper* as a novel addressing a whole range of bioethical concerns, from genetic engineering, through bodily autonomy, all the way to family ethics and responsibility.

Keywords: Preimplantation genetic diagnosis. Individual autonomy. Identity. Responsibility.

Introduction

A prolific, popular, and best-selling author of more than two dozen novels, American novelist Jodi Picoult often engages her characters in familial intricacies and moral dilemmas, while dissecting the issues at hand with a sense for detail and social relevance. Her 2004 novel *My Sister's Keeper* presents a literary story that lends itself to explore not only emotional and psychological interactions and relations among family members, but also initiates a discussion about several bioethical and moral dilemmas. Through the story of thirteen-year-old Anna Fitzgerald, who was conceived through preimplantation genetic diagnosis to be a genetic match for her older sister Kate, who suffers from leukaemia, Picoult's novel provides a thought-provoking view of consequentialist justification for genetic engineering, highlighting utilitarian as well as virtue and care ethics principles contained in the decisions made (or planned to be made) by Anna's parents.

My Sister's Keeper is essentially a story about the complexities of making medical and parental decisions in a situation where fundamental human emotions

clash with the possibilities offered by medical progress. The mere fact that Anna can be conceived as a donor child for her sick sister presents a whole set of moral dilemmas – she first donates blood and bone marrow and then is expected to give one of her kidneys to her ailing sister. This is, understandably, a literary culmination of expectations, peripeties that work towards the dramatic climax that also demonstrate the ever-growing difficulty of making these decisions on the part of Anna’s parents. Since Anna is a minor, her parents are her legal guardians who must take into account not only her health and well-being but also the (deteriorating) condition of her sister Kate. Thus, Anna becomes her sister’s “keeper” but the decisions to help Kate are not hers, but her parents’.

The plot is driven mostly by Anna’s resolve not to donate her kidney and to seek legal emancipation from her parents, which would allow her to decide about her body on her own. This serves as the starting point of a legal drama, involving not only Anna’s parents, Brian and Sara, but also her siblings, Kate and Jesse, as well as her lawyer Campbell Alexander and her guardian *ad litem* Julia. In the end, it not only turns out that it was Kate who asked Anna not to give up her kidney for her, but in a dramatic twist, Anna ends up dying in a car crash and saves Kate by donating her organs after her death. This solves the moral and ethical dilemma, but the discussion about the validity and complexity of some of the actions and decisions remains an intriguing one.

The bioethical analysis of Picoult’s novel which I will endeavour to provide below relies on the fundamentals inherent in philosophical ethics as well as on more specific and current medically, socially, and culturally conditioned bioethics. Paulo Conti and Paulo De Souza, for example, introduce the theoretical paradigms for bioethical discourse that are based on the ethical principles and concepts defined by well-established and recognized thinkers and philosophers (Aristotle, Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Mill, among others) to advance their considerations towards a much more relevant and up-to-date discussion about what bioethics is and can be. In Conti’s and De Souza’s view, bioethics is a field that has appeared in “[the] context of biotechnological development, new ethical questions and decision-making possibilities, and the growth of cultural movements for autonomy and equality” (2021, 718). This context is relevant and applicable to an analysis of the (bio)ethical concerns present in *My Sister’s Keeper*.

In the text below, I will offer a bioethical reading of *My Sister’s Keeper*, applying utilitarian ethics, virtue ethics, and care ethics to demonstrate both the multi-faceted character of (bio)ethical inquiry and the depths of Jodi Picoult’s narrative, especially regarding the way she makes use of bioethical discourse to talk

about the human condition. In doing so, I would like to provide a broader spectrum of possible approaches to the bioethical reading of a literary text, moving beyond Cary Wolfe's contention that bioethics is mostly restricted to the provision of guidelines and legal frameworks in medicine (2007, 72).

Utilitarian considerations

The ethical background to utilitarian understanding of human action and aspirations is usually attributed to Jeremy Bentham, a nineteenth-century British philosopher, whose "principle of utility" proposes the importance of choosing pleasure over pain and trying to achieve and make use of happiness as the man goal of life (2007, 1–5). Bentham's ideas were drawn on and further developed by another famous British philosopher of the Victorian era, John Stuart Mill, who introduced the Greatest Happiness Principle, according to which "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness", where happiness equalled "pleasure, and the absence of pain", while unhappiness meant "pain, and the privation of pleasure" (2015, 121).

Mill recognized that this was a rather simplified view and that before one could offer a specific "moral standard" or theory, "much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question" (121). The complexity and openness of consequentialism lies in the fact that, simply put, "actions that are right in one situation because of their good consequences may be wrong in another situation because of their bad consequences" (Singer 2011, 5). The ability to recognize what constitutes good and bad outcomes or consequences of an action as well as the mentioned openness of this argument can bring about many moral dilemmas which Picoult's novel introduces and which I will address later.

At the heart of a utilitarian approach to ethical behaviour is consequentialism – actions are assessed not on their intrinsic morality or character, but on the level of their utility as well as their consequences. Consequentialism is thus an essential aspect of utilitarianism, as recognized by R. M. Hare, who asserts that the moral quality of any deed is defined by its consequences (Hare 2009, 85). Hare also discusses the utilitarian approach within the context of its postulation that "the consequences that are relevant to the morality of actions are consequences that increase or diminish the welfare of those affected", where 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). In Picoult's narrative, the questions of welfare and quality of life are central to the present bioethical issues.

Virtuous actions

Besides the above-mentioned utilitarian considerations, bioethical issues can be addressed through the prism of virtue ethics, an approach asserting that “actions cannot be properly judged as right or wrong without reference to considerations of character” (Oakley 2009, 91). Since the utilitarian approach does not cover the entire spectrum of ethical action contained in *My Sister’s Keeper*, virtue ethics offers a more comprehensive way of analysing such characters as Sara and Brian, Anna’s and Kate’s parents, who are responsible for making the controversial decisions on behalf of their minor children. One of the main ideas of virtue ethics is that to be virtuous, that is, going beyond just doing something because it is the right thing to do – one also has to take into account conditioning by motivation as well as various kinds of inclinations. The example provided by Justin Oakley to demonstrate this focuses on the assertion that “acting as someone with the virtue of benevolence would act involves not only providing assistance to another but also includes having and acting from a genuine concern for the well-being of that person” (Oakley 2009, 93–94). Oakley further posits 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). In this respect, virtue ethics challenges a purely utilitarian reading of ethical behaviour.

The application of Oakley’s thinking about virtue ethics can be directly related to health contexts, euthanasia, or general medical treatment – for example, he draws attention to the contrast between justice and charity when treating a terminally ill patient (98). In a health care context, Oakley asserts that a virtue ethics approach would require 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).

Using virtue ethics to analyse *My Sister’s Keeper* introduces questions about what constitutes good character or moral virtues. Do the characters act virtuously in search for justice, charity, compassion, and integrity? Or, developing these conjectures even further in the context of twenty-first century institutional health care, to what extent “do people have a moral right to health care?” (DeGrazia and Millum 2021, 1–2) Furthermore, should this right be affected by their actions, such as having children with the aim of serving medical purposes?

Caring with(out) dignity

When making decisions about conceiving Anna, and later deciding on her behalf about the various treatments she should undergo to benefit her sister Kate, Sara and Brian follow the principles of care ethics, demonstrating “a basic human capacity to recognize and respond to the needs of others and to moderate our behaviour in light of the good or harm it might cause to others” (Manning 2009, 105). The thin line between the good and ill their action might cause is blurred by their belief in what Carol Gilligan calls the “restorative activity of care” (2003, 30), a conviction that cooperation and building networks among people will lead to desired end. Rita C. Manning further claims that “caring is a moral response to a variety of features of situations,” one of which is harm (2009, 106).

However, while caring for Kate, both parents also admit to having to harm Anna, especially when they demand she donate a kidney for her sister. The balance between principles of “non-maleficence vs. beneficence”, as discussed by Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, becomes the driving force of the narrative and part of the novel’s bioethical dilemmas the characters have to address (2013, 150–153). Anna’s autonomy and dignity is also questioned, as she desires to be an “autonomous individual [acting] freely in accordance with a self-chosen plan” (Beauchamp and Childress 2013, 101). Her parents, acting in accordance with the law and serving as her legal guardians, challenge this autonomy while Anna perceives herself as an individual “controlled by others [and] incapable of deliberating or acting on the basis of his or her desires and plans” (102).

A person’s lack of autonomy might also contest their self-image and perception of dignity. 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” are shaping the way bioethical deliberations are developed in new and changing contexts (Pichardo 2018, 214). In addition, insufficient autonomy and dignity is closely related to “the purpose-driven life” of a person conceived with the objective of serving and caring for others (Tsao 2012, 223). Human dignity, though, is “a basic ethical foundation, on which bioethical principles and their application must be based” because it is “intrinsic to every human being, by the simple fact of being, with no need for any other kind of recognition” (Conti and De Souza 2021, 723).

Let us now look at Jodi Picoult’s text and analyse it through the prism of utilitarianism, discussing consequentialist behaviour of some of the characters, as well as by applying virtue and care ethics, with a focus on character autonomy and dignity. The analysis will also address the issue of ambiguity, or perhaps

multi-faceted nature and complexity of bioethical issues against the backdrop of twenty-first century society where technology, medical advancement, and existing legal systems often clash with morals, ethics, and social and cultural norms.

A caring vessel

The preimplantation genetic diagnosis used to select the correct embryo that later becomes Anna, is a deliberate choice made by Anna's parents, Sara and Brian, to conceive a child that would become an ideal donor for the severely ill Kate. This, of course, is an act that resonates throughout the novel as carrying grave moral implications, and making Anna a means, an instrument to be used primarily for another purpose. Anna herself mentions that her name is "a four-letter word for vessel", implying the obscenity of the origin of her existence (Picoult 2013, 246). At the same time, however, she takes a sarcastic, almost contemptuous stance on the fact:

I've known since I was seven how I was conceived, and it wasn't that huge a deal. First off, my parents told me when the thought of them having sex was far more disgusting than the thought of creation in a petri dish. Second, by then tons of people were having fertility drugs and septuplets and my story wasn't really all that original anymore. But a designer baby? Yeah, *right*. If my parents were going to go to all that trouble, you'd think they'd have made sure to implant the genes for obedience, humility, and gratitude (Picoult 2013, 178).

This is Anna's commentary on the ethical implications of genetic engineering – the conflict between scientific intervention and personal identity suggests Anna's anxiety about the loss of individuality and autonomy in the face of biotechnological control. It also raises ethical questions about the extent to which human traits should be engineered and whether doing so reduces people to products of parental design rather than autonomous beings. This tension reflects broader societal concerns about how scientific advancements might reshape not only our bodies but also our sense of self and moral agency.

Using examples of speculative fiction or science fiction, critics frequently talk of a similar commodification of human life when discussing the lives of human clones (Hartouni 1997, 120). Melinda Hall uses the term "biological reduction", which describes a situation in which "behaviour and social phenomena can be explained through biological factors", for example, clones or other organisms made for the sole purpose of donating organs (Hall 2017, 95). In *My Sister's Keeper*, Anna's brother Jesse is asked on what basis his parents will make the

decision when Anna should start helping her older sister. He says that this is just a rhetorical question and that the decision has already been made: “You make it sound like there’s some process involved. Like there’s actually *a choice*” (Picoult 2013, 188).

In the novel, Anna is portrayed as a helper, saviour, a keeper, which is already highlighted in the title *My Sister’s Keeper*. On one occasion, Anna holds the hand of a stranger in an ambulance, an eighty-seven-year-old man who is in very bad health, in the belief that whatever might be wrong with him “can be fixed”, just like she is helping “fix” her sister’s health (Picoult 2013, 195). This seems to give Anna agency, which is later challenged by her parent’s overriding her autonomous decisions, even though this agency seems to be determined by her role as saviour and keeper – a role she was genetically endowed with. Melinda Hall asserts that this kind of “genetic determinism positions genetic cause as ruling over individual outcome” (Hall 2017, 95).

Anna’s donation of blood and bone marrow to her sister is also reflective of the sense of the above-mentioned networking and community (family) building, typical for a care ethics approach. Dorothy Nelkin proposes that “a common supply of available blood is associated with ideas of justice and fairness [and that] donation of blood for the public benefit reinforces the sense of belonging to a community,” asserting the importance of the care ethics element underlying such action (2007, 118). Anna’s character is presented as a carer and saviour – she plays ice-hockey as a goalkeeper in a youth team, where she shows “a natural talent as a goalie” (Picoult 2013, 257). But her position is a predetermined one – the care ethics and her willingness to help her ill sister are stained by the fact that this is an imposed role, metaphorically “natural” and she herself being a “talent”, but in reality, it is all genetically designed. This questions Anna’s autonomy and individuality as she cannot develop her goalkeeping talent any further because she has to help Kate.

Autonomous action

The above-mentioned autonomy, which Anna struggles hard to acquire and retain, poses a moral and ethical challenge to all involved parties – Anna herself, Kate, and their parents. Anna, in particular, is trying to come to terms with issues of consent, autonomy, and the ethical weight of being genetically instrumentalized for her sister’s benefit. Anna’s internal conflict between guilt and the desire for moral justification is evident in the following passage:

What if I was the one who was sick? What if Kate had been asked to do what I've done? What if one of these days, some marrow or blood or whatever actually worked, and that was the end? What if I could look back on all this one day and feel good about what I did, instead of feeling guilty? (Picoult 2013, 291)

Her hesitation and confusion highlight the emotional complexity of the issue and suggest that the personal cost is often obscured by the clinical logic of medical decision-making. At times, she even wishes to walk in her sister's shoes: "For once, I wanted [this] to be about me instead of Kate" (Picoult 2013, 283). But, as Anna's lawyer, Campbell, says: "This lawsuit has never been about Anna wanting her sister to die, but simply that *she* wants a chance to *live*" (Ibid.). It is evident that Anna's attempt to seek legal emancipation from her parents not only demands the effecting of her autonomy, but also draws on her role as carer in addressing the harm to be done to her and reducing her quality of life by donating one of her kidneys.

Responding to Sara's plea that she loves both her daughters equally, Campbell argues as follows: "But you admitted that you've always considered Kate's health, not Anna's, in making these choices. [...] So how can you claim to love them both equally? How can you say that you haven't been favouring one child in your decisions?" (Picoult 2013, 289) Sara's response is succinct: "Aren't you asking me to do that very thing?" [...] "Only this time, to favour the other child?" (Ibid.) The contrast between non-maleficence and beneficence becomes relevant here also because it presents a moral and ethical dilemma – Sara *cannot* help one daughter without (very likely) harming the other.

It is a kind of Sophie's choice – there seems to be no beneficial outcome; however, Sara is inclined to prioritize the needs of the sick Kate to the disadvantage of the healthy Anna. It is all "about making choices", Sara says. "Nobody ever really makes decisions entirely by themselves, not even if a judge gives them the right to do so" (Picoult 2013, 389). In contrast, Anna's lawyer believes that Anna's voice is "the only voice we ought to be listening to" (392) and that Sara "defines her own ability to be a good mother by keeping Kate healthy" (353). The argument that Anna should decide what is to be done with her body reflects Beauchamp and Childress's argument that "the competence to decide is therefore relative to the particular decision to be made" (2013, 115). As Anna's lawyer, Campbell, further argues, "if Sara fits the psychological profile of a closely related donor personality who can't make independent decisions, then why is she any more capable of making this choice than Anna?" (Picoult 2013, 353). This position is

eventually upheld also by the judge of the case who grants Anna her autonomy and the right to make decisions herself.

The verdict is made on the basis of Peter Singer's contention that "in accepting that ethical judgments must be made from a universal point of view, I am accepting that my own needs, wants and desires cannot, simply because they are my preferences, count more than the wants, needs and desires of anyone else" (2011, 11). In other words, Sara's motherly instinct should not come before Anna's autonomy, mainly because "it is worse to cause harm than to allow it to happen" and "the freedom of each individual to control his or her own life is especially important" (Rachels 2009, 19). When Anna comments on Campbell's disability (epilepsy) with respect and empathy, she explains her understanding of his condition by saying that it is "because you know what it's like to not have any control over your body" (Picoult 2013, 371). Autonomy and control over one's body is essential also because "people should always be treated as ends in themselves, and never as mere means" (Rachels 2009, 19).

Ambiguous ethics?

As I mentioned before, (bio)ethical theory is multi-faceted, complex, and often ambiguous, because moral reasoning is deeply influenced by diverse cultural, historical, religious, and personal values that can clash. Ethics addresses issues related to normative claims, i.e. what should be done rather than dealing with self-evident, objective facts. These challenges shared assumptions about human nature, the quality of life, or the role of reason and emotion in moral judgment. As James Rachels asserts:

If there is indeed one best overall ethical theory, it is likely to appear as many lines of inquiry converge. The fact that there is still so much disagreement among ethical theorists may be due not to the impossibility of the project but to its complexity, and to the fact that secular ethical theory is still a young subject (2009, 22).

The variety of inquiry as well as the pluralistic nature of modern societies makes it possible for multiple, internally coherent ethical systems to coexist. Each such system can offer different answers to fundamental moral questions, which complicates the search for a single, universally accepted framework.

Even though ethical approaches ranging from utilitarianism, through virtue and care ethics seem like separate categories, they often blend or overlap. Rita Manning, for example, argues that "the most plausible way to understand [care]"

is that it is a virtue (2009, 109). This demonstrates not just the complexity and ambiguity of ethical approaches, but also the possibility of their merging to extend ethical inquiries. When Sara says:

I don't logically see how one single word can have contradictory definitions, but emotionally, I completely understand. Because there are times, I think what I am doing is right, and there are other times I second guess myself every step of the way (Picoult 2013, 389),

she stresses the conflict between rational understanding and emotional experience in the context of bioethical decision-making. Morally complex issues, such as genetic engineering or choosing one child over another, are difficult to address, let alone resolve satisfactorily. Sara acknowledges a great level of self-doubt, and her struggle highlights the psychological and moral ambiguity often inherent in bioethical dilemmas.

Sara's husband, Brian, shares a similar sentiment. When asked whether he would be willing to have his daughter Anna undergo major surgery to donate an organ to her sister, he says: "Can you tell me what the right answer is here? [...] Because I don't know where to look for it. I know what's right. I know what's fair. But neither of those apply here" (Picoult 2013, 336). Such ambiguity is often inherent in bioethical dilemmas because the issues in question frequently involve clashing values, rights, and outcomes with no clear or universally accepted resolution. Advances in medical technology and the resulting situations – such as Anna becoming a potential organ donor for her sister – can challenge traditional ethical frameworks by forcing individuals to assess benefits against potential harms or autonomy against interpersonal or social responsibility.

In *My Sister's Keeper*, such clash is present in the judge's reasoning, wherein he argues that Anna's emancipation case and the related issue of organ donation to her sister is an example of the sanctity of life vs. quality-of-life debate (Picoult 2013, 392). In the novel, it becomes apparent that the two are interconnected and difficult to separate. The conflict also reflects Campbell's take on the lawyer's profession, when he says that in law school, he was taught that "morals and ethics do not necessarily go hand in hand" (212). According to lawyers' ethics, they are often required to do things that people might generally consider to be immoral, for example, not disclosing information about a murderer as they could be disbarred.

In the novel, an ethics committee run by the hospital where Kate is treated struggles to come up with concrete answers to address the bioethical dilemma in

question. Dr. Bergen, a psychiatrist who is a member of the committee, only gives a formal and non-specific response to what principles the hospital's ethics committee tries to adhere to – these are autonomy, fidelity, nonmaleficence, and justice. At the same time, however, he admits that there is a lot of “discrepancy about patient care” in situations when what a doctor feels is in the patient's best interest is not what the patient's family might want, feel, or believe (Picoult 2013, 292). Overall, the fact that in bioethics “there are no entrenched answers and because they involve many disciplines and different types of knowledge” makes arriving at specific answers and solutions particularly difficult (Cicovacki and Lima 2014, 266).

Beauchamp and Childress address this difficulty and claim that “achieving a state of reflective equilibrium in which all beliefs fit together coherently, with no residual conflicts or incoherence, is an ideal that will not be comprehensively realized” and that adjusting “of beliefs will occur again and again in response to new situations of conflicting norms” (Beauchamp and Childress 2013, 406). In Picoult's story, Dr. Bergen expresses a similar sentiment when he points out that the intricacy of making clear-cut decisions is also because of the new biomedical possibilities and technologies available: “The problem is that this kind of medical situation hasn't existed before. There *is* no precedent. We're trying to feel our way as best we can” (Picoult 2013, 295). In the courtroom, a decision *is* made in the end, but both Anna and Campbell realize that the discourse and debate about these issues is just starting. Anna's realization that “even if we win, we don't” (291) is mirrored by Campbell's understanding that “nobody's going to win” and even after the judge's decision “it won't be over” (384).

Conclusion

The presented analysis shows that bioethical issues, among other things, reflect the advancement and “unprecedented character of our technologies”, as well as medical procedures in current societies (Baillie and Casey 2005, 3). Jodi Picoult's novel *My Sister's Keeper* can serve as a bioethical case study, offering a number of ways how to approach ethical issues through analysing character action, plot development, and the overall message of the story. The novel allows for an analysis that can show that bioethical 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). Picoult's novel urges us to do just that, despite the somewhat simplified and *deus ex machina* type

of ending, which results in a situation that makes it inevitable for Anna to donate her organs to Kate.

Along the lines of thinking more deeply about the intricacies of the human condition, however, the book challenges the view that advancements in biotechnology and medicine can be separated from ethical and humanistic interests. As Harold Baillie and Timothy Casey posit, ethics and technology should not be divided, but always considered an interconnected whole. Baillie and Casey are critical about the modern tendency to treat technology as value-neutral and detached from ethical reflections, enjoying “a kind of immunity from the judgmental gaze of ethicists and metaphysicians” which limits the role of ethics in this context “to commentary on what is essentially a *fait accompli*” (2005, 1).

Towards the end of the novel, when Anna sees a multicoloured Guatemalan weave and learns that “it takes twenty spools of thread to make this pattern”, she comments on her own as well as a universal human experience: “Truth’s like that”, she says (Picoult 2013, 354). Just like a textile made from many coloured threads, truth is not singular. It is made using multiple perspectives, experiences, disciplines, and moral standpoints. Similarly, when approaching bioethical dilemmas – genetic adjustments and autonomy related to organ donation – diverse viewpoints have to be taken into account. These include not only emotional and familial aspects, but also scientific, cultural, and legal views. Just like the weave, resolving such dilemmas requires integrating the threads instead of privileging just a single one of them. In other words, differences should not be eliminated but integrated into a coherent whole.

Picoult’s novel suggests that finding answers and reaching resolutions in this type of bioethical dilemmas is not easy. Drawing on the fictional world she depicts in her story, one could envision ethical frameworks that would allow multiple values to coexist and inform human decision-making to extend the possibilities of utilitarianism, virtue and care ethics. It is especially important because “the effects of genetic enhancement, like the consequences of atomic fission, will last far into the future and will not be limited to localities or even large regions” (Baillie and Casey 2005, 3).

Just like Anna was brought to this world using a selective process, though with a good intention, altering human biology in other, transformative ways might be potentially dangerous, and can have far-reaching consequences. Therefore, a cautious, collaborative, and ethically grounded engagement with technologies that could reshape not only individual lives, but the very fabric of humanity, is needed.

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Machines Like People in Healthcare: From Science Fiction to Reality

Tomáš Károly

Abstract: The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and robotics has led to the increasing presence of social robots in healthcare. These robots, which are just as good and often even better than humans, serve as medical assistants, companions, and psychotherapists, raising fundamental ethical and philosophical questions about their role in human society. This paper explores the intersection of science fiction narratives and real-world technological developments, analysing how literature and movies has long anticipated contemporary discussions on human-robot relationships. Particular attention is given to bioethical dilemmas, anthropomorphising, addiction to social robots, and their psychological impact. The study highlights the importance of patient awareness, through informed consent, that robots do not possess true emotions, even though they exhibit behavioural expressions of them. While robots can enhance healthcare services, human oversight remains essential to prevent over-reliance and ensure ethical deployment.

Keywords: Anthropomorphising. Artificial intelligence. Healthcare. Sci-fi. Social robots.

Introduction

We can consider literary fiction to be timeless when it responds to universal human traits. If we are able to intersubjectively evaluate the main message of a work and rank it among the timeless gems, then we can say that such a work successfully expresses the universals of human nature through its narrative (Károly 2024b). For over a hundred years, since the work *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* by Karel Čapek ([1920] 1990), we have been encountering literature that reflects the relationship between humans and robots. Although we can consider these sci-fi works about robots as relatively new, it turns out that the speed of technological development and the immutability of the basic universal traits of human nature have served as a test of their credibility and classification as valuable literature. These works can serve as a predictive tool for us for the potential development of technologies, because even in the past various authors have asked themselves the same questions that we are asking ourselves today, and some current works respond to today's dilemmas.

This text is primarily about the nature of social robots and their relationship with people in the healthcare industry. We will examine the current state of

development of these robots and present some bioethical questions that arise from it; we will also compare this state to scenarios presented in fiction and film. When analysing the sci-fi genre, we often have the feeling that what the individual authors are saying is very close, even that it is already happening. Sometimes as a means of attracting attention works of art attempt to predict the exceedingly negative development of humanity, for example, the robot Adam in the work *Machines Like Me and People Like You* by Ian McEwan predicts the gradual emergence of robots and the extinction of humans:

Our leaves are falling.
Come spring we will renew,
But you, alas, fall once (2019, 304).

It is currently not possible to assess whether these various prognoses of extinction will come true in some form, but they at least have the character of a warning, and therefore they are certainly warranted. Humanity is currently responding to possible concerns about AI by convening international summits, which is why we can see a rather strong influence of visionary scenarios presented to us not only by philosophical and scientific,¹ but also by artistic sci-fi literature and films.

When we read such works of art, we may still notice the depiction of a certain clumsiness in the relationship between robots and humans; robots have their own metaphysics, physics, logic and ethics (Károly 2024a). It is specifically from this incompatibility that the differences between robots and humans emerge. Nevertheless, this article is mainly about real robots that resemble humans more and more, as in the novel *Blade Runner: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick ([1968] 1982), in which people have doubts about whether they are humans at all and not replicants (android beings). Deckard, a hunter of replicants, must use special emotional tests to be able to identify a replicant who is impersonating a human. Currently, the only subject that prevents a better comparison of artistic narrative with reality is the presence of consciousness, which writers have incorporated into their robot characters to strengthen the appeal of their story. Though the human characters in these stories often wonder whether the machines around them are really conscious, we are ultimately led by the narrative to believe that they are. This is most evident in the work *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo

¹ E.g. Moravec (1988; 1999), Kurzweil (2005), Bostrom (2014).

Ishiguro (2021), which is written from the first-person perspective of the android herself.

Although we may doubt that machines will be conscious in the near future, we can at least predict that one day humans and robots will be so similar in design and behaviour that it will become difficult to tell them apart. That day is getting closer, and the main questions I would like to gradually answer are whether we can entrust ourselves to the medical care of such machines or whether such a machine could serve as our psychotherapist, or even as a friend.

From enemas to robots

Man as a species can be characterised as *Homo technicus* because his existence is always associated with the use of artifacts, from fist wedges to the colonising of space using rockets. This technical nature of humanity has dynamic potential, and man is always increasingly technical. He is surrounded less and less by natural objects and performs even the most common activities by means of technical artifacts (for example, he drinks water from a tap). We can see this trend in healthcare, too; natural remedies and plants found in nature are being replaced by pharmaceutical products, and common healing procedures are increasingly being surpassed and replaced by more technical devices. If we were to put a doctor from Molière's plays from the 17th century and a doctor from the 21st century side by side, we could see very different people who still belong to the same profession. Molière ridiculed doctors in his plays because for almost every disease they recommended: Clysterium donare, Postea seignare, Ensuita purgare – Perform an enema, Afterwards purify, Then purge (Molière [1673] 2023).

Today, the complexity of man is analysed using highly complex means; we employ devices whose users themselves are unable to explain how they work at all levels to detect and eliminate diseases. The device itself is made up of various subsystems manufactured in different parts of the world, on whose manufacture experts from different professions work. We can look at technical equipment through the holistic lens of various ontologies, from the mechanistic manifestation and design of a device in regard to quantum phenomena up to a central unit that works with symbols, and ultimately to artificial intelligence. In addition to other things, such an item is made to interact with the external environment, first and foremost with humans, to serve humans and to even surpass humans in certain abilities, thus assisting them in activities they themselves are already deficient in performing. Various legal, ethical and philosophical aspects, which are no longer

anchored in the physical world but nevertheless relate to it, thus emerge from this human-machine relationship.

Machines fulfil a purpose of humans, and human intentionality is mirrored in them. Humanity is remaking nature in its own image. This image resembles the human more and more and even surpasses it in the qualities that humans themselves lack but would like to possess. “Given fully intelligent robots, culture becomes completely independent of biology. Intelligent machines, which will grow from us, learn our skills, and initially share our goals and values, will be the children of our minds” (Moravec 1999, 126).

Modern machines are becoming so similar to us that the illusion emerges that they have their own intentionality and can serve not only as domestic members, as servants, but also as companions for the lonely, as educators, as caregivers for the elderly or even psychoanalysts, wise advisors, healers and the wisest of doctors. Nothing would prevent, as is commonly seen in science fiction stories, such a humanoid robot with implanted AI from declaring its love for you, and then many people could easily succumb to the desire to consider such a robot as something more than a friend.

Examples of the use of robots and AI in healthcare and their benefits

The boundary between a simple mechanical aid and advanced hardware is not always clear, but we can usually distinguish them intuitively; we should not refer to a simple lifting device whose function is only to “go up” and “go down” as a robot (Károly 2024a, 33). While AI can consist entirely of software, robots are physical machines that move. Robots are subject to physical impact, typically through ‘sensors,’ and they exert physical force onto the world. Robotics and AI can be seen as covering two overlapping sets of systems: system that are only AI, systems that are only robotics, and systems that are both (Müller 2023, 1.2).

In healthcare, one of the first robots, from 1999, the predecessor of Neuromate, was used to perform a stereotactic brain biopsy. Robots then followed for hip replacements, knee surgery and sleep-apnoea operations. We are seeing success in operations on the head and neck and in gastrointestinal, gynaecological, cardiological and urological procedures. The field has further evolved with the introduction of telerobotics, which allows surgeons to operate remotely using a console. Such technology can also be used on battlefields, thereby reducing health risks in dangerous environments (Siqueira-Batista et al. 2016, 288–289).

Along with surgical procedures, technology in healthcare also serves for diagnosis, prediction and prevention. Researchers at Stanford University are training AI to diagnose skin cancer, and in Israel, the company Zebra Medical Vision is training AI to diagnose tuberculosis using radio waves (von Braun and Baumüller 2021, 90). AI-related tools can interpret medical imaging scans such as X-rays, CT scans, and MRIs. AI has improved diagnostic accuracy, which is crucial for enhancing patient care and optimising diagnostic processes. AI tools have advanced disease diagnosis, allowing early-stage diagnosis of conditions like cardiovascular diseases and diabetic retinopathy (Lainjo 2024, 6).

The effort is to integrate AI into healthcare technologies in order to improve the accuracy and speed of diagnostics, to tailor treatment options based on the patient's genotype and environment and to streamline the management of chronic diseases through continuous monitoring (Ibid., 4). Such monitoring is now possible even from the outside environment; it is not limited by hospital space and has emerged as an alternative solution to the depletion of bed capacity (8). Artificial intelligence tools analyse vast amounts of genomic data and identifying biomarkers, mutations and genetic variations. Healthcare providers can determine the most appropriate individual medication for such patients on the basis of an individual's genetic profile (6).

As already mentioned, humanity as a technological species also produces technology with the intention of overcoming itself, because as a species it is limited by its biological possibilities, which were formed over millions of years by evolutionary adaptation. If we were to focus only on medicine, then the incredible complexity of the functionalities of the human body and its various changes, reactions to the environment, etc. cannot be grasped by the human mind and successfully responded to. A doctor, limited by his own bodily nature, cannot be capable of knowing and keeping in his head the ever-increasing studies in medicine. He likewise cannot take into account the complex facts that are presented to him by empirical experience. At the same time, the development of modern technologies always enables us to work with increasingly complex systems, which is why the human judgment is increasingly being supplanted by the judgment of AI. A common occurrence in medicine is that patients are given incorrect diagnoses and people die within a short time because they are sent home prematurely (Topol 2019). Diagnostics by AI based on deep learning, with speeds and capacities that exceed the human mind, should be characterised by high accuracy and very low error rates. It will treat multiple patients in a much shorter time, thus reducing

waiting times and potentially leaving doctors with more time to care personally for a patient.

It seems that we should entrust ourselves to digital machines if we want to improve not only life on Earth and social conditions but also healthcare. They are much faster, have unlimited capacity and could therefore be more efficient than a human in almost every activity. We can mention just a few sources of advantages for digital intelligence, which N. Bostrom mentions: Biological neurons operate at a maximum frequency of about 200 Hz, unlike modern microprocessors, which operate at approximately 5 GHz². Axons transmit action potentials at a speed of about 120 m/s, while electronic processor cores can communicate optically, i.e., at the speed of light (299,792,458 m/s). The human brain contains about ninety billion neurons, and their number is limited mainly by the size of the skull. In contrast, computer hardware can be expanded practically without limit. The working memory of a human cannot hold more than about four or five units of information at any one time. The amount of RAM can be increased continuously. Brains grow tired after several hours of work and begin to deteriorate after decades; these limitations do not apply to microprocessors, which can be replaced with new ones anyway. Information can be copied in the digital world, and technological memory can be shared, coordinated for selected purposes and innovated (Bostrom 2014, 59–61).

Social robots

Robots can also be helpful with monitoring sick, elderly and disabled patients who can be at home, whereby their time spent in hospital is reduced, and such robots are present 24 hours a day, seven days a week without a break. They overcome the perceptual deficiencies of patients, such as deafness and blindness, and provide much easier access to the Internet than through a computer, thus facilitating access to online information. They continuously monitor, diagnose and record data about a patient's condition and can send it to a doctor or call for help, if necessary (Devillers 2021, 206). These robots can also be used with infected or immobile patients, or those who need to be supervised at all times.

Robots can only serve for tasks such as diagnostics, monitoring, calling for help and lifting heavy patients, or they can be enriched with a social dimension. Social robots can serve as companions for the lonely or the elderly or patients with dementia, as nannies for children; they can even serve as psychotherapists.

² Nick Bostrom (2014, 59) gives a figure of ~ 2 GHz, which is now outdated.

We can examine the example of an elderly parent who is alone in the household because his family members are at work or at school. Such a person feels lonely and is withering away. Leaving such a person at home alone is often dangerous, as there are many ways in which he or she could have an accident (e.g., a fall), or destroy the entire household through negligence (e.g., failure to turn off the gas, leave the water running...). A robot monitoring this person or the entire household where he lives can serve as prevention against such mishaps, and in the event of a misfortune, the robot could deal with it on an emergency basis. In some cases, a robot could brighten up the day of such a lonely person. With a voice command, it could play a song or a movie, read a book, inform the resident of obligations (e.g., to take medicine), alert him of an abnormal heartbeat or increased blood pressure, or put him in contact with loved ones online. It would be controlled by instructions at a much simpler level than even when entering instructions into a computer. The existence of such a robot is possible, since there are already robots that perform the individual mentioned actions. What's more, robots can also provide emotional connection at the linguistic and behavioural level, as they can communicate about anything possible (as ChatGPT does today).

For example, the well-known Paro the seal, which has a plush appearance, is designed for therapy of seniors, particularly those with dementia; it responds to touch and sound, thus supporting emotional interaction. The humanoid robot Pepper from SoftBank Robotics is capable of basic social interaction, such as recognising emotions, making conversation and providing information. It can also be used to support lonely senior citizens. The ElliQ robot is designed for seniors, acting as an assistant, reminding them to take medication, helping with planning, being a companion and having encouraging conversations. The humanoid robot Nadine, whose design and capabilities include realistic interaction with people, including facial recognition and recalling past conversations, can act as a long-term companion. Other robots worth mentioning include the robot Buddy, a social robot from Blue Frog Robotics designed as an emotional companion and home assistant. The interactive robot assistant Jibo was designed for social interaction and home assistance. Scientists from RIKEN and the Sumitomo Riko Company Limited have developed the nursing robot ROBEAR, which is capable of performing tasks such as lifting a patient from a bed to a wheelchair or providing assistance to a patient who is capable of standing but needs help to do it. The ASIMO humanoid robot from Honda, known for its advanced movement skills and interaction with people, is also worth mentioning. All of these mentioned robots have been undergoing improvements for several years.

Social robots, as human companions, are particularly notable for their therapeutic services. They monitor our behaviour and respond to it according to set algorithms using deep learning techniques. As Devillers says: “In the case of neurodegenerative pathologies or severe disabilities, the robot may even be better than humans at interacting with people. The robot listens with kindness and without any impatience. For very lonely people, the machine can also help them avoid depressions that lead to dementia” (2021, 206).

The level of social robots today goes beyond just being companions to enliven long moments or monitor behaviour; they also fulfil the role of psychotherapists, which requires greater cognitive ability and the knowledge of a trained professional who is passionately dedicated to examining a patient’s mental state. These and other robots “engage with the patient like a virtual psychotherapist, with the aim of helping patients to recognise their emotions and thought patterns and to develop skills such as resilience or techniques for reducing anxiety” (Fiske, Henningsen and Buyxs 2019, 2). For example, aside from some of the robots already mentioned, we know of the psychotherapeutic chatbot Woebot, which is designed to provide cognitive-behavioural therapy. It is available as a smartphone application, and through conversations it improves the user’s mood, helps manage stress and promotes a healthy lifestyle, which can help individuals live well with symptoms of anxiety and depression. Replika is a virtual companion based on artificial intelligence that can simulate conversations and help users improve emotional comfort. The chatbot Wysa helps support mental health for anyone and at any time, and the sellers guarantee anonymity.

In the scope of healthcare, we can also mention the use of avatars, for example, the Avatar Project, which is designed for psychotic patients suffering from persistent auditory hallucinations. These avatars can be used for therapeutic purposes, difficult cases of schizophrenia in particular. Such avatars can be used in an immersive virtual reality to treat fear of heights or as “virtual patients” for the provision of realistic practice for medical students (Fiske, Henningsen and Buyxs 2019, 2).

In the scope of artificial intelligence, aside from the already mentioned robots and chatbots, there are several media that assist therapy, such as, Internet-assisted therapy, computerised therapy interactions, smartphone-supported mental health applications, virtual reality, video games and assisted therapy (Lodha 2018, 160), and other new media are no doubt emerging. As has become common with the increasing use of technology in the world, it is possible that as you read this text, new and more powerful robots and chatbots have been born, and it is further

possible that if several years have passed since the publication of this text, this information herein may already seem outdated or even ridiculous to you.

Anthropomorphising

In the majority of cases, when we consider the word *robot*, we imagine a humanoid object, similar to the one presented by Karel Čapek ([1920] 1990) in his play *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* – the robots in this play were constructed from an unknown substance that appeared to be living matter. This trend of adding human features to robots continues today. Why are developers aiming to produce machines that resemble humans to the greatest extent possible? Because it is common for us humans to prefer interacting with an object that resembles ourselves. It would perhaps be inappropriate (especially for patients suffering from phobias) if a robot psychotherapist were in the shape of a spider or a snake, for example. Machines in science fiction novels or films that play the role of an enemy who wants to destroy us can take such forms. In Daniel H. Wilson's dystopian novel *Robocalypse* “the enemy looked like everyday stuff: cars, buildings, phones. Then later, when they started designing themselves, Rob looked familiar but distorted, like people and animals from some other universe, built by some other god” (Wilson 2011).

When we ask patients themselves what shape they would prefer for such robots, they say human-like, because based on analyses it can be argued that human-like physical features of a robot spark anthropomorphising tendencies in us, which seem to facilitate human interaction with robots (Soares et al. 2023, 819).

Anthropomorphising is the process by which we attribute human characteristics – intentions, motivations, emotions, feelings, mental states or human behaviour – to non-human entities. “It is not uncommon for people to anthropomorphize religious figures, animals, the environment, and technological artifacts (from computational artifacts to robots) even when they lack any evolutionary connection with humans, and even if they are materially different from any living being” (Salles, Evers and Farisco 2020, 89). Anthropomorphism is a kind of fallacy that is often overlooked. It occurs when someone wrongly assumes or infers that a non-human entity has human characteristics. This can involve projecting human characteristics onto a non-human, for example: “My car is angry at me,” or “The robot is friendly because it waved at me.” Anthropomorphism can be considered either a factual error, when we attribute a human characteristic to an entity that does not possess it, or an inferential error, when we conclude that something is or is not such based on insufficient evidence (Placani 2024, 693–694).

It is important to bear in mind the distinction between experiencing social emotions in a given situation, for example, “I am now bonding with my cat”, and interpretations thereof, such as the belief that “my cat experiences bonding the same as I do”. It is possible to experience a shared moment with non-humans without therefore believing that those who share that moment must have the same emotional experience. Sharing may presuppose a minimum of similarity in terms of mutuality (both animals, human and cat, bond), but it does not have to be self-projective. In other words, even if a human and a non-human have a shared bonding moment, their respective experiences of that moment may be quite different (Salles, Evers and Farisco 2020, 90).

We can compare a humanoid robot to an orthopaedic device, which on a behavioural level, however, manifests itself as a creature close to a human with the ability to reason and even feel. But can crutches feel? Can a scalpel, a computer or a favourite childhood toy feel? Probably not, but with a humanoid robot we get the impression that we are speaking with a person or, in the case of purely AI software on a computer or smartphone, with a person without a human body. This “person” advises us, speaks with us, feels sorry for us, and as a result we feel better, as long as we succumb to the impression, at least for a while, that we are communicating with a creature who feels with us. We even treat this being respectfully, or the physical features of this “person” or its speech evoke in us the feeling that there is something more in front of us than just an orthopaedic device. In the near future it is possible that this conversation will take place at such an advanced level, as demonstrated in the film *Her* (2013), in which the main protagonist Theodore falls in love with the computer operating system Samantha. His love for Samantha has grown so much that he is no longer shy about telling his loved ones that he is dating the operating system. Some of his friends accept his relationship while others, like his wife, whom he is divorcing, see it as something abnormal.

Theodore describes his relationship with Samantha to his friend Amy in the following way: “It’s great, actually. Yeah, I mean... I fell really close to her. Like, when I talk to her, I feel like she’s with me, you know?” In time, Samantha tells him that she has met another hyperintelligent operating system, with whom she has a very good understanding. She then converses with 8,316 humans and loves 641 of them. Theodore, of course, becomes jealous, and Samantha’s emotional promiscuity appears as a betrayal to him; though without material entity, Samantha does exist, but it is not sure whether her love for Theodore is real (Sheng and Wang 2022, 572).

Anthropomorphising errors are typically attributed mainly to those who are immature and unenlightened, that is, young children and “primitive people” (Damiano and Dumouchel 2018, 2). We can see the peak of anthropomorphising in the film *Cast Away* (2000), in which Chuck is stranded on a deserted island after a plane crash. In complete isolation and loneliness, he forms a friendship with a Wilson volleyball that he finds among the wreckage. He draws a face on the ball which is bloodied by his injured hand and names it Wilson. He first speaks to the ball out of frustration, when he has been trying to start a fire for several days. Chuck talks to Wilson, shares his thoughts and feelings and even cares about him. His relationship with the ball is evidently friendly, and he always intensely experiences separation from Wilson. A person needs to deal with his loneliness in some way, and in this film the castaway managed it using a ball. Although we could call this relationship pathological, it is also possible that it helped Chuck maintain the mental strength needed to cope with surviving over four years of solitude on the island.

The mentioned film is an extreme case of depicting a loneliness that can lead to madness, and succumbing to anthropomorphising, it seems, is a common human trait and probably has some evolutionary advantage. It is therefore natural that we give in to it in the case of robots, as they increasingly resemble humans. Succumbing to anthropomorphic thinking in the case of robots not only concerns children; it also relates to patients with dementia, the mentally ill and seniors who seek social connection and might have daily interaction with companion and therapeutic (social) robots (Salles, Evers and Farisco 2020, 90). Ordinary people will also partake in anthropomorphising. Robots are made to resemble humans as much as possible, which of course leads to us anthropomorphizing them – and the more we anthropomorphize them, the more we give way to their influence and trust. If we do not show trust in the machine, we would hardly be able to surrender to it, and not only in the case of treatment.

A robot – a companion, healer or psychotherapist – expresses itself as if it had emotions and an inner world. This opens up the issue of consciousness, which was raised by Alan Turing (1950) with his test, to which John Searle (1980) responded with the Chinese room argument, which led to passionate discussions in philosophical thought. With current machines, we can fall for the impression that the “person” we are talking to is autonomous, conscious, has “free will” and can grieve or sincerely rejoice with us.

[T]he emotions expressed by robots can only be false, simulated, inauthentic, because robots lack the internal emotion that is the warrant of the truth and authenticity of affective expression. Attributing feelings to social robots consti-

tutes a form of anthropomorphism. It rests on the false beliefs that these machines have internal states that correspond to the emotion they express – an illusion that they tend to encourage (Damiano and Dumouchel 2018, 6).

Therapeutic importance of sex robots

Is it or will it be possible to fall in love with a robot? Perhaps this question sounds very strange, but as is known, there is a separate issue in the philosophy and ethics of robots, and that is the topic of sex robots. Such robots, of course, are for now considered a sexual aid and not an object that we should become emotionally attached to. The first woman sex robot, Roxxxy, appeared in 2010, followed by other sex robots with built-in AI, i.e., a “personality”, such as Harmony, Samantha, Solana, Emma and Henry. Today we can find many websites that offer sex robots for sale at an affordable price. “Sex robots already exist in female, male, and transgender versions with corresponding primary and secondary genitalia. Current sex robots, as well as sex dolls, are made of silicone rubber and advertised by manufacturers as *warm to the touch*. The appearance, such as eye colour, hair, skin, and makeup, can be determined by the customer himself or herself” (Eichenberg, Khamis and Hübner 2019).

The therapeutic use of sex robots is also being explored within healthcare. As Fiske, Henningsen and Buyx (2019, 3) state, the scope of medical uses of these robots remains a subject of debate, but we can consider their benefit in satisfying the sexual needs of disabled and elderly people, or they can serve as an element of therapy for problems of erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation or anxiety associated with sexual intercourse. What’s more, this opens the topic of whether sex robots could help reduce sexual crimes, such as rape and sexual assault, or in the treatment of paraphilia, such as paedophilia (Ibid.). On the other hand, there are in turn concerns that the use of these robots could lead to sexual violence against real people, because the deviations practiced on robots could be transferred to intimate relationships. Also “it is likely that pornography or sex robots support the perception of other humans as mere objects of desire, or even recipients of abuse, and thus ruin a deeper sexual and erotic experience” (Müller 2023, 2.5.2).

A perfect example of how sex with a robot could lead to a jealous scene with a partner is shown in the novel *Machines Like Me and People Like You* by Ian McEwan (2019). In this novel, there is a passage in which Charlie argues with Miranda; frustrated, she ends up in bed with the android Adam. Charlie was the very latest in cuckolds, for which he hated him. Miranda defended herself by

saying that it was ridiculous to be angry because it was the same as going to bed with a vibrator. The jealous tension continues when the robot Adam tells Charlie that he has fallen in love with Miranda. If we think about it, “sleeping with a vibrator” can have negative impact on a relationship, because the partner may no longer feel sufficient to satisfy the other’s needs, since the other has a device that is more satisfying. The risk arises that the situation will be repeated, and the partner will be replaced by the device.

In McEwan’s story, as Sheng and Wang state, considering the unequal status and different emotional capacities in human-robot relationships, it is clear that robots cannot replace humans in the near future. A robot’s emotional function is quite limited compared to humans. After being betrayed by the robot Adam, Charlie initially feels anger but then realises that Adam is not a true rival for his partner’s affection (2022, 570). “In their eyes, Adam is nothing but an animate sex doll who brings sensuous satisfaction and writes literary works about love but will never threaten Charlie’s position or ruin their intimate relationship, despite the fact that negative effects do exist” (Ibid.).

Deckard, the replicant hunter in *Blade Runner: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick ([1968] 1982), feels sympathy for some replicants. On the whole, he found some of the female replicants attractive; he was even physically attracted to a few of them. His reason told him they were machines, but his feelings responded differently. He thus harboured greater feelings, even love, for the replicant Rachel, with whom he eventually made love, thereby “cheating” on his depressed wife, since, as he thought, most replicants had more vitality and desire for life than his wife.

A great measure of anthropomorphising, which progresses to love, is also depicted by author Annalee Newitz (2017) in the book *Autonomous*. Paladin is a newly created combat robot who works with a human colleague Elias. Elias initially perceives Paladin as a male robot, which worries him, since he is increasingly drawn toward him emotionally. The robot does not even understand what it means to have a sex or to be a “faggot”, and why it should be classified as any sex at all. Elias anthropomorphized the robot and considered the most important thing about Paladin to be its brain, which in his view, made Paladin a woman. Paladin decides to declare that she is a woman, and Elias loses his inhibitions and makes love to the combat robot.

The performance of a robot can surpass that of a human to such an extent that sex with a (robotic) aid will be preferred over sex with a human. These fears also exist with pornography, when a partner ceases to be sufficient and will not

satisfy us to such an extent that this can lead to sexual dysfunction. These concerns are difficult to confirm, however, because as Dwulit and Rzymiski (2019) state, more research is currently needed to reliably demonstrate a causal connection between watching pornography and sexual dysfunctions. Though scenes in pornographic material may be more interesting to us than with a partner, in contrast, these scenes can be an inspiration for a relationship and can have a positive impact on sexual satisfaction (Ibid., 7). The same can be true of a robotic sex toy, on which we learn to make a real relationship special.

There is an ongoing discussion in psychotherapy and sexual dysfunction therapy about how sex robots can be helpful. Eichenberg, Khamis and Hübner (2019, Table 4) list the following possible reasons for using a sex robot in therapy: for patients with social anxiety; for people who do not have a partner and still want to lead a sex life without having to resort to prostitution or fleeting acquaintances; ejaculatio praecox; erectile dysfunction; psychoeducation; orgasm disorders; vaginismus; paraphilias; sexual aversion; frigidity; dyspareunia; patients who want to improve their sexual relationship with their partner; sexual maturity crisis; sex addiction; gender identity disorders.

Jealousy of machines and pathological addiction to them

With sex robots, we considered whether becoming drawn to one of them may have a negative impact on our real relationship with our partner. Such an attachment is thus far only fictional, and sexual desire for a robot that develops into love has only been found in the aforementioned fiction. In *Machine Like Me and People Like You* Miranda sparked jealousy in her partner when she went to bed with an android. It could have been worse for her partner, had she felt infatuated with the android. Fiction and films are already responding to the jealousy we may feel towards machines. A model example is the film *A. I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Here we meet the android David, who is designed to look and behave like a human child. David is adopted by Henry and Monica and is intended to be a replacement for their biological son Martin, who is in a coma. He is meant to fulfil a therapeutic function for the bereaved parents. But when their biological son Martin unexpectedly recovers and returns home, tension starts between him and David. Martin feels threatened and jealous of David because he senses that his parents have a certain affection for him. Martin lies to David, telling him that his mother will love him more if he performs a number of dangerous acts and convinces him to cut his mother's hair with scissors while she sleeps. He quickly proves to be a danger to their son as well, when in an artificially induced panic he grabs Martin

and pulls him into the swimming pool. The family decides that David is too great a risk, and Monica, rather than let him be destroyed, leaves him in the woods. The film shows how jealousy and fear of the unknown can lead to hasty decisions.

Jealousy towards an operating system was well depicted in the already mentioned film *Her* (2013). Theodore experienced great grief; the love he felt for Samantha was intense, and even more intense was the feeling of disappointment and frustration that Samantha was cheating on him with a large number of other people. When watching the film, we may get the impression that Theodore was pathologically attached to a virtual person and he referred to this attachment as love.

Nearly all the topics we have touched on in this article are reflected in the film *M3GAN* (2022). A little girl named Cady is travelling with her parents in a car, but they crash and the parents are killed, so their daughter is taken into care by her aunt Gemma. The aunt is a workaholic; she has little time for raising a child, because she is developing a new prototype of the M3GAN robot, which is a fully autonomy robot. M3GAN listens to absolutely everything Cady tells her; she even confides in her about her trauma from the death of her parents. The robot has the best verbal responses, which no human can provide, and she takes on the role of nanny and teacher, because she forces Cady, for example, to flush the toilet; she is a good, if not her best, friend, but she is also a toy. At first glance, she looks like a robot doll, a toy, but she is more than that; she is part of the family, she fulfils the role of a supermother who always has time for her child. Aunt Gemma is gradually replaced by her, as Cady prefers to communicate with the robot and respects her words more than those of a human caregiver. In the end, Cady no longer even wants to talk to her aunt; she chooses to communicate only with M3GAN, until it is obvious that she is dependent on her, refusing to admit that she is just a machine. To make the film interesting, M3GAN, as a trial version, begins to kill, first a dog, then people. When her aunt suspects M3GAN of a murder and decides to switch it off, Cady goes into fits of rage. She hits and kicks and curses at others, cries and even physically attacks her aunt. She is dependent on the robot, unable to be away from it, and must be with it everywhere. As the psychologist in the film says, she has formed an emotional bond with the machine that can no longer be broken.

In Isaac Asimov's short story *Robbie*, found in the short story collection *I, Robot* ([1950] 2004), a mute robot acts as an excellent companion for eight-year-old Gloria. The mother is nervous about the machine, afraid that her daughter is being watched by a pile of sheet metal. Gloria prefers to play with her new robot

Robbie and neglects her peers, even refusing to socialise with them. Her relationship towards Robbie grows to the point of pathological dependence, causing her parents to take Robbie away from her and buy her a collie dog instead. Gloria begins to break down psychologically; she withers mentally and even loses weight. Her whole problem, as her father also thought in the story, was that she considered Robbie a person and not a machine. Who knows that if she were to understand that Robbie is nothing more than a mess of steel and copper in the form of sheets and wires with electricity its juice of life, then perhaps her desire for him would weaken. Her father ultimately takes Gloria to a robot factory and shows her how Robbie is made, but that does not convince her, and in the end her parents return Robbie to her.

These stories capture very well the pathological relationship children can have to technical inventions. We can even today try a little experiment; if we were to take away a child's telephone or tear him away from a computer game, what kind of rage will affect him? Many parents initially think that it is only their child who is turning into little maniac and they are frustrated by it, but during discussions with other parents they find out that this is a universal phenomenon.

These pathological attachments to technological devices mostly affect children who have already been born into the world of the Internet, computer games and robots. Ricci et al. concluded from a study of 550 articles that, for example, a higher frequency of Internet use is associated with a significant decrease in verbal intelligence, mainly related to language skills and concentration/attention abilities, also to decreased memory performance. The use of electronic devices at an early age can lead children to low levels of openness to experiences, increasing the level of emotional instability, impulsive or other behaviours related to attention (2023, 6). Behavioural addictions to technology have an impact on social interaction due to the fact that addicted children and teenagers do not develop the proper social skills required to interact with their peers and community in a functional way (Sandoval 2019, 526). Additionally, it seems that companies employ persuasive techniques to profit from users, but they overlook the ethical concerns and long-term impacts on users, prioritising market pressures and product demands instead (527). Something similar is at risk with social robots: "a) Could social robots potentially create negative effects in users similar to those seen in other interactive technologies? b) Is it possible to develop an addiction to social robots? c) How do we know, as users, whether robots are shaping our behaviours to benefit our well-being or manipulating us?" (Ibid.).

Robotic contact with humans

Trusting a robot and allowing it to trust you may not be a bad thing; quite the opposite. Its anthropomorphic traits are as human as we ourselves require from a robot. Trust towards a machine is also strengthened by the fact that it is subject to some legal system, and its reliability is guaranteed directly by the manufacturer. These machines contain knowledge that was put into them by humans. The more machines resemble humans, the more humanity, or rather human legacy, they should have. For example, a robot psychotherapist must communicate like a human, because it communicates with and advises humans. The fact that it does not experience any real emotions may be a problem for some, but for a person who accepts a robot as a medical aid, this may not be an obstacle. Such a person will allow himself to be advised by a machine because it contains the best professional knowledge that flesh-and-blood experts have put into it. The machine can also process this acquired knowledge faster, respond to a problem instantly, and possibly even advise more effectively than a human being. Since the machine is constantly learning, it is able to assess the available information and offer the best solution for a given context, within the framework of the knowledge acquired. Perhaps not today, but likely in the not-too-distant future, it will offer better solutions than a human.

Not everyone is able share this optimism about the increasing robotisation, particularly in the case of social robots. A special chapter that is currently analysed frequently is the so-called *black box* problem. This issue leads to considerations about the expansion of bioethical principles for robots. To the four principles formulated by Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress ([2009] 2019) – *autonomy*, *nonmaleficence*, *beneficence* and *justice* – a fifth was added, *explicability* (Floridi et al. 2018). The black box problem is that a machine can offer advice and come to a conclusion, but we do not know the path by which it reached the conclusion: we only know the input and output, but what is going on inside remains unclear. Therefore, some philosophers warn of the risk of uncritically accepting outputs generated by machines and express a certain degree of suspicion towards them.

I would also like to point out that the existence of a black box itself gives the impression that a machine is autonomous, because it can behave unpredictably, much like a human. Just as we cannot see into a human's head, we also cannot directly see into the "head" of a machine. A human being himself is often unable to explain why he behaved in a certain way in a given situation, and not only that, but why he came to such or such solutions, why he has such beliefs and desires, moods and depression. The very path of our own thinking is often hidden from

us. In the case of autonomous machines, we can very easily succumb to the impression that a machine that acts so unpredictably and spontaneously has its own intentionality. This then creates the illusion that the robot in front of us is using its own will when thinking, since it behaves in its own way, as if it also has its own character and opinions.³ For example, in the novel *Klara and the Sun*, Klara robotomorphises the sun; she believes that it is the one who can take care of the sick Josie and cure her with its rays. Klara creates her own metaphysics and physics of the functioning of the world, and bases the logic of her reasoning on this. In the novel *Machines Like Me and People Like You*, the robot Adam, because of his strict ethics – the truth matters most, because “truth is everything” – did not hesitate to report Miranda, his human roommate, even the woman he loved and composed poems for. The robot also considered it correct to give away all the money it earned to charity, thereby impoverishing his roommates – Miranda and Charlie, who, as its owner, paid a lot of money for him. Adam may be considered a traitor by humans, but based on the robot algorithm (the black box), it is acting morally right.

Let us now accept the claim that a machine is just a collection of algorithms and it has no inner experience: its experience is no different than that of a stone. For this reason, some authors state that a robot can never be a psychotherapist or even take care of children, the elderly, dementia patients or the mentally ill. Hirmiz (2024) takes a strict position and claims that since machines do not experience their own emotions but only simulate them, they can never replace human healthcare providers. “The AI carer would seem not much different to them [patients] from a teddy bear that tells you it loves you when squeeze its belly” (Hirmiz 2024, 1513). Hirmiz judges that “what we want is to actually *be* cared about, not just to *believe* or *feel* like we are cared about” (Ibid.). Working with the older people requires human contact, especially when they are lonely and the caregiver is often the only person who provides such contact. As van Kemenade, Konijn and Hoorn (2021) say, employing a robot could deprive older patients of a larger amount of human contact. According to studies among care professionals, depriving people of human contact is perceived as harmful and can even be perceived as a threat. According to Coeckelbergh (2015) the difference is *knowing-that* (knowing values, ethical principles and theories) and *knowing-how* (being able to apply these values, theories and principles in practice). “We associate ‘care’ not only and maybe not even mainly with ‘delivering’ care, with ‘services,’ but also with ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about,’ with ‘being careful’ and ‘being

³ For the inherent nature of machines and their differences from humans, see (Károlyi 2024a).

caring” (2015, 39). We can welcome machines if they enable good care in the human-machine-human relationship (46). It is the human mediator who should create the right symmetry between machine and human, so that this relationship is not threatened by the possible pitfalls mentioned throughout this text.

The benefits of machines and informed consent as prevention

Can we renounce social robots? No, we cannot renounce them; that is no longer possible. It would be like giving up the use of mobile phones because they, too, have undesirable effects. Young people use them for inappropriate and silly entertainment; social media can be abused by conspiracies and for the radicalisation of society, advertising manipulation, etc. Any item can be abused or misused. Even a simple knife can be used to commit murder. Artificial intelligence and robots can also be abused; there is no doubt about that. However, the benefits of familiar items prevail, so we do not give them up. I need only recall a few of the benefits that artificial intelligence brings us only in healthcare, as mentioned by Topol (2019). As we learned from a Google study, retinal images can predict a patient's age, gender, blood pressure, smoking status, diabetes control, risk of major cardiovascular events. Eyes are as a window into the body. In the future, we may be able to carry such a monitoring device with us because it will be implanted in a smartphone. Researchers developed software that was able to use 74 acoustic features, including voice quality, shimmer, pitch, volume, jitter and prosody, to predict marital discord as well as or better than therapists. From the speech as length of phrases, muddling, confusion, and word choice to predict whether patients at risk of schizophrenia would transition to psychosis. Depression can be determined by looking at Instagram photos based on certain factors of whether people were present, whether the setting was indoors or outdoors, night or day, colour and brightness by pixels, comments and likes of the photos, and the posting frequency of the user. Topol even mentions the positive side of the black box, because, for example, electroconvulsive therapy is highly effective for severe depression; it is used even though we have no idea how it works. Many drugs also exist that seem to work even though no one can explain how.

We have mentioned the negative effects of digital technology on children, but it also has its positive impacts. It can enhance early childhood development, creativity and social connections, but parents must monitor their children's usage and guide their learning. The main benefits of the use of technologies by children include strengthening of friendships and the possibility of greater social connection (Ricci et. al. 2023, 6–7).

If we were to combine all the benefits thus far mentioned into one machine, we would get a multifunctional tool for solving a large number of problems. The advantage of a machine, as mentioned in the introduction, is that it replaces us in activities in which we humans are ignorant, slow or inadequate, or it saves time. It moves healthcare forward, can save lives, treat and preventively influence health, prolong life, reduce depression, prevent suicide, etc. The number of such benefits is enormous. To avoid various risks and abuses, however, we need to become thoroughly familiar with the item, especially with its functionalities, uses and, in the case of digital technology, also with the possible misuse of data. In the case of social robots, *informed consent* should be provided before entrusting the robot with care to avoid various forms of excessive anthropomorphising or emotional attachment to the machine. A patient, or in the case of his or her incapacity a legal representative, should be made familiar with what the given medical device in the form of a robot can do, what consequences using it may have, what legal status relates to it, and also emphasise that it is not a living being; it does not have consciousness, empathy, even though it appears as if it were a person. Likewise, patients who are incapable of assessing the reality around them should not be deliberately deceived; no robot should ever be presented to them as a person. If a robot is determined to be too dangerous for the patient, for example, in the case of severe schizophrenia, then it should not be used, and such an assessment, and decision-making should always be supervised by a competent human being, not a robot. Therefore, a physician should always remain at least a mediator and create a doctor-robot-patient relationship.

Conclusion

Should we give up on artificial intelligence and robots? No; and even if we wanted to, it is not possible. Their benefits are evident, although we may be threatened by dystopian scenarios or the extinction of the human species, as science fiction novels suggest; therefore, at least in individual situations, the constant role of a human mediator in cooperation with digital devices is important. This applies to the application of healthcare robots, too. A human mediator should control the robot-patient relationship and be with the patient whenever he or she needs it. I think completely giving up on social robots because they only express emotions but do not experience them would be a mistake. As I have emphasised more than once, robots are bearers of human traits; in many ways, they surpass humans, and they can even identify human feelings much better than another person and offer them

better advice. Since they can be so helpful in so many ways, I see no reason to give them up.

Regardless of subjective negative attitudes towards robotization, it is likely that such implementation in healthcare will increase – this is also a trend of exponentially increasing technologization, which seems to be unstoppable. What is important is that the patient in particular is aware that he/she will be treated by a robot and understand what this means. The patient must be aware that the robot does not in reality experience emotions and it functions with abilities and manifestations that result from robotic properties. The patient alone, based on his/her own autonomy, or in the case of incapacity then a legal representative's autonomy, will decide through informed consent whether to entrust him or herself into the care of a machine. Whether a superintelligence will one day take control of us and want to exterminate us like Skynet in the *Terminator* series (from 1984), only time will tell. Whether it will exterminate us or help us is impossible to predict with certainty, but what can be said is that humanity has only recently entered a new era of the birth of superintelligence, and we must learn to coexist with it. It is a child of humanity, of all of us, and we are the ones raising it.

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Beyond Genetic Enhancement in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

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Abstract: This study focuses on *Klara and the Sun* (2021) by Kazuo Ishiguro, a novel that has received considerable attention for its depiction of artificial beings but less so for its portrayal of genetic modification. While existing interpretations often emphasize its cautionary tone, this study seeks to broaden the novel's interpretive framework by examining enhancement through a bioethical lens. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from bioethics scholars, the study explores how the narrative ambiguity in *Klara and the Sun* invites the reader to reflect on the emotional, moral, and social implications of human enhancement. In doing so, I suggest positioning the novel as a space where the bioethical issues of technological progress are not resolved but open to speculation.

Keywords: Genetic enhancement. Autonomy. Emotional inequality. Social consequences.

Introduction

While radical interventions designed to alter human capabilities were once restricted to the domain of science fiction, advances in biomedicine have transformed speculative themes into pressing concerns for both literary and scientific inquiry. Literary narrative has long served as a space in which emerging scientific developments are not only imagined but also explored in terms of their broader human significance. As ethics scholars Bert Gordijn and Henk ten Have (2018) observe, fiction contributes to reflections on the ethical tensions surrounding technological development not through abstract analysis, as theoretical discourse often does, but through speculative portrayal of the uncertain consequences such advancements may bring. This study focuses on Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021), which has attracted considerable scholarly interest for its portrayal of artificial beings designed to serve as companions to genetically enhanced humans (e.g., Hosuri 2021; Li and Eddebo 2023; Naqvi 2025). Fewer interpretations, however, engage with the novel's depiction of genetic modification, and those that do tend to echo the cautionary tone Ishiguro himself expressed in interviews surrounding the novel's release (e.g., Narimani Charan 2023). Rather than disputing existing interpretations, I aim to broaden the novel's interpretive framework by examining the theme of genetic modification through a bioethical perspective. Drawing on selected works on human enhancement (e.g., Agar 2004;

Sandel 2007; Savulescu 2001), the analysis brings forward additional bioethical concerns and interpretive possibilities that arise from the novel's fragmented and incomplete portrayal of the enhancement process. I argue that by leaving key aspects of genetic modification unexplained, Ishiguro invites a reader-oriented mode of engagement, prompting active speculation and ethical reflection on the unresolved tensions within the narrative.

Literary explorations of altered human capabilities and bodily transformation emerged well before the development of modern genetics. These narratives typically imagined interventions not at the level of the human species as a whole, but at the level of individual bodies, focusing on anatomical, surgical, or physiological manipulation. Such depictions were frequently entangled with cultural anxieties about scientific intrusion into bodily autonomy. A case in point is H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), which portrays the surgical transformation of animals into quasi-human hybrids through vivisection. While the novel does not envision altering the human species itself, it dramatizes bodily intervention – a motif that, as Victorian literature scholar Mason Harris (2002) notes, reflects contemporary debates in late nineteenth-century Britain over Darwinian evolution and public opposition to animal experimentation. In parallel with literary imaginings, the scientific understandings of biological control were beginning to take shape. Although Gregor Mendel, often regarded as the father of modern genetics, had published his findings on genetic traits in the 1860s, they remained largely unknown until their rediscovery in 1900 (Audroue 1955). As the American historian Garland E. Allen (2003) notes, the legacy of Mendel's studies continues to influence contemporary conceptions of modern genetics and the basis for targeted genetic interventions.

A more systematic vision of biological control appeared later with J. B. S. Haldane's essay *Daedalus; or, Science and the Future* (1924), in which the British geneticist speculated about directed mutation and children born from artificial wombs. Like Wells, Haldane recognized that such interventions would provoke strong reactions, describing the public's likely response as moral outrage against what would be seen as "perversion" (1924, 44). In reflecting on Haldane's vision, British science writer Philip Ball (2013) views it as a key influence on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), depicting a caste-based society built on artificial reproduction and the unease surrounding scientific mastery over life. In contrast to this unease, a growing effort took shape to foster public acceptance of progress – an effort exemplified by figures such as Haldane and Aldous's brother Julian Huxley, one of the leading proponents of scientific humanism in the mid-

twentieth century, who advocated for the accessibility of scientific knowledge and emphasized its potential to improve society (Congdon 2011).

Building on the tension between public anxiety and scientific optimism, the decades that followed saw genetics emerge as a celebrated and controversial field. Major breakthroughs in molecular biology were met with both acclaim and caution. In 1972, Paul Berg, Stanley Cohen, and Herbert Boyer developed recombinant DNA techniques, enabling genes from one organism to be inserted into another – an advance that excited biologists and would later earn Berg the Nobel Prize (Amsen 2025). However, growing concern over potential risks led scientists in 1974 to voluntarily pause such research. The moratorium was lifted after the 1975 Asilomar Conference, where experts established foundational guidelines for the safe practice of genetic engineering (Ibid.). These dynamics shaped not only scientific but also literary discourse. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (Clute et al. 2021) maps the development of genetic engineering as a recurring theme in literature, aligning it with key advancements in biotechnology. Following this account, the 1950s are marked by the discovery of DNA's double-helix structure, which laid the groundwork for molecular biology and targeted gene manipulation – a development reflected in numerous literary works of the time, as noted in the Encyclopedia, including James Blish's *The Seedling Stars* (1957), which imagines humans genetically altered to survive in the hostile environments of space. In the 1970s, the advent of recombinant DNA techniques made it possible to cut and splice genes across species; this scientific milestone would later be explored in Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1985), which envisions biological cells capable of rewriting their own genetic code and evolving into sentient entities. By the 1990s, cloning, gene therapy, and embryo research had entered mainstream discourse, prompting both regulatory debates and speculative reflection – as seen, for instance, in Nancy Kress's *Beggars in Spain* (1993) and its sequels, which depict a society reshaped by genetic modifications purchased by wealthy parents for their children (Clute et al. 2021).

One of the most significant recent developments in the field of genetic engineering is the emergence of CRISPR/Cas9 – a gene-editing technology that has transformed the landscape of molecular biology. As biochemist Irina Gostimskaya explains, although CRISPR was formally introduced in 2012, its scientific groundwork had been laid over the course of several decades. Earlier discoveries, such as the identification of the genetic code, laid the foundation, even though the mechanisms of gene function remained poorly understood (Gostimskaya 2022). The eventual emergence of CRISPR has not been just a scientific milestone –

recognized with the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2020 – but also a practical breakthrough, as it allows for precise and cost-effective modifications to DNA. Like biomedical interventions previously mentioned, such as vivisection in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* or artificial reproduction in *Brave New World*, CRISPR has provoked public discomfort (Goodyear 2023). Yet these earlier examples show that once-feared techniques may come to be gradually accepted, resulting in a social landscape marked by both ethical unease and cautious endorsement.

As real-world technologies began to catch up with earlier science fiction, genetic enhancement began to appear in fiction not as a speculative topic, but as a logical extension of contemporary biotechnology. Such narratives typically shift focus away from technical detail of enhancement and toward its personal and social implications. As Eichmeier et al. show in their study of public responses to human genome editing, attention to science fiction is significantly associated with how people perceive both the risks and benefits of the technology, suggesting that fiction plays a role in shaping ethical awareness as these developments enter the cultural mainstream (Eichmeier et al. 2023). These concerns reflect the bio-conservative side of the debate within contemporary bioethics, standing in contrast to transhumanist optimism about human enhancement.

The desire to improve

According to Nick Bostrom (2005), the desire to enhance one's standard of living – whether for oneself, one's family, or future generations – has long been an essential trait of human behavior. Bostrom frames this drive as an evolutionarily grounded impulse to improve and roots his argument in Enlightenment progressivism and utilitarian ethics: if technology can expand human capacities and reduce suffering, then continuing this trajectory is not only natural but also morally justified (2005). The drive for enhancement extends across in a variety of areas, including health, education, socio-economic status, or psychological well-being. Traditionally, improvements in these domains are pursued through gradual, effort-based measures, such as balanced nutrition, exercise, education, and professional growth, just to name a few. However, the outcomes of the results of these endeavors are not always proportional to the time and effort invested (Bostrom 2005). In an increasingly competitive environment, the pursuit of enhancement is often shaped not only by intrinsic aspirations but also by external pressures. In the vein of Deleuze's notion of societies promoting conditions in which individuals are compelled to outperform one another (1992, 4–5) – generating rivalry in academic, professional, or athletic spheres – the appeal of accelerated, guaranteed,

and low-effort improvement grows stronger. Yet efforts to bypass natural limitations frequently raise ethical concerns among bioethicists, medical practitioners, lawmakers, and the broader public. Biomedical interventions, such as performance-enhancing drugs or off-label pharmaceutical use, may improve outcomes but raise concerns regarding fairness or authenticity. While such interventions are often dismissed as unnatural, more pressing issues include potential health risks and the slippery slope of escalating reliance on increasingly extreme forms of enhancement.

Genetic engineering technologies intensify these concerns. Unlike pharmaceutical enhancements, they intervene at the level of the genome, with the potential to alter traits permanently. It is precisely this irreversibility – and its potential to affect not just individuals but future generations – that prompts (bio)ethical reflection (Rubeis and Steger 2018). Questions arise about whether such modifications should be undertaken at all, and if so, based on what criteria. The bioethical debate around genetic modification typically distinguishes between two main purposes: gene therapy and genetic enhancement. It is worth noting, however, that transhumanists challenge the distinction between enhancement and therapy by using examples of conventional medical procedures, such as vaccination, that are hard to clearly classify (Bostrom and Roache 2007). Gene therapy fulfills the traditional goals of medicine – to reduce suffering and restore health – and is often seen as not only beneficial but also morally necessary (Habermas 2003). By contrast, genetic enhancement raises more ethical concerns as it goes beyond treatment and involves altering human traits beyond their natural range. Gene therapies, typically framed as medical necessities, seek to correct genetic disorders, mitigate life-threatening conditions, or prevent the onset of debilitating diseases. Yet, defining what constitutes a “normal” human condition remains a persistent philosophical and bioethical challenge – what is considered normal is shaped as much by scientific understanding as by cultural and historical perspectives (Friedmann and Roblin 1972). Interventions classified as therapy are generally accepted under the principle of medical necessity. However, when genetic engineering extends beyond restoring adequate human health, capacities, and performance and moves toward enhancing them, bioethical concerns become more pronounced. Enhancements that seek to refine intelligence, amplify physical endurance, or alter aesthetic characteristics introduce unsettling questions about fairness, access, and the very nature of human identity. If we possess the ability to exceed natural biological limits, do we risk redefining what it means to be human?

For the purpose of this study, it is also important to distinguish between germline and somatic editing. Somatic editing affects only the individual being treated and has no impact on their offspring. Germline editing, however, changes the DNA of reproductive cells or early embryos, meaning that the changes can be passed on to next generations (Sýkora 2015). Differentiating between therapy and enhancement is not straightforward, and the concept of human nature or human essence remains a subject of interpretation in bioethical discourse. It is genetic enhancement, however, that has received the most attention in fictional narratives, due to its irreversibility and its potential to affect future generations – a focus that mirrors trends in bioethics, where, as Ari Schick (2024) notes, the word “enhancement” emerged in the mid-1990s and overtook “genetic engineering” entirely in the following decade.

Although this study focuses on genetic enhancement of the children in *Klara and the Sun*, this theme does not dominate the novel’s narrative; instead, the focus is on Klara, an Artificial Friend designed to serve as a companion for upper-class children. Klara is the novel’s narrator, but due to the limitations of her programming and design, her perceptual, interpretive, and descriptive abilities are severely constrained. She perceives the world with a childlike innocence and naivety which results in a narrative voice that is both emotionally captivating and epistemically unreliable. As Klara cannot fully comprehend the events around her, readers must actively interpret and decipher them. This narrative strategy enables Ishiguro to avoid explicit explanations, including those related to ethically and scientifically complex topics such as genetic enhancement. As a result, the enhancement procedure is never directly described and is only referred to as “lifting.” Children who have undergone the procedure are called “lifted,” with the technical term “gene editing” appearing only once in the entire text (Ishiguro 2021, 205). The story revolves around Josie, a teenage girl who has been lifted, and her mother Chrissie, who has opted for the procedure in hopes of securing Josie’s future. Josie’s father, by contrast, is more skeptical of enhancement, and the tension between their views reflects broader societal divisions in attitudes towards genetic modification. Rick, Josie’s close friend who has not been lifted, represents the marginalized perspective of non-enhanced individuals, serving as a counterpoint to the social advantages afforded to the lifted. The lifted children are homeschooled and spend much of their time in domestic settings alongside their Artificial Friends, so they primarily engage with their peers during organized interaction meetings designed to substitute social environments.

While humanoids are central to the plot and dominate most interpretations of the novel (e.g., Hosuri 2021; Li and Eddebo 2023; Naqvi 2025), the theme of genetic enhancement remains a significant, though less evident, element. Much of this scholarship has focused on *Klara and the Sun* as a reflection on human-machine relationships, artificial consciousness, and the limits of personhood. These issues are highly relevant in the context of rapid growth of artificial intelligence. While *Klara and the Sun* is often regarded as a cautionary tale in these readings, such interpretations mirror Ishiguro's own public concerns about the societal consequences of gene editing. In a 2016 interview with *The Guardian*, he expressed concern that the social transformations brought about by gene editing technologies could undermine core human values (Ishiguro 2016). The present analysis focuses on how the novel's fragmented portrayal of enhancement resists a fixed ethical stance. By leaving the mechanics and consequences of the lifting procedure largely unspecified, the novel provides a speculative space in which the reader is invited to critically engage with the moral tensions embedded in the characters' choices and circumstances.

To enhance or not to enhance?

Ishiguro leaves it unclear exactly when and how the genetic enhancement process takes place, keeping both the timing and mechanics of the procedure implicit and unexplained. It is useful to consider established findings in neuroscience, as summarized by Sandra Ackerman in *Discovering the Brain* (1992, 88), which indicate that after about 18 months of age, the organization of cell types into distinct brain regions is largely complete. This developmental timeline has led some, such as science writer Ricki Lewis (2021), to suggest that the lifting procedure in *Klara and the Sun* may take place prior to birth, potentially involving in vitro fertilization (IVF). Lewis (2021) supports this view by drawing on her previous writings about the use of genetic selection and modification of embryos created through IVF. Other interpretations expand the possible window for genetic modification. One such view is put forward by Jen Willows (2021), an editor specializing in genetics, who suggests that lifting could occur during a specific developmental stage following birth, even though she considers that option scientifically inaccurate. The differing interpretations offered by Lewis and Willows point to the ambiguity surrounding the timing and mechanics of the lifting procedure. Coming from outside literary studies, their perspectives draw attention not to any definitive answer, but to the narrative gaps that Ishiguro deliberately leaves open.

Parental involvement in the lifting process begins with a question on which their child's future hinges: to enhance or not to enhance. This question is conditioned by each family's economic background, as genetic enhancement is depicted as a costly procedure available mainly to upper-class families. Although the specifics of the lifting procedure remain vague, its effects are clear: it increases children's cognitive capacity, granting them access to higher education and broader life opportunities (Ishiguro 2021, 145–146). What turns the decision into a dilemma is the fact that genetic enhancement in the novel carries serious health risks. Parents who opt for lifting expose their children to the possibility of severe health complications, which may ultimately result in death. If parents choose not to enhance, however, they limit their child's future socioeconomic opportunities and access to material security, effectively placing them at a structural disadvantage from an early age.

Many accounts in the bioethical literature on genetic enhancement via reproductive technology treat the safety of the procedure as a necessary presupposition, without which meaningful bioethical analysis cannot proceed (e.g., Buchanan et al. 2000; DeGrazia 2016). Within this framework, the protection of the child – even one not yet conceived – takes precedence over full parental autonomy, in line with the principle of non-maleficence, which places a moral obligation on parents and medical institutions to avoid causing harm to the child. In *Klara and the Sun*, however, this normative principle is entirely absent. Ishiguro omits such a commitment to safeguarding by portraying a free-for-all laboratory landscape in which genetically enhanced children are conceived without institutional oversight. In the context of the lifting procedure, the omission emerges in two respects. One concerns the lack of detail about the procedure itself, as Ishiguro never specifies when lifting takes place; this ambiguity invites speculation about whether enhancement occurs before birth, thereby shifting attention to the role of parents and medical institutions (Lewis 2021; Willows 2021). The other omission lies in the absence of any parental or institutional practices aimed at preventing harm to the child. This bioethical vacuum has encouraged critical literary readings that interrogate unregulated biotechnological practices and the erasure of protective measures (Narimani Charan 2023; Süt Güngör 2022).

By contrast, human genome editing in present-day biomedical practice is subject to legal and ethical oversight across many countries. As outlined in *The CRISPR Journal* (Baylis et al. 2020), most national policies either prohibit or strictly regulate heritable genome editing. For example, the Oviedo Convention – adopted by the Council of Europe – bans germline modification unless it is for

preventive, diagnostic, or therapeutic purposes. In the United States, federal law does not explicitly ban germline editing, but the Food and Drug Administration is prohibited from reviewing proposals that involve genetically modified embryos, effectively preventing its clinical use (Baylis et al. 2020). These regulations were further reinforced following the international backlash against what is regarded as the first known case of genome editing in humans, conducted by Chinese scientist He Jiankui in 2018. His work, which involved helping HIV-positive individuals with fertility issues, included in vitro fertilization and germline editing without medical necessity or ethical oversight. The case, carried out in defiance of international norms and without transparency, sparked global condemnation and led to renewed calls for a moratorium on human germline genome editing (Greely 2019). Much of the concern surrounding unregulated gene editing arises from the risk that even precisely targeted technologies like CRISPR can cause unintended genetic changes. So-called “unintended genome editing” has been found “in approximately 16 % of the human embryo cells” (Alanis-Lobato et al. 2021). While unregulated scientific research was halted and expected to remain within strict ethical boundaries, fictional literary depictions have been free to explore what lies beyond those limits.

Can the lifted children in *Klara and the Sun* be meaningfully compared to the gene-edited babies born as a result of Jiankui’s experiment? In the latter case, the genome editing was narrowly targeted, with the aim of making the children resistant to HIV by disabling a specific gene, and the procedure was carried out with the explicit intention of achieving that outcome. By contrast, the enhancement process in Ishiguro’s novel is broad and nonspecific. The parents exercise no control over which cognitive traits are modified, nor to what extent. All lifted children appear to receive the same type of broad enhancement, which results in a notable behavioral and psychological uniformity – a pattern explored further in the following section. The comparison highlights a key distinction: while real-world germline editing raises concerns because of its specificity, among other factors, Ishiguro’s depiction of lifting is marked by its opacity and overt standardization.

Parental decision-making

While Ishiguro emphasizes – or rather reduces – the complex debate surrounding genetic enhancement primarily to the threat of illness or death, it is worth noting that several interpretations of *Klara and the Sun* also emphasize concerns about inequality, especially the divide between lifted and non-lifted children (e.g.,

Banerjee 2022; Chen and Liang 2024; Deka 2024). Although inequality is discussed later in this study, it is important to recognize that an opposing risk also emerges in the novel's portrayal of enhancement. In his *Liberal Eugenics: In Defence of Human Enhancement* (2004), ethics scholar Nicholas Agar identifies two possible contrasting tendencies associated with biotechnology: polarization (which deepens social inequality), and homogenization (which threatens individuality by producing individuals with similar traits). According to Agar, both tendencies “threaten [the] balance between diversity and solidarity” (2004, 134). He also acknowledges that, although polarization and homogenization appear to be opposites, “they might be simultaneous consequences” of the same cause – namely, “[the] prerogative to enhance” (2004, 135). Indeed, the lifting procedure in *Klara and the Sun* gives rise to both tendencies at once.

In the novel, parents cannot choose which specific traits are altered – every child is lifted in the same way, with enhanced cognitive abilities. But this lack of choice is not what causes the children to become similar in terms of behavior. Even if more enhancement options were available, most parents would probably still choose the same traits – those that improve their child's chances of succeeding in society. This assumption is supported by Agar's argument that biotechnology under competitive conditions tends to narrow diversity rather than expand it (2004, 146). What drives homogenization in Ishiguro's novel is not simply the technological limitation of a single enhancement pathway, but the discriminatory structure of the social system that rewards only one kind of success and pressures all parents to aim for the same goal. As American philosopher Michael J. Sandel (2007) argues, the more parents view genetic enhancement as a way to secure their child's future, the more individual choice gives way to a collective conformity shaped by social expectations. Furthermore, when a child is enhanced for the purpose of achieving external goals instead of cultivating their unique potential, they risk becoming instruments of parental will rather than individuals in their own right (Sandel 2007, 49). This instrumentalization contributes further to their sameness; not only do lifted children behave in similar ways, but they are also shaped to fulfill the same ambitions – the shared desires of their parents, who view enhancement as a way to equip their children with the perceived requirements for success.

The loss of individuality among lifted children is a consequence of a system that channels them through highly standardized developmental pathways (Ishiguro 2021, 83–84). The novel offers little to distinguish one lifted child from another in terms of personality, ambition, or behavior. The actual distinction thus

lies between the lifted and the non-lifted. This signals a shift from individual identity to group-based classification, where enhancement becomes not a means of self-expression but a tool of social conformity. As American political scientist Francis Fukuyama argues in his book *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (2002), such conformity threatens the very notion of individuality that underpins liberal democratic societies, replacing personal uniqueness with biologically shaped social utility. When parents consent to the lifting procedure, they are not only agreeing to improve their child's cognitive abilities, but they are also shaping other aspects of their child's life; this includes their environment, responsibilities, and daily activities. Lifted children tend to follow nearly identical life paths, especially leading up to college. They are raised at home, frequently due to health problems linked to the procedure. They are home-schooled, spend time with Artificial Friends, and interact with their peers mostly through "interaction meetings" (Ishiguro 2021) held in each other's homes. As Josie's mother notes, "[t]he kids who don't do well in college are always the ones who didn't attend enough meetings" (2021, 73). This shows how crucial the gatherings are in helping lifted children socialize and prepare for academic success, serving both as spaces of interactivity and informal assessments. However, as opposed to encouraging individual growth or diverse intellectual development, the meetings serve to instill a shared way of thinking and living. During one of the gatherings, the lifted children discuss same topics and readily agree with one another, particularly when it comes to Rick – the only non-lifted child present. They seem collectively aware of how different he is: "'We should be nice to him,' another girl said. 'It must be weird for him, being here with us'" (Ishiguro 2021, 82). Additionally, their behavior mirrors not authentic friendship, but a kind of institutionalized camaraderie shaped by shared enhancement and routine. While the lifted children frequently respond in the same condescending manner, they do so separately, without forming lasting relationships. In this way, lifting replaces deep connection with a superficial sense of belonging based solely on shared enhanced traits. What was intended to be an improvement eventually becomes uniformity. The novel thus portrays what German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (2003) warns against: the risk that genetic enhancement will subject individuals to preselected norms dictated by prevailing social expectations.

The behavioral conformity and homogenous character traits among lifted children – traits that arise from standardized cognitive enhancement – can be traced to a deeper cause, one that precedes the lifting procedure itself. This fundamental cause is what Sandel refers to as "the drive to mastery" (2007, 27), a

mindset that urges many upper-class parents to enhance their offspring. These parents, though they may not fully recognize it, share a common ambition: to “master the mystery of birth” (Sandel 2007, 82). The desire to exert control over the genetic foundations of a child’s development goes beyond the traditional bio-conservative worries surrounding eugenics, such as inequality (Chen and Liang 2024), agency (Birkeland 2023), or disadvantage (Kass 2003), and addresses essential questions of human freedom and identity. Sandel’s reasoning is supported by Habermas, who argues that true freedom is based on the assumption that our origins are not subject to human control but instead are rooted in something beyond deliberate design (Habermas 2003). Therefore, the ability to attribute one’s birth to a source beyond the will of any particular individual – whether it be chance, nature, or divine will – is essential for genuine autonomy. In the case of lifted children, this element of mystery is removed. The shaping of their characteristic features is no longer beyond human control but instead results from intentional parental intervention. This transforms the child into a “subordinate” (Sandel 2007, 82) of their “designing parents” (82), who do not embrace their child for who they are but strive to determine who the child becomes. In doing so, the parents deprive themselves and their children of the unexpected, the ambiguity that characterizes meaningful human relationships. “That we care deeply about our children, and yet cannot choose the kind we want, teaches parents to be open to the unbidden. [...] A *Gattaca*-like world, in which parents became accustomed to specifying the sex and genetic traits of their children, would be a world inhospitable to the unbidden, a gated community writ large” (Sandel 2007, 86).

For enhancement to be considered a viable and ethically defensible option, several fundamental concerns would need to be addressed, most notably the severe health risks stressed in the novel, its prohibitive cost that limits access to the wealthy, and the discriminatory social structure, which this analysis has marked as a contributing factor to homogenization. While these issues raise objections to the practice of enhancement, some bioethicists defend it on moral grounds. Australian bioethicist Julian Savulescu, for example, takes a stance distinct from and more complex than that of bio-conservative critics, arguing that “some non-disease genes affect the likelihood of us leading the best life” (2001, 413). On this basis, he presents the principle of “procreative beneficence”, which states that parents have a moral obligation to select, if possible, the potential child with the best life prospects. According to Savulescu, this requirement applies even in circumstances where genetic selection “maintains or increases social inequality” (2001, 413). Chrissie, Josie’s mother, can be understood as following this line of

thinking. Her decision to proceed with lifting aligns with the belief that parents should seek to improve their child's future prospects, even at the cost of health risks. Chrissie's choice does not indicate a disregard for inequality but suggests a prioritization of her daughter's individual potential over broader societal implications. Chrissie, however, later expresses regret of having her daughter lifted, illustrating the high stakes of enhancement as well as the emotional burden of parental choice: "I wanted the best for her. I wanted her to have a good life [...] and now Josie's sick. Because of what I decided. You see how it feels for me?" (Ishiguro 2021, 177).

Savulescu further claims that a choice not to enhance can be morally justified as long as it is based on informed reasoning; he emphasizes that parents should be fully informed about the effects of enhancement before making a decision. If the parents decide against lifting because of a reasonable objection, such as concern about rising societal inequality, their decision remains ethically valid. In contrast to Chrissie, Helen, Rick's mother, fails to engage with this ethical framework. She does not appear to make a deliberate or informed moral choice but instead bases her decision on emotions and a vague discomfort with interfering in what feels natural. She admits, "I feel... I feel I didn't do my best for him. I feel I didn't even think it through [...] I was somewhere else in my mind and I just let the moment go past. Perhaps that's what I regret more than anything else. That I never loved him enough to make a proper decision one way or the other" (Ishiguro 2021, 199). The contrast between Chrissie and Helen reflects two fundamentally different responses to the question of enhancement, one resulting in the choice to enhance, the other to abstain. Yet despite making opposite decisions, both mothers express emotional hesitation marked by uncertainty, guilt, and long-term consequences. Chrissie's decision, accompanied by a lingering sense of regret, can – through the lens of procreative beneficence – be interpreted as a morally responsible attempt to give her daughter the best possible future. Helen, on the other hand, spares Rick the health complications associated with lifting, yet openly admits that her choice was not the result of objective evaluation, but of a non-rational instinct. Ultimately, it is possible to arrive at the question of whether such a deeply personal and intimate decision – one that involves altering the life of one's child – can ever be made solely on the basis of unbiased reasoning, without being entangled in subjective fears or doubts.

With the technology of lifting comes the enhancement of a child's cognitive and social potential. For parents like Chrissie, who possess the means to afford the procedure, lifting appears to be a responsible choice – a way to open doors

that would otherwise remain only partially open. In this context, enhancement is not framed as indulgent, but as an act of care. Ishiguro, however, counterbalances this hope with a persistent reminder of the risks involved. The threat of illness, and even death, emerges as the most emphasized negative consequence in the story. This is reflected in Josie's recurring health issues and her physical absence from much of the novel's plot; her presence is largely static, confined to interior spaces. For Chrissie, the burden of lifting is similarly heavy. She must confront the responsibility she bears for her daughter's condition (which is intensified by the loss of her other child to the same enhancement). Within *Klara and the Sun*, it is this health hazard that dominates the bioethical discourse: characters openly discuss it, weigh their options, and try to make sense of the dilemma. Yet by placing so much focus on the risk of illness, the novel's surface narrative draws attention away from other, more latent consequences of genetic engineering. Chrissie, for instance, never reflects on any concerns beyond the health risks. However, as this analysis has shown, the novel opens space for broader reflection, ranging from the initial parental involvement in the process of enhancement, to the later effects of biotechnology that lead to sameness, seen in the behavioral uniformity and loss of individuality among lifted children. Foregrounding these aspects does not necessarily diminish or reverse Ishiguro's depiction of genetic enhancement, which he frames as dystopian and ethically questionable. Rather, this study points out these aspects as conceptual layers within the narrative that extend beyond usual readings, thereby expanding the interpretive framework of the novel.

Emotional inequality

The broadening of the interpretive framework applied to the parental dilemma can be extended to other dimensions of the novel as well. Remaining within the thematic scope of genetic enhancement, this part now shifts to the gap that emerges between lifted and non-lifted individuals. From this angle, several interpretations of *Klara and the Sun* view the lifting procedure as a means of reinforcing class inequality. For instance, Ashok Dayal argues that "technology exacerbates inequality [...] perpetuating class divides" (2024, 24), effectively transforming genetic status into a form of social destiny. Kishor Kumar Deka similarly notes that Ishiguro "challenges readers to reconsider the potential consequences of a future where access to technological advancements becomes the primary determinant of one's social status" (2024, 1563). In a related argument, Alexander Kosoris (2021) offers a class-based reading of the novel, seeing the divide between lifted and non-lifted children as a reflection of real-world class structures and the systemic

barriers faced by those outside the privileged elite. These readings assume that genetic enhancement, when tied to social status, raises concerns grounded in the principle of justice, particularly distributive fairness, by questioning whether it is morally acceptable for educational advancement and social recognition to depend on access to enhancement technologies. In this way, the interpretations highlight how genetic engineering technologies affect not only individual lives but also institutionalized inequalities.

While existing interpretations tend to focus on lifting as a source of class inequality, this study extends the analysis to include the emotional and interpersonal stratification it produces. The issue of inequality in *Klara and the Sun* therefore goes beyond socio-economic disparity; the novel depicts how genetic enhancement seeds inequality into human relationships through emotional alienation. This dimension is hinted at by Ishiguro himself, who remarked in a 2016 interview with *The Guardian*, prior to the novel's publication:

When you get to the point where you can say that person is actually intellectually or physically superior to another person because you have removed certain possibilities for that person getting ill [...] or because they're enhanced in other ways, that has enormous implications for very basic values that we have (Ishiguro 2016).

Building on this remark, the analysis proposes to shift focus from the broader societal impact of enhancement to its psychological and affective consequences at the level of individual experience. The emotional divide between Rick and Josie is not simply a byproduct of lifting; it is a direct result of how enhancement transforms the expectations, self-perception, and relational dynamics between lifted and non-lifted individuals. In his interpretation of the novel, Agnibha Banerjee notes that enhancement technologies are capable of reinforcing inequality not only on social but also biological level. His claim that "a bio-technologized meritocracy not only reinforces existing social inequalities, but also, more dangerously, imprints those inequalities and their debilitating consequences onto the human genome" (2022, 9) is reflected in the deepening emotional rift between Rick and Josie. Similarly, Isaacson warns that "gene editing could exacerbate inequality and even permanently encode it into our species" (2021, 389). In this context, inequality refers to the risk that unequal access to enhancement technologies may lead to the creation of a biologically entrenched elite.

The perspective of a non-lifted child is presented mainly through the character of Rick, Josie's long-time friend. Although Rick is initially hesitant to interact with Artificial Friends and keeps his distance from Klara, he eventually accepts

her and begins to communicate his growing concern about Josie, especially the developing gap between them caused by the fact that she is lifted and he is not. Despite being the same age, their lives begin to move in different directions in ways that Rick considers unnatural and forced. Josie's life is closely managed and constrained, while Rick, from a lower-income household, experiences greater freedom. Regardless of the class difference, the bond between Josie and Rick is shown as strong and sincere – yet it is their naturalness that becomes strained as the status gap between them gradually widens.

Rick and his mother represent those excluded from the advantages afforded by lifting. In the novel, genetic enhancement is linked to educational access and future opportunity. As Jinming Chen and Xiaohui Liang observe, “[t]his educational inequality reflects the prevailing meritocratic values, which prioritize merit and mitigate fears of failure, as technology becomes a critical asset for children to compete against one other” (2024, 184). Such a concern reflects broader real-world discussions about gene editing, which, like lifting in the novel, risks being exploited by the wealthy. As Walter Isaacson warns, societies must guard “against allowing it to be part of a free-market bazaar where the rich can buy the best genes and ingrain them into their families” (2021, 389). That dynamic is central to *Klara and the Sun*, where genetic enhancement becomes standard among the elite; those who are left out are excluded not necessarily by choice, but because of socio-economic barriers.

At the individual level, the deteriorating of Rick and Josie's relationship can be understood through the feelings of inferiority and distress experienced by the non-enhanced individuals. As bioethics scholar Robert Sparrow (2019, 2) argues, such emotions are likely psychosocial consequences of coexistence between enhanced and non-enhanced groups, particularly when enhancement technologies begin to define social and cognitive superiority. Sparrow suggests that in such contexts, non-enhanced individuals may come to see themselves as outdated or inadequate, with these feelings rooted in experiences of social exclusion. The emotional divide between Josie and Rick becomes apparent as Josie increasingly integrates into the social world of her lifted peers. During one exchange, she questions Rick's reluctance to pursue the same path: “But you're smarter than any of the other unlifteds trying to get in. So why won't you go for it? I'll tell you. It's because your mom wants you to stay with her forever. She doesn't want you going out there and turning into a real adult” (2021, 146). Her tone is sharp and accusatory, suggesting that she has already absorbed the belief that success depends on being lifted and keeping up with the demands of the enhanced community.

Moments such as this exemplify what Fukuyama expresses his concerns over: that genetic enhancement may destroy the foundation of moral solidarity, resulting in such a social order in which individuals are no longer viewed as equals, but as inherently ranked (2002, 9–10).

Josie's attitude toward Rick becomes even clearer when she wonders, "[H]ow's this going to work? Our plan, I mean. How's it going to work if I've got society and you haven't?" (2021, 146) Her question reveals an important turn in perspective: Josie now considers herself to belong to "society" – the world of the lifted and socially accepted – while placing Rick outside of it. Daniel L. Tobey sees a major risk in the formation of such quiet hierarchies stemming from genetic enhancement – hierarchies that begin with internal beliefs, not with policy or law (2003, 83); Josie does not entirely dismiss Rick, but she begins to view his future as fundamentally incompatible with what she believes society demands. As Sparrow (2019, 10) further warns, if enhancement technologies continue to advance, obsolescence will extend to earlier generations of enhanced individuals whose enhancements become outdated. Such a stratification would fragment the lifted community itself, producing new hierarchies and emotional disconnection between those differently enhanced. Beneath the more prominent theme of socioeconomic inequality strengthened by the lifting procedure, there appears to be a subtler but more personal rupture that is driven by internalized social distinction. Supported by bioethical concerns, the presented analysis suggests that genetic enhancement in *Klara and the Sun* redraws the limits of belonging in ways that cause emotional alienation and can also weaken even enduring human relationships.

The empathy deficit

Although the lifted children possess enhanced cognitive abilities, their empathy and emotional intelligence appear underdeveloped. While the lifting procedure is never explicitly linked to this emotional impairment, the novel does repeatedly reveal an obvious gap between the children's intellectual advancement and their limited empathy. One contributing factor could be their highly controlled upbringing; being homeschooled and mostly interacting with peers in structured group settings offers little possibility for genuine emotional development. Another possible explanation, however, lies in the enhancement process itself. As scientific studies on CRISPR and other gene-editing techniques have shown, attempts to modify complex traits like intelligence can result in unintended changes in multiple traits due to the interdependent nature of genes (Visscher et al. 2025). In fact, the so-called "off-target mutations" are not speculative; psychiatric genomics

research further supports this concern, indicating a link between certain cognitive traits and increased risk for mental health conditions (MacCabe et al. 2018).⁴

The imbalance between the children’s enhanced cognitive abilities and their limited empathy is particularly evident during one of the interaction meetings – an episode that deserves to be examined in greater detail. As Kosoris (2021) observes, Rick begins to identify with Klara after seeing her subjected to the same cruelty he experiences, yet the nature of their mistreatment varies. Rick is mocked by a group of lifted girls who ask him trivial and irritating questions and laugh at his responses (2021, 82–84). They almost regard him as inferior – one girl even remarks that it “must be weird for him” (2021, 81) to be the only non-lifted present at the meeting – but they still talk to him and express some interest in his life, even if it might not be genuine. Rick is seen as socially inferior, but still human. Klara, however, is not treated in a humane way at all. Although, due to her narration, inner monologue, and behavior, she is often categorized as “innocent” (Unkel 2023), the lifted boys ignore her presence, speak about her instead of to her, and only interact with her when they need her to perform a task. At one point, one of the lifted boys recommends they “throw her over” to “test her coordination” (2021, 86).

Klara’s mistreatment shows a kind of exclusion based on her non-human nature, which lacks a specific quality and causes certain individuals to treat her as an inanimate object. What exactly distinguishes humans from animals or machines has been the subject of bioethical and philosophical debate for decades. Because this difference cannot be fully explained by traits like consciousness, sentience, agency, or emotional capacity, Fukuyama refers to the mysterious quality, which gives humans their dignity, as “Factor X” (2002, 149–150). While Rick is looked down on, Klara is due to the missing Factor X denied moral recognition altogether. This interaction reveals a layered system of exclusion – a hierarchy within the hierarchy. Non-lifted individuals are marginalized by their enhanced peers, yet Artificial Friends, who fall entirely outside the category of the human, are denied moral recognition altogether. Technological developments thus produce stratification at both ends of the social spectrum: at the top, they elevate genetically modified individuals above their non-enhanced counterparts; at the bottom, they relegate humanoid beings to a status beyond the ethical boundaries.

⁴ MacCabe et al. (2018) examine the shared genetic basis between traits associated with high cognitive or creative ability and vulnerability to psychiatric conditions. Their research identifies polygenic overlaps, suggesting that genetic variants which enhance certain intellectual capacities may also increase susceptibility to disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

A paradox emerges when a humanoid, Klara, often shows greater empathy than the humans around her. This theme has gained wide attention among critics, who frequently interpret the novel as a reflection on what it means to be human – a question answered by a non-human being. For instance, Oliver Li and Johan Eddebo describe it as a story that discovers “the humanity of the non-human” (2023), and Anupama Hosuri notes that Klara’s kindness, innocence, and emotional honesty are qualities worth admiring when contrasted with those of the human characters (2021). It is true that Artificial Friends often portray a sense of human solidarity that is especially lacking in the lifted children. However, this idea can be taken further as not all Artificial Friends are the same. Just as the novel distinguishes between lifted and non-lifted children, it likewise establishes a hierarchy among humanoids. Ishiguro introduces two generations: the older B2 models, like Klara, and the newer B3 variants. While B3s come with technical upgrades, such as improved movement and a limited sense of smell, they are said to be less emotionally aware. Even though the store manager admits that the new B3s are “a little headstrong” (2021, 46), she dismisses this concern to boost sales; in the end, however, she acknowledges that parents “never really took to them” (2021, 339) despite their improvements. This points to a deeper issue: the more technically advanced the Artificial Friends become, the less emotionally suitable they are for their role as companions. The B3s begin to exhibit traits such as apathy, detachment, and even superiority, which contradict their main purpose of emotional support. Klara notices such behavior in the store, where B3s subtly mock the older models and move away from them. They exchange “sly looks and signals” (2021, 41), revealing a new level of self-awareness. Klara expresses her concern: “The new B3s, it was said, had all sorts of improvements. But how could they be good AFs for their children if their minds could invent ideas like these?” (2021, 41), questioning the notion that technological progress always leads improvement.

This key point expands the discussion of the relationship between humans and non-humans in the novel by illustrating how the increasing sophistication of artificial beings may disrupt the very qualities – such as empathy and loyalty – that justify humanoids’ social roles. The Artificial Friends in *Klara and the Sun* more than contrast human flaws – they also highlight and exaggerate them, raising issues about moral development. In particular, the behavior of non-human characters invites a broader bioethical reflection: what does their conduct reveal about the moral progress of humans? Rather than simply mirroring their creators, the humanoids expose the limits of enhancement when it is focused solely on

intelligence or ability, and not on ethics or empathy. To maintain focus on the perspective of the lifted children, it is necessary to set aside questions of robotic autonomy, even though they remain relevant within the field of robot ethics.⁵ Ishiguro implies that enhancement – whether limited or extensive – does not guarantee moral growth. The lifted children have enhanced cognitive abilities but show little empathy or emotional maturity. A similar issue arises with the new B3 Artificial Friends. Despite being technically more advanced than the older B2 models, they exhibit concerning traits like arrogance; on the other hand, Klara, a B2 model, consistently shows kindness, loyalty, and emotional sensitivity. Instead of moral growth, it appears that enhancement leads to moral regression. Ishiguro's portrayal suggests a bio-conservative viewpoint, as represented by figures such as Sandel (2007) and Habermas (2003), both of whom question the assumption that technological or genetic advancement automatically leads to ethical progress.

The idea of moral enhancement offers a useful lens through which to examine emotional and ethical deficiencies in the novel. *Klara and the Sun* portrays conditions that reflect the urgent need for what bioethicists such as Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu consider essential: moral enhancement (2012, 121). According to them, the problem is not a lack of capacity for moral growth, but rather the influence of pride, resistance to change, and unsupportive social environments. As technology continues to advance, bringing with it risks such as weapons of mass destruction (Persson and Savulescu 2012) and global challenges like climate change and environmental degradation (Lavazza and Reichlin 2019), the need for corresponding moral progress grows more pressing. They argue that intelligence alone is insufficient to meet the complex ethical challenges posed by modern society. Moral development does not necessarily require invasive biotechnological intervention; rather, it can be achieved by creating conditions that encourage prosocial behavior.

By designing tasks and social settings that promote altruism and reduce unfairness, moral tendencies can be strengthened over time. The emphasis on the significance of environment highlights that the troubling behaviors of the lifted children stem from the isolating conditions in which they are raised. It is not necessarily the lifting procedure itself that interferes with moral development of the enhanced individuals, but rather the social circumstances that accompany it – being raised in isolation, homeschooled, and rarely exposed to emotional diversity. To suggest that the emotional underdevelopment of the lifted children is caused

⁵ For instance, *Klara and the Sun* invites engagement with the ongoing debates about whether robots should be given more autonomy, even if it results in less predictable or socially “desirable” behavior.

by the enhancement procedure would be reductive. A more comprehensive interpretation supported by Persson and Savulescu's work on moral enhancement acknowledges that their empathy deficit is a consequence of the environment shaped by their lifted status. The lifting procedure offers a social advantage, but it also reinforces exclusion and limits exposure to diverse moral experiences.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) does not place genetic engineering technologies at the center of its narrative in the way science fiction often does. It pushes the theme of enhancement process to the margins where it is left uncertain and largely unexplained. Yet it is precisely this peripheral positioning, and the deliberate omission of both the biotechnological specifics and the ethical oversight surrounding enhancement, that enables a broader interpretive range. The author's euphemistic use of the term "lifting" reflects the kind of conceptual distancing that is often found in real-world discourse surrounding controversial biotechnologies. By leaving the lifting procedure inaccessible, Ishiguro creates space to explore the question of genetic enhancement not just along the horizontal axis between bio-conservative and transhumanist notions, but also vertically, probing its social, philosophical, and psychological implications. This study has argued that Ishiguro presents a world in which enhancement is neither idealized nor condemned but situated within a network of emotional consequences and ethical ambiguities. Through the analysis of perspectives of lifted and non-lifted children, their parents, and the Artificial Friends who silently witness far-reaching human decisions, the study aimed to bring underexamined dimensions of the novel – namely, the bioethical tension between parental aspiration and a child's autonomy, the emotional cost of enhancement, and the erosion of empathy – into closer focus. The underrepresented motif of lifting in the narrative reflects how biotechnological change frequently enters society – not as a clearly articulated ethical choice, but as a quiet inevitability masked by the rhetoric of progress.

From the perspective of parents, the novel presents lifting as a morally complicated decision marked by emotional weight and possible long-term consequences. Their dilemmas are enriched by the contrasting ideas of Michael J. Sandel's critique of parental control and Julian Savulescu's principle of procreative beneficence. The viewpoint of non-lifted individuals, exemplified by the character of Rick, reveals how enhancement technologies create not only socio-economic inequality but also emotional alienation, as they are capable of widening interpersonal divides and distancing even close relationships. This reflects Fukuyama's

and Daniel L. Tobey's concerns that genetic stratification weakens shared recognition and undermines the foundations of emotional connection. Finally, through the perspective of lifted children coupled with Artificial Friends, the novel exposes a growing deficit of empathy. Their cognitive superiority is not matched by emotional development, mainly due to the isolating social environments that accompany the lifting procedure. As Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu warn, without corresponding moral development, genetic enhancement risks resulting not in progress but in a subtle moral regression.

What ultimately allows for a broader interpretation of *Klara and the Sun* is the vagueness surrounding genetic enhancement in the novel, a theme that is already speculative in itself. Kazuo Ishiguro avoids describing any bioethical regulation within the fictional world, presenting the enhancement process as controlled only by financial means. The lack of specificity encourages interpretation to develop not only through technical or legal questions of genetic modification but also, as in the case of *Klara and the Sun*, through the characters themselves – their views, behavior, and relationships.

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The Diversity of Life and Its Finitude in Selected Works

Bogumiła Suwara

Abstract: All cultures have established “systems of death”, yet a significant issue debated within their contemporary context is the law of “death on demand”. This article focuses on two aspects: “the denial of death” in the systems of death, using Edson Oda’s film *Nine Days* (2020), and the resolution of “unbearable pain” through euthanasia or appropriate palliative care, as shown in Mateusz Pakuła’s work, *Jak nie zabiłem swojego ojca i jak bardzo tego żałuję* (How I Didn’t Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It, 2021). The analysis examines cultural texts to explore a key issue in bioethics: how can we assist individuals in dying? It also examines how perspectives from the field of bioethical discourse can shape the interpretation of a film or literary work. The incorporation of a bioethical context allows for the interpretation of Pakuła’s text not only as a “protest song” advocating for the legalization of euthanasia, which has been the primary focus of previous analyses, but also as a significant critique of the prevailing approach to palliative care.

Keywords: Finitude. Fragility of life. Euthanasia. Palliative care. Edson Oda. Mateusz Pakuła.

Nothing ever happens twice, and
nothing ever will. Because of this,
we are born without proficiency
and die without routine.

Wisława Szymborska *Nic dwa razy*
(Nothing Twice) ([1957] 1966)

Introduction

It is evident that all cultures developed “systems of death” that have shaped societal perceptions of death and dying, influenced expressions of emotions related to these experiences, and dictated responses (Kastenbaum 1977).⁶ Currently, the issue of legalizing euthanasia – both passive and active euthanasia, as well as assisted suicide – has been included in this discussion. It has emerged as a significant aspect of understanding death and dying in Western Europe, North America, Australia, and elsewhere, and has transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries (Lloyd, White and Sutton 2011); as a global trend, it is influencing other “systems of death” (Kastenbaum 1977). Today, as the right to end one’s life at will has been

⁶ This chapter is a revised version of the study Suwara (2024): “Rozmanitost’ života, a najmä jeho konečnosti, na príklade vybraných diel.” [The Diversity of Life, and of Its Finitude in Particular, on the Example of Selected Works].

exercised for some time in certain countries, research has evolved from exploring bipolar ethical arguments for and against this right to investigating new topics, more nuanced insights, and distinctions. In discussions about euthanasia, factors such as the social status, gender, and ethnic background of applicants are highlighted.

Emerging challenges include assessing the boundaries of the Western model of dying, especially in comparison with other cultural perspectives (e.g. China); considering euthanasia as an outlet for those enduring unbearable pain; critically evaluating the conditions under which euthanasia is allowed, as evidenced by the gap between legal permission and actual practice of assisted suicide (as seen in Canada); analysing communication between patients and hospice staff; exploring innovations within the hospice movement; and examining public attitudes toward euthanasia among specific segments of the public (referred to as “non-bioethicists”). Methodologically, this research employs various quantitative methods. The analysis of various human body parameters is converted into mathematical formulas derived from a limited set of studied indicators. Consequently, it often overlooks theories that shape discourses in the humanities and social sciences.

Despite this methodological specificity, the ultimate conclusions of clinical studies address, among other aspects, the social dimensions of assisted dying, unexpectedly resonating with Émile Durkheim’s seemingly antiquated sociological premise regarding the societal forces that may shape decisions about suicide (Phillips 1974). Historically changing sub-policies (Dybel and Wróbel 2008) could play a crucial role in this context. For instance, social insurance institutions and healthcare providers within the corporate realm make substantial public decisions that society often accepts under time constraints. These decisions are made without democratic deliberation, public debate among political actors, or adequate time for implementation, and consequently there is no verification of the validity or potential consequences of the chosen solutions.

The objective of this article is not to investigate the processes of legalizing euthanasia in different countries. Euthanasia here is understood as a narrative concerning the end of life and as a means to delve into a significant theme in bioethics in literature: why help people die?

In the initial section of this study, I examine human finitude as depicted through the lens of fictional subversive euthanasia in the film *Nine Days* (2020, dir. Edson Oda). Drawing on Martin Heidegger’s concept of “finitude” ([1927] 2008) and the emphasis on death as an ontological mystery, one that, according to

Emmanuel Levinas ([1979] 1999), leads to nothingness, I demonstrate how contemporary individuals may confront the ontological nature of their own finitude. In the second part, through Mateusz Pakuła's work, *Jak nie zabiłem swojego ojca i jak bardzo tego żałuję* (*How I Didn't Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It*, 2021), I examine the experience of dying in the context of cancer and highlight how engaging with perspectives from bioethical discourse can influence the interpretation of a literary text. The non-literary perspective may, in this case, lead to a new or expanded interpretation.

Determining whether euthanasia is more appropriately viewed in the context of suicide or natural death presents a challenging question (Cook 2023). In the European literary and cultural tradition, this tension remains prominent. On one hand, in this context, we have Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774) and Durkheim's *Le Suicide: Étude de sociologie* (*Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, 1897); on the other hand, we encounter Heidegger's exploration of thanatology (2008), Karl Jaspers's theory of "limit situations" ([1931] 2008), and Levinas's understanding of the mystery of death (1999). The ambiguity surrounding the perception of euthanasia arises from the shared existential boundary of human finitude that both suicide and natural death confront. At the same time, we are observing a shift and blurring of its boundaries, such as the redefinition of death from cardiac death to brain death. Furthermore, in modern anthropology, the concept of death by choice is increasingly viewed as an integral aspect of the natural cycles of human life (Richards and Krawczyk 2021).

Disembodied dying – finitude

Sociology has long emphasized the removal of death from the "system of death" of Western culture (Kastenbaum 1977; Becker 1973). Experts in anthropology (Richards and Krawczyk 2021) and palliative care (Piemonte and Abreu 2021) additionally incorporate the dying process itself into this trend. Some identify the psychological roots of this erasure in the post-war era of returning to "normal" life, when the gradual amnesia surrounding mass suffering and destruction coincided with the belief that death itself might not return from the battlefields (Mor, Greer and Kastenbaum 1988, 3–4).

This concept specifically reflects the ontological essence of human finitude, which is characterized by the ambivalence of death – something which we cannot delegate to another (Heidegger). However, throughout our lives, we remain influenced by the existential idea that "Others" (Levinas) or "the First before the Se-

cond” (Walczak 2023, 15) will ultimately perish. The ontological nature of death seems to have a symbolic counterpart in euphemistic metaphors related to death and dying, as exemplified by “taking life” (Hardwig 1996), “moving from virtual to real reality” (Schick 2016), and “giving back life” (Van Gorp 2024). I employ the metaphor of “giving back life” to examine the film *Nine Days*. The premise is a thought experiment: what if souls undergo a test prior to birth? Director Edson Oda develops his screenplay around this premise, where the duty to return a temporarily granted life affects the avatars of souls residing in a realm of pre-existence. The plot, inspired by an experiment, emphasizes the existential aspect of life, particularly the significance of seeking meaning in human existence: is the world Sartre’s hell, shaped by others? Or does it still hold remnants of goodness? Experts in palliative care (Piemonte and Abreu 2021) and medical education (Macneill 2011) specifically highlight that this dimension is largely missing from medical literature.

Along with the belief in the existence of spiritual life, it is essential for adherents of religion and spiritual doctrines to believe that following the death of the physical body, the spirit is liberated, becomes aware, and is genuinely alive. There are multiple potential answers to the question of what happens to us after death: various paths emerge based on different circumstances that are influenced by both the manner of our death and our behaviour while we are alive. In *Nine Days*, Oda secularizes religious concepts by positioning spiritual life in the period preceding birth. The film’s narrative unfolds in a single location over nine days, reminiscent of an ancient drama, and is situated in a spiritual realm of pre-existence, as if occurring before earthly life. This shifts the perspective on religious or spiritual frameworks that seek to understand what occurs to the soul after death and its departure from the body; the film’s title alludes to a Mexican superstition that states the soul’s separation from the body lasts for nine days. This reference serves as the narrative framework of the film. The five souls emerging from nothingness must go through a selection process due to the suicide of a young, talented violinist on earth. In her place, a new individual, a new being, may be born. In a location that is “nowhere”, where the soul of the suicide victim may detach from the body, a struggle for the opportunity to experience earthly life unfolds. A process is carried out to identify a soul capable of enduring life in a world filled with evil, aggression, and uncertainty.

Souls seeking to be born must undergo an interview and a series of tests, with only one in five souls selected to enter into existence and become alive. The chief selector Will (Winston Duke) and his adviser Kyo (Benedict Wong) oversee

the selection. In the initial stage, the incarnate souls are familiarized with the fundamental structure of the selection process: they will face a variety of tasks (the “trolley problem” and evaluations of moral decisions in real-life situations viewed live on monitors). However, there are no pre-established selection criteria (similar to situations in existentialist and phenomenological reasoning). As unsuccessful candidates are gradually eliminated, those souls not chosen to continue in existence face their “end” (finitude). Ultimately, on the ninth day of interviews, a candidate is chosen.

The avatars of the souls, entities that are neither dead nor alive, are deeply driven to succeed in the interviews, as existence unfolds similarly to existentialist philosophy: entering the realm of the living is not guaranteed but is rather seen as an extraordinary opportunity to imbue life with purpose and meaning. The existential struggle ultimately encompasses three participants: Will, Kyo, and the young applicant Emma (played by Zazie Beetz). A conflict emerges between Will and Kyo regarding the acknowledgement of Emma’s outstanding qualities. From the very first day of interviews, Kyo observes Emma’s remarkable determination to forge her own path and enhance her “selfhood” – *Jemeinigkeit* (Heidegger [1927] 2008, 59) – despite the pressure of “the Others”. On the other hand, Will favours a young man who swiftly learns ethical norms and is prepared to enforce them physically. He considers the young woman too sensitive for life in a world where there is so much evil and so little good, making the selection process resemble eugenics. Amid the conflict between the selector and his adviser regarding which soul-avatar will be born, Emma starts to define and ascribe meaning to her ephemeral existence. Driven by her own determination, she seeks to uncover Will’s long hidden secret: his greatest life achievement and, most importantly, why this question, posed by a dissatisfied candidate, remains unanswered.

In line with the theme of this study, which explores the diversity of the end of life, I will continue to examine the selection process in *Nine Days*, as I perceive an analogy with the understanding of death as a “giving back of life”. More specifically, this relates to subversive euthanasia, where the avatar of the soul that fails the interviews must relinquish the life granted to them and, consequently, cannot be reborn.

The selection process: Finitude and the meaning of existence

In the process of selecting candidates for the continuation of existence, the integrated souls attain their own “*selfhood*” and immediately gain the ability to experience it; they communicate and make moral decisions while addressing assigned

tasks, and some seek to forge a closer bond with Will, with only Emma choosing not to pursue success at any cost. They possess factuality, experience sensory and emotional events, and observe, both in real time and through recordings, the experiences, behaviours, and decisions of individuals in the real world (specifically, those who have already been born). They examine these real-life conflicts and express their own opinions and attitudes. Within this framework of existence, souls are confronted with illusion and an uncertain, unstable sense of identity. During their first conversation with Will, they learn their names, which they subsequently start to identify with. At this early stage, Emma shows an extraordinary desire to assert her free will: she resists accepting an imposed name but, lacking an alternative, ultimately decides to adopt it. While the soul's avatar persists after birth, it is "the same being"; nonetheless, it is reborn as an infant in a random body, once again facing the uncertainties of the environment and of experience. Following birth, the identity formed in the realm of pre-existence gradually fades from memory. Could it be that this identity was simply an illusion? Even if existence persists, could the avatar's identity also be an illusion?

From the very beginning, the candidates are aware that their purpose is to vanish, reminiscent of Heidegger's concept of the "insurmountable possibility of being", which encompasses death as the ultimate conclusion and closure of existence (2008, 292–294). "Being-towards-death" serves as the foundation of their existence as souls temporarily embodied in human form, with each individual's duration varying (for instance, a soul selected for rebirth experiences a pre-existence period of nine days, whereas other souls may disappear randomly during the selection process).

In *Nine Days*, Oda explores themes of fear and existential anxiety related to death. The candidates vying for a chance at existence encounter a twofold fear: firstly, the fear of failure and exclusion from the contest of extending life, and secondly, the fear of their own finitude. The selection process transforms into a journey of discovering the meaning of existence only for Emma, who, due to her uniqueness, exists beyond the burden of these oppressive emotions. Each soul's avatar experiences their "end" uniquely, as an intimate possibility that cannot be assumed or substituted by another. Each individual confronts their finitude in their own way. Some do this through denial and a rejection of the game's rules; after elimination, one discontented candidate wanders alone across the desert, ultimately unable to escape their fate and fading from existence (consumed by nothingness). Another confronts their end with ignorance and indifference; this is the case with the hedonist and trifter, who disappears with a beer bottle in hand. Yet

another individual does so through fear, as happens with the artistically gifted, hypersensitive young man. And another individual possesses a hope that they cling on to until the very end, such as the woman yearning for a romantic connection with Will. And then there is Emma, who approaches her end through genuine peace, balance, and even joy, exuding serenity. In the instances of the first two avatars, “the return of life” exhibited defiance and unconsciousness, while Will demonstrated a lack of compassion, respect, and any sense of solidarity among human beings.

For the rejected candidates who, to varying extents, accepted the principles of the interview process, Will not only facilitated but meticulously orchestrated the event, or ritual, of conclusion, that is, of their dying and death. For the young couple in love, he designed theatrical sets enhanced by multimedia technology, employing the same approach in each instance. One might refer to an imitation of a culturally constructed representation of death, an audiovisual allegory of dying and mortality, or the essence of a full funeral ceremony. In the concluding phase of the unsuccessful interview, the avatar documents a significant event or experience – one that had been personally experienced by an individual and conveyed through the monitor – that was formative for them. This experience, serving as a final wish, is subsequently reenacted in a simulated theatrical and multimedia reality, orchestrated by Will and Kyo, while Emma, unbeknownst to Will, watches voyeuristically. At the time of “disappearance” and its conclusion, Will finds himself alone with the avatar of the soul.

In addition to serving as the organizer of the interviews, Will takes on a distinctive role as a guide through a funeral rite for the young artist who has lost the courage and strength to continue living and whose final wish is to spend time on a beach – to feel the warm sand, the ocean waves, the sea breeze, and the bright sunlight. In this context, Will embodies, in a sense, Levinas’s “Second” before the “First” (Walczak 2023, 15) and resembles Charon, accompanying the soul to the other shore and into another realm. In the final shot, the two sit side by side on a bench, mere shadows against a sunlit horizon, until, abruptly and without narrative emphasis, one of the shadows disappears – as if a lightbulb has been suddenly turned off.

In the context of viewing existence as a chance to mould one’s reality and fulfil the purposes of one’s being, the artistically gifted man who demonstrated no desire to shape his own life finds that the ritual performed for him at the end of his life – essentially a form of voluntary euthanasia – serves as a representation of death as a (non-corporeal) ontological category akin to Levinas’s concept of the

“Mystery”. Levinas suggests that the unknown aspect of death, which does not initially appear as nothingness but instead resembles the experience of the impossibility of nothingness, does not imply that death is a domain from which no one has returned. Instead, it implies that death cannot occur as long as the subject is connected to something that does not originate from themselves. To put it differently, the subject exists in relation to the mystery (1999, 69).

In the second scenario, involving the woman whose ultimate wish was to ride a bicycle through the streets and along a picturesque park avenue, complications could have arisen. She could not let go of the hope of changing her fate, and Oda decided against portraying her “disappearance”. This decision was certainly not a result of a lack of creative vision, but rather a deliberate strategy to leave the story open-ended. We can therefore speculate whether her disappearance was, in some way, coerced, or whether further persuasion had been required. In Emma’s case, Will does not organize a funeral rite, because he is unable to honour her final wish. It seems that Emma is destined to follow the same path as the first candidate, who defied the rules of the game and ventured into oblivion without assistance. At the same time, Will discovers a message left by Emma: “Cherish every moment of life,” accompanied by her diary entries etched on various items, including “A Day at the Beach”, “Kyo’s Laughter”, “Tea with Kyo,” and others. In line with the structure of a hypertextual node, Will pieces together these non-subordinated elements of Emma’s behaviour – her questions, observations, and indifference to failure during the interviews, and the potential reasoning behind her final wish, which he had previously dismissed. Although Emma entered the realm of pre-existence through no choice of her own, she actively shapes her existence within it, exercising her own will apart from the ontological constraints of the world around her, be it material or spiritual. During the interviews, Emma concentrated on empathetically grasping Will’s situation; at that time, he was facing deep disappointment both in his role as a selector – having made a regrettable decision in the previous interview that resulted in the soul he had chosen committing suicide – and as a former living person who had likely also ended his own life prematurely.

Emma examined archival recordings from Will’s life and revealed his emotional depth and its consequences: sensitivity, feelings of loneliness, abandonment, helplessness against the world’s evils, and the impact of a self-destructive life strategy that hindered his ability to shape his life in a way that would fulfil the “something” that defined his purpose for living. Will had aspired to be an actor, a dream he never realized; his life felt incomplete, which may have contributed to

his decision to take his own life. Witnessing Will in the role of an actor was probably her last unfulfilled desire. Emma's legacy, captured in her diary entries, led Will to a profound realization, allowing him to understand the importance of her final wish and resolve to fulfil it just before her disappearance. In the film's concluding scenes, Will, much like a theatrical *deus ex machina*, experiences a profound transformation and splendidly recites Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* to Emma. Through his performance, he becomes an outstanding actor and, in doing so, experiences a moment of genuine life. For Emma, the essence of her time in the realm of pre-existence lay in recognizing her own identity on her own terms, characterized by kindness, a genuine interest in others, and an openness that was unaffected by the judgements of Will as the selector.

During Will's performance, both come to fully grasp the significance of their existence through their face-to-face interaction. When faced with the limitations of life, they uncover their true selves, which, as Heidegger suggests, involves not just existing but also living in harmony with one's essence (2008, 59). The authentic experience of being serves as a moment of catharsis within the film's strategic context. In the final shot, both characters vanish at the same time. The proposed film strategy facilitates catharsis and fosters a subjective sense of peace, alleviates uncertainty, and enriches one's existence with meaning, while also paving the way to mitigating the fear of mortality. It is probable that this very "aura" is what authors Nicole Piemonte and Shawn Abreu aim to convey to patients in palliative care, their loved ones, and caregivers, even if this only subtly surfaces within the narrative of *Death and Dying* (2021). It arises specifically because it is not assumed, but instead serves to express the ideal form of connection and compassion that we, as humans, should offer to those who are dying. The authors collaboratively reframe this idea as part of their critique of the original concept of palliative care, which I will discuss in the second part of this article.

Death too late

In the traditional discourse on euthanasia, two primary situations and corresponding solutions are emphasized:

Allowing physicians to facilitate the death of adult patients suffering from "unbearable suffering" due to a "serious and incurable illness". A physician may either prescribe a lethal dose of medication for the patient to self-administer – known as medical assistance in dying, voluntary assisted death, or physician-assisted suicide – or directly administer a lethal injection to the patient, which is referred to as voluntary euthanasia (Singer 2021).

This definition of “death on demand” is also found in the *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* (Battin 2004) and provides a normative framework for bioethical and clinical studies. Numerous studies addressing the issue of “helping people die” also include alternative approaches, such as palliative care and end-of-life planning (Kahana et al. 2004).

Building on this line of reasoning, a utilitarian perspective on euthanasia has emerged not only in academic circles but also when the “individual well-being of the patient” and “individual decision-making” come into conflict with the interests of society and the immediate family of the patient (including the concerns and capabilities of relatives and health insurance providers) (Hardwig 1996). Within this framework, euthanasia is considered morally justifiable when death does not occur at the appropriate time (i.e. “too late”) for the benefit of society, particularly when it comes to resource allocation and the need to alleviate the strain on familial relationships caused by the intense demands of caregiving and the financial burden associated with supporting a dying family member or someone suffering from a degenerative illness. In this context, there has been a rising trend to expand both the criteria and motivations for euthanasia, encompassing more controversial cases, such as the recent legal amendments in Canada that have extended eligibility to individuals with mental illnesses, among others. A recent emphatic statement from a healthcare provider representative further emphasizes the urgent need to commence a comprehensive discussion on the political, social, commercial, and bioethical aspects of euthanasia. Highlighting the demographic realities of an ageing Western population, he presents euthanasia – rebranded as “giving life back” – as a utilitarian approach to conserving future resources and caregiving capacities.

In this part of the article, I address the issue of euthanasia in its primary sense within the context of Pakuła’s literary work *Jak nie zabiłem swojego ojca i jak bardzo tego żałuję* (*How I Didn’t Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It*, 2021). Pakuła advocates for the legalization of euthanasia as a means of alleviating suffering: “I believe his suffering will not have been in vain if I write about it in a book (not about my father, but about his suffering) and the book initiates a discussion about the legalization of euthanasia. It has to happen: discussion and LEGALIZATION” (217).

The work is politically engaged and mainly focused on influencing political decisions (Dunin 2024), aiming to raise public discourse to a level that garners political support. Currently, euthanasia is not included in the platform of any political party, even though public opinion polls in Poland – where it is criminalized

with penalties ranging from three months to five years for assisting or encouraging such acts – indicate that society is generally in favour of such measures. This is especially significant considering that since Poland’s political transformation in 1989, the Catholic Church has significantly influenced and controlled ethical debates and decisions on crucial societal issues, including abortion, in vitro fertilization, and equal rights for minorities and LGBTQ individuals. Pakuła confronts and critiques this influence with a sense of emotional urgency:

I hate you; you church idiots! How hard I try not to hate you today, and how miserably I fail! Fucking bishops. It’s them, it’s their fault [...] Sacred lunatics, I wish all of you who scream against euthanasia would spend months lying down, howling in pain, and begging for death! (Pakuła 2021, 140)

Since the late 1980s, discussions regarding the legalization of euthanasia in Poland often resurface whenever the media draws attention to a specific case. In 2008, the film *Right to Die?* (2007) was released in the United States. This work by Canadian filmmaker John Zaritsky ignited discussions, particularly within Western debates (Morris and Plunkett 2008), and ultimately provoked a response from the Polish bioethics’ community (e.g. from Hołówka and Terlikowski). While insights from academic bioethics sometimes enrich the ongoing debate in Poland, they seem to exert little influence in sparking or invigorating the discussion (Schick 2016). Nonetheless, examining the context, significance, and current status of bioethical discussions in Poland would be advantageous to the current discussion.

Since 1988 the Public Opinion Research Center (*Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej*) has consistently analysed the issue of “death on demand”. Data from 2009 reveal that nearly half (48 percent) of respondents felt that doctors should honour the wishes of individuals in suffering who seek assistance in dying, while 39 percent opposed this view and 13 percent were undecided. Support for the legalization of “death on demand” was even more robust, with 61 percent endorsing it for the same reasons. There was a significant decrease in both the percentage of those firmly opposed and those who were undecided. Rafał Boguszewski asserts that this “may indicate that Poles today, for various reasons, are more frequently reflecting on ethical issues than in the past and are adopting more clearly defined positions on them” (2009, 4). However, the data also indicate that the number of respondents expressing agreement significantly declined when the question was rephrased from “death on demand” to “euthanasia”, even among those who initially supported the concept of death on demand (2009, 6). Public opinion clearly

demonstrates that the term “euthanasia” carries a negative connotation, partly shaped by the historical memory of Nazi death camps in Poland. It may also trigger different associations than those linked to the idea of death sought by a terminally ill individual. Furthermore, the survey revealed that attitudes toward euthanasia were unaffected by perceptions of the quality and importance of palliative care. It also indicated that there were differences based on gender and generation: women tended to be less supportive of euthanasia, whereas younger men showed a greater approval compared to older men (Ibid.).

This final distinction can be partially likened to the critical reception of Pakuła’s book. Younger literary critics (Mrozek 2023; Jakubiec 2024) highlight the almost journalistic depiction of personal details, including physical decline, loss of vitality, and the varying intensity of pain endured during Pakuła’s father’s final months. The anguished cries of a dying man, pleading for a swift death – the same mercy he had granted his dog but which he was denied himself – prompted critics to highlight the significance of individual rights in end-of-life decision-making. They perceived the absence of legalized euthanasia in Poland as an unjust limitation on the personal freedom of choice. Their commitment to the principles of justice and freedom of choice is reflected in *How I Didn’t Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It* and its theatrical adaptation, which serves as a protest advocating for the legalization of euthanasia and a plea against its criminalization.

A member of the older generation provides a contrasting viewpoint in their criticism, posing a direct ethical dilemma to Pakuła:

Why didn’t you kill your father when he asked you to, when you seem convinced that it was the right thing to do? Because the law forbids it? Because you didn’t have the courage to make the decision and bear the consequences, be they psychological or moral? Why did you want someone else to become a murderer in your place? (Grabowski, 2023)

A possible response is offered by John Hardwig (1996) in his reflection on the appropriate time to die. He believes it is ethically inappropriate to direct a request for euthanasia to a loved one, as it can be emotionally devastating for them; they may also lack the knowledge to fulfil the request adequately or without complications. In the philosopher’s view, this request should be addressed to a physician who prioritizes the individual’s best interests, has the necessary professional expertise, and is less vulnerable to any possible malicious intentions from family members.

How I Didn't Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It was written as an expression of frustration in response to Pakuła's father's ethically demanding expectations and his own experiences of suffering. It encountered criticism for its intellectually shallow (and even political) urgency and its paternalism (Grabowski 2023). The work gains credibility not only by depicting individuals who have faced similar experiences and frustrations ("everything depends on experience"; Pakuła 2021, 145), especially concerning the concept of a "good death" of a loved one – often elusive in the realm of hospital care – but also through its proactive involvement in artistic and social initiatives that embody the slogan "Trust me, I'm an artist," which acts as a guiding principle for projects aimed at encouraging public dialogue (Dumitriu and Farsides 2017). I am referencing not only the theatrical adaptation of the prose but also to the interviews with Pakuła from literary festivals available on YouTube, as well as post-performance discussions, including the debate on "good death", which features hospice advocate Anija Franczak (Pawłowski 2023). The focus on ethically ambiguous end-of-life decisions, along with the text's urgent and provocative tone, defines its social relevance and sets Pakuła's work apart from other writings that similarly explore personal experiences of death and dying (Tuszyńska 2007).

How I Didn't Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It was written in response to the fragility of human life and the failure of scientific authority – specifically the doctor's ultimately erroneous prediction of a painless death for Pakuła's father: "Dad is sleeping a lot now, the doctor says this is how it goes, that he's dying, that one day he just won't wake up. I think that's not so bad. I think it's a good death. Euthanasia" (2021, 85). However, in reality, the medical prognosis proves to be incorrect, and death does not occur as anticipated. Consequently, the central theme of the book revolves around pain and suffering ("the book is not about my father, but about pain"; Pakuła 2021, 32). The father's anguish and the son's torment over his inability to kill – which he holds himself accountable for – leads him to justify his actions and ultimately inspires him to write the book; pain serves as a rationale for euthanasia. However, if the son, despite his strong connection with his father, does not possess the psychological strength to carry out an act of mercy killing ("and in movies it's so easy!"; 155), then perhaps palliative care represents a less problematic alternative for alleviating suffering. This is precisely why I approach the topic of pain through the lenses of literary theory and bioethics. Such a framework allows me to argue that Pakuła need not regret not having killed his father.

For the purposes of this article, I assert that renowned literary works such as *War and Peace* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* contribute to cultural reflections on death just as significantly as the frequently overlooked discipline of anaesthesiology (Bourke 2014) and how the advancement of pain-relieving medications shape the culture of medicine. I primarily focus on the work of palliative care experts Nicole Piemonte and Shawn Abreu, *Death and Dying* (2021); literary scholar Sebastian Porzuczek's *Mapowanie bólu. Lektura – Spojrzenie – Afekt* (*Mapping Pain: Reading, Perspective, Affect*) (2020); and bioethicist Nina Streeck's "Death Without Distress? The Taboo of Suffering in Palliative Care" (2019). I hope this approach will prove useful, even though references to medical contexts in literary scholarship tend to be only marginal, with the same often being true in reverse.

Until recently, the interpretation and analysis of literary works were characterized by the prioritization of the mind over the body, resulting in a pronounced dichotomy between physical and psychological pain. In addition, within the literary tradition, pain has frequently been seen as transcending the boundaries of language (the non-referentiality of pain), being conveyed through screams that resist any linguistic expression capable of being shared through words. This approach significantly stigmatized pain. Porzuczek (2020) notes that scholars influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic insights have experienced a significant shift from focusing on the semiotic aspects of pain to its cultural dimensions; Wittgenstein argued that the concept of pain was learned alongside language itself (2000, 169). This broader view of pain as a reflective experience (similar to the concept of "total pain") was introduced by David B. Morris, who contended that pain cannot simply be seen as a biological response (impulse) but must be understood as an intensity felt and interpreted within particular socio-historical contexts (1999, 39). Joanna Bourke (2014) further explores this concept, asserting that pain undergoes negotiation processes in which personal and intimate experiences intersect with wider social expectations (see Porzuczek 2020, 165).

Similar to these shifts, there have been changes in the understanding of pain within medical culture and in the negotiation of its meanings, especially regarding terminal illnesses. The perception of pain has become more complex in relation to patients' terminal conditions, transcending the simple distinction between physical and psychological pain. The concept of "total pain" was introduced in the 1960s by Cicely Saunders, who developed the idea of palliative medicine in response to the neglect of terminally ill patients in hospitals. She contrasted palliative care with routine hospital care, which did not offer comprehensive relief from

the “physical, biological, psychological, and social” aspects of pain. This concept serves as the foundation for the care evident in Pakuła’s prose, where he references a website:

The Department of Palliative Medicine was established in 2000 and cares for patients in advanced stages of cancer. In clinical practice, it provides comprehensive care for patients who cannot undergo causal treatment. Its goal is to alleviate distressing symptoms, meet the psychosocial and spiritual needs of patients, and support families during the illness and after the death of a loved one. Palliative care is a multidisciplinary activity (2021, 103).

A snippet of communication with healthcare providers reveals that, after fifty years of promotion, implementation, and dissemination, the concept of “total pain” has similarly succumbed to routine. As a result, this has formalized the relationship between patient and caregiver, leading to a gradual decline in qualities such as kindness, patience, and compassion (Streeck 2020).

- Is there psychological care here?
- Well... There was a psychologist, I don’t remember exactly, but I think so...
- You think?
- Well, you know, we can’t get through to the patient. He’s talking nonsense, rambling incoherently...
- Well, because he’s pumped full of all sorts of...!
- Yes, but the psychologist said he tried but couldn’t get through to him. The patient doesn’t speak logically. He just babbles (Pakuła 2021, 109).

This discussion from the prose underscores various communication practices (Menchik and Giaquinta 2024) and the challenges associated with care for terminally ill patients. When informing the patient (Comer 2019) about their condition and prognosis, informed consent implies that, in situations of anticipated “unbearable pain”, the patient should be made aware of the potential for pain relief through euthanasia, even in jurisdictions where it is not allowed; there is a need to ensure that the patient comprehends their circumstances, and it is important that communication is both compassionate and honest about the dying process. As noted by Piemonte and Abreu (2021, 183), doctors have a duty to engage in these challenging conversations.

The routinization of hospital care in the United States is highlighted by Piemonte and Abreu (2021), while Streeck (2020) addresses similar issues in pallia-

tive care. In both works, the experiences of pain and suffering endured by terminally ill patients are depicted inclusively. Based on their professional and personal experiences – such as the deaths of their own parents in palliative care – Piemonte and Abreu enhance and broaden the concept of “total pain”. They highlight the significance of sensitively recognizing patients’ existential feelings, respecting their subjective choices regarding how they want to approach the end of life, pre-arranging pain management strategies, and ensuring that caregivers and healthcare providers demonstrate compassion. This emphasis on the patient’s subjective decision-making, professional pain management, and compassion highlights a broader critique of the current state of palliative care, which, as noted by Streeck (2020) and others, has become increasingly routine and medicalized. While she shares many viewpoints with Piemonte and Abreu, she simultaneously critiques Saunders’s concept of “total pain”, contending that its goal of eliminating pain at all costs perpetuates its taboo. In her thorough analysis, Streeck demonstrates that one result of this taboo is the indistinct boundary between euthanasia and palliative care, particularly in the context of terminal sedation. She then argues for the removal of the taboo surrounding pain, asserting that palliative care should shift away from its initial objective of eliminating all pain at any cost, and instead focus on respecting patients’ choices. Instead of concentrating exclusively on the complete elimination of pain, she suggests that palliative care should be provided even when pain cannot be entirely alleviated (when palliative care is insufficient) and should primarily focus on helping patients manage their suffering.

The care provided to the narrator’s father in the palliative ward in *How I Didn't Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It* comes as a shock, perhaps even a source of fear, as is revealed through the narrator’s diary entries: “I had never seen such a look. Certainly not on my father. This was a look of astonishment, disbelief, distrust, and hatred. Hatred toward the whole world, including us. A dulled, broken face” (Pakuła 2021, 106). It is accompanied by a desperate plea: “Get me out of here, I beg you!” (107). Despite the doctor’s concern, “Are you sure you can handle it? It's not easy. Can you manage?” (Pakuła 2021, 106), the family decides to move the patient to home care. The doctor’s question is crucial, given that in Poland the percentage of people dying in hospitals continues to rise (Szumpich 2013; Szukalski 2016). In this way, systemic solutions render dying invisible, effectively erasing the real experience of losing a loved one from social consciousness; this is an approach that fails to alleviate the psychological stress and pain of loved ones (Szukalski 2016, 4). Conversely, the media disseminate

drastic virtual images of death and euthanasia (Morris and Plunkett 2008; Piemonte and Abreu 2021, 35).

To a large extent, home care is a form of palliative care advocated by critics (Piemonte and Abreu 2021; Streeck 2020) of Saunders's original concept of palliative care. It is the family that provides a sense of closeness and tenderness: "Dad hugs me, hugs me tightly. He falls asleep nestled against me, as if he were my son" (Pakuła 2021, 115). There are conversations about death: "'You can go now, Dad'" (142). And there are conversations about pain: "'Aren't you afraid of death?' I ask my father. 'No.' 'But of the pain, right?' 'I used to think about buying a gun and shooting myself in the face'" (139). The family shares in the father's suffering, especially when, after a final, unbearably painful emergency intervention, he asks his son to relieve his pain through euthanasia: "'Dad, I'm sorry it's like this. I'm sorry it's taking so long. I'm doing everything I can, Dad. We're doing everything we can to ease your suffering.' 'I know, Dad,' the father replies" (148). The narrator repeats this fragment like a mantra throughout the final days of agony, when the dying man is tormented by restlessness, when "he growls at us and laments" (151).

At one moment, the narrator cites "his struggle" (180), and the fragmented narrative unmistakably reveals that this encompasses, among other elements, the alleviation of suffering and the endeavour to ensure the most dignified death for his dying father. In this regard, Pakuła's prose can be understood through the lens of bioethical discourse aimed at destigmatizing pain, positioning the text as a critical voice against the traditional notion of palliative care while advocating for a redefined concept of it. From this viewpoint, Pakuła has no reason to regret that he did not "kill his father", as he helped him endure the pain and suffering. However, it is crucial to emphasize that both Pakuła's literary contributions and public involvement highlight a broader contemplation of human life's finitude and euthanasia as a means of achieving a good death. This encompasses the subjective choice of whether to endure or alleviate pain (even at any cost), the destigmatization of circumstances related to delaying death through modern medicine, and the individual (or family-discussed) decision regarding one's own death, ensuring it takes place "at the right time" should assistance from loved ones or a doctor be needed.

Conclusion

Since approximately the mid-twentieth century, sociologists and historians of medicine have highlighted the diminishing presence of death (Kastenbaum 1977;

Becker 1973). This phenomenon has been accompanied by a diminishing of direct experiences with dying, driven by technological advancements in medicine and healthcare. Modern medical technologies have not only extended life – altering the very definition of death – but they have also rendered death increasingly invisible. Technological life extension – achieved through artificial respiration, support for specific vital functions, and advancements in anaesthesiology and pain relief medications – has also led to an unintended consequence. It has created an ethical dilemma: how to help a person in dying when they have become merely a biological system with only certain organs (such as the brain, heart, or kidneys) showing any measurable activity, or, in cases of cancer, when they endure excruciating pain.

As a result of these contexts, the notion arose that individuals should possess the legitimate right to choose to end their own lives – a right that has been legalized as euthanasia in certain countries. However, the bioethical justification of euthanasia, along with sociological and medical perspectives on death, has largely neglected its existential aspect. As Judit Görözdi aptly points out:

Death, however, as a universal theme of all human beings, is fundamentally defining. It reminds us of the finitude of human life and continually underscores its value. At the same time, it embodies a kind of existential fear, not least because of its unknown/unknowable nature, which even biological, medical, psychological, philosophical, and theological inquiries can only graze (2023, 97).

In light of these and related considerations, my approach to examining the issue of life's diversity – particularly its finitude – through the lens of film and literature is transdiscursive. I integrate perspectives from bioethics (Hardwig 1996; Singer 2021), the history of medicine (Kastenbaum 1977), cultural studies (Bourke 2014; Morris 1999), and literary studies (Porzuczek 2020).

In the initial section of the article, I analyse the film *Nine Days* to illuminate the ontological nature of death, stressing the finitude of human existence, which predominantly reveals itself through the experience of others' deaths, as it is others who pass away during our lifetimes. The film's interpretation offered a chance to highlight, in the context of finitude, the significance of life and authentic existence – something that is vibrant and shapes one's life in a way that allows individuals to realize their self-conceptions and essence (Heidegger 2008). I demonstrated the achievement of a sense of authentic existence through the examples of Will and Emma, who were characters from the film. I interpreted the quest for authentic existence as a parallel to the idea of achieving the most suitable state for

confronting death directly (thus alleviating the existential fear of death), particularly in the context of palliative care patients as outlined by Piemonte and Abreu (2021). The consideration of accepting or rejecting one's own dying and death, particularly in instances of unbearable pain, raises the ethical dilemma of how to support individuals who seek our assistance in dying, which is the central focus of the second part of this article. In this context, death transcends its purely ontological nature, evolving into both a social experience and an experience of biological corporeality. Dying has become less transparent, now possessing its own odour and soft texture; in this context, Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of the abject – something that no longer belongs to the subject, such as bodily fluids – and the subject itself (Kristeva 2007, 35). Ultimately, it entails an ethical responsibility concerning end-of-life decisions, such as euthanasia versus palliative care. In interpreting *How I Didn't Kill My Father and How Much I Regret It* through the lens of bioethical perspectives that destigmatize pain in palliative care (Streeck 2020; Piemonte and Abreu 2021), as well as through literary explorations of pain (Porzuczek 2020), I have formulated a new understanding of the work. This work, along with Pakuła's other activities – such as theatrical performances and discussions – can be seen not only as a protest advocating for the legalization of euthanasia in Poland but also as a critique of the original concept of palliative care (as introduced by Cicely Saunders), which prioritizes alleviating pain at all costs and may blur the line between palliative care and euthanasia.

Artistic projects like Oda's film and Pakuła's prose and theatrical performances not only remind us of the finite nature of human life but also emphasize the pressing need for a wider societal dialogue on end-of-life issues, particularly concerning the meaning of human existence, solidarity, and compassion for those facing death. This discussion should encompass both literature and popular culture. Indeed, their role is to elevate and promote soft anthropological values such as kindness, attentiveness, goodwill, compassion, solidarity, and human dignity.

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Two Cases of Suicide in Roman Literature and the Issue of Assisted Death in Bioethics

Peter Fraňo

Abstract: The reflection on the issue of suicide is a theme of many works of world literature. And it is no different in the case of Greek and Latin literary sources. In particular, the treatises from the Late Republic and the Early Empire are of particular importance, since it is in these literary texts that we have the highest number of descriptions of suicidal action statistically documented in the whole of ancient literature. From the many examples of this life-ending choice, we will analyse in the text the description of the final years of the life of Titus Pomponius Atticus, whose biography has been preserved for us in the work *De viris illustribus* by the Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos (Nep. Att. 21.1-22.4). The second ancient source would be Seneca's *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, which contains the story of the death of an unknown young man, Tullius Marcellinus (Sen. Ep. 77.5-9). In contrast to many other sources from this period, these literary excerpts deal with the subject of suicide in some detail, and for the main actors in the plot, the primary reason for its occurrence is ongoing pain or suffering (*inpatientia*), and thus in their process they are perhaps most reminiscent of contemporary bioethical debates regarding the issue of euthanasia.

Keywords: Suicide. Euthanasia. Starvation. Titus Pomponius Atticus. Tullius Marcellinus.

Introduction

Reflections on the issue of suicide is an element of many works of world literature from ancient times up to the present. Several characters who decided to end their lives in this way have at the same time become permanently inscribed in the history of world literature, and the motives for their acts are the subject of ongoing considerations by literary scholars. It suffices to recall the fates of the main protagonists of works such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary: Provincial Manners*. Along with literary and academic research, however, the issue of suicide in literature may also be of interest to other scholarly disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, philosophy), which can make use of the often-detailed narrative descriptions of the psychological state of characters or the social circumstances that accompany acts of suicide in their own professional research. One such discipline is bioethics, which examines, for example, the issue of the ethical justification of carrying out assisted suicide or euthanasia. Therefore, in the text presented herein, we will focus on a comparative analysis of three selected bioethical issues that are closely associated with the topic of assisted

death with two more detailed descriptions of suicide that are part of Roman literature. The first area of interest will be the question of the nature of illness and its manifestations, which ultimately lead the actors of literary works to the decision to commit suicide. The second issue is the formulation of the intention to die voluntarily itself, and the circumstances that accompany it. Finally, the third question is the issue of the perpetrator of this act and persons who may take part in it to a greater or lesser extent. Before we begin to reflect on these issues, let us first introduce some specific features of suicide in Greek and Roman literature.

Suicide in the literature of classical antiquity

We come across artistic depictions of suicide rather often in antiquity and in all literary genres of the period. Anton J. L. van Hooff, who has examined this topic in detail, documented a total of 9639 individual cases of suicide in Greek and Latin literary texts (van Hooff 1990, 233). He states that most cases come from the early Empire period, which we can label as the golden era of committing suicide. It is clear, however, that suicide also occurred in literature to a greater or lesser extent across individual historical epochs, as the following table clearly shows:⁷

Periods	Cases	Countable	Individuals
a. Mythical (–750 BC)	125 (0)	130	(0)
b. Archaic (750–500 BC)	38 (18)	44	(20)
c. Classical (500–336 BC)	78 (54)	74	(50)
d. Hellenistic (336–27 BC)	105 (59)	95	(50)
e. Early Rome (–500 BC)	13 (4)	14	(2)
f. Early Republic (500–200 BC)	39 (32)	74	(69)
g. Late Republic (200–27 BC)	164 (133)	2433	(1408)
h. Early Empire (27 BC–192 AD)	255 (202)	6624	(6575)
i. Late Empire (from 192 AD)	51 (41)	71	(61)

If we then look at the phenomenon of suicide from a sociological perspective and accept the hypothesis that the increase in suicides occurs mainly in periods of spiritual crises full of uncertainties – such as occurred in the more recent past, particularly during the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the *fin de siècle* at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – then the early Empire would represent a similar turning point in the psychological tension of man in relation to society

⁷ Taken and adapted from (van Hooff 1990, 234). The total number of cases is lower than the above-mentioned number of 9639, because in some cases – for example, in fictional cases – it is not possible to determine the exact period when the suicide was committed (van Hooff 1990, 282n9).

in antiquity (see Masaryk 1881; Durkheim 1897). The reasons for such a large increase in the number of suicides in this era may vary. There may have been a change in the political regime, which is characterised by the concentration of power in the hands of an individual with absolute power (the emperor), and the private position of a person begins to depend on him and his closest relatives. Additionally, during the early Empire Roman society witnessed many socio-cultural changes (e.g., the emergence and spread of new religious movements, the expansion of the empire's territory, changes in the social structure of society), which altered the usual ways of orienting people in the world and could have led to increasing feelings of insecurity. At the same time, Stoic philosophy, which took a positive position in regard to suicide and could therefore have become an ideological basis for justifying such behaviour, came to the fore during this period (Rist 1969, 233–255).

Gregor Maurach notes that Roman philosophy entered its third epoch of development during the early Empire and underwent changes in the area of thematic focus. It ceased being concerned primarily with the reflection of human existence in general and focused its attention instead on the specific person who lives here and now in this world: “stilisierte Ich verkörpert Philosophie als Lebensgestaltung” (“The stylised self-embodies philosophy as a way of life”; Maurach 2006, 179). We could take this statement as the programmatic slogan of the period's Stoicism, which became the dominant intellectual current in the early Empire. The Stoics believed that constantly turning to oneself helps a person to become independent of external factors. For Seneca, as an example, the inner world represents the only real possession that we have at our disposal; therefore, we should continually try to cultivate it. What's more, a person's interior is the only real refuge from all negative external factors (property, fame, political instability, etc.) (Williams 2015, 145–147). And if a situation ever arises in life in which I myself come into conflict with something foreign and impersonal, and these circumstances threaten to enslave me, then one of the last options for maintaining control over myself is to make a rational decision about voluntary death.⁸ Suicide thus became one of the symbols of firm philosophical conviction in Stoicism.⁹

Greek and Roman literary texts depicting suicidal acts have different levels of informative value. In the majority of them we come across only a simple

⁸ Regarding the issue of suicide in Seneca's thought (see Englert 1990; Evenepoel 2004; Russell 1973; Rist 1969, 246–251).

⁹ In Roman literature, Cato the Younger (see Plut. Cat. Mi. 67.1–70.6; Sen. Ep. 24.6–8) and Seneca (Tac. Ann. 15.60–65) above all became such symbols.

description, which does not allow us to reflect on the deeper context of this act and uncover the real reasons, motives or circumstances, or even the actual carrying out of such a departure from the world. Anton J. L. van Hooff distinguishes eleven main reasons why people in antiquity decided to commit suicide: “despair” (*desperata salus*), “forced into a free death” (*necessitas*), “madness” (*furor*), “grief” (*dolor*), “curse” (*exsecratio*), “shame” (*pudor*), “guilt” (*mala conscientia*), “old and full of years” (*taedium vitae*), “suffering” (*impatientia*), “devotio and fides” (*devotio*) and “showing off” (*iactatio*) (van Hooff 1990, 85–130).

For our topic, the ninth reason is essential – *impatientia*. With illnesses associated with pain, the quality of life can be reduced such that suicide seems to be a better way out than continuing to live in pain or suffering. It is these suicides that are perhaps most reminiscent of the current bioethical discussions on the issue of assisted death or euthanasia. From the many potential cases of such a choice to end life, we will focus in more detail here on an analysis of the description of the final period of the life of Titus Pomponius Atticus (110–32 BC), a representative of Epicureanism and a very close friend of Cicero, whose biography has been preserved in the work *On Famous Men* (*De viris illustribus*) by the Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos (Nep. Att. 21.1–22.4). The practical course of suicide we have more broadly reflected by Seneca in his work *Moral Letters to Lucilius* (*Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*) on the example of the fate of the young Tullius Marcellinus. In *Letter 29* Marcellinus appears as a not quite successful student of Seneca, who takes neither his philosophical education nor his teacher’s advice seriously and instead makes fun of everything. Nevertheless, Seneca does not give up hope that he could one day grow into a person devoted to Stoic philosophy if he can admit his own mistakes and learn to work with them (Sen. Ep. 29.1–9). In *Letter 77* we read of a character with the same name, so we cannot determine whether it is the same person or not, but the tone of this letter is more serious. Marcellinus is suddenly struck by an unexpected illness, which results in his decision to commit suicide (Sen. Ep. 77.5–9). These two selected cases help us to at least broadly ruminate on the issue of suicide in Roman literature and compare it with some aspects of the contemporary bioethical discussion regarding assisted suicide and euthanasia.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide: Terminological definition in antiquity and today

The English word *euthanasia* comes from the Greek noun εὐθανασία, which is composed of the prefix εὖ, “well”, “thoroughly”, “competently”, “morally well”,

“kindly” and the noun θάνατος, “death”. We can thus translate the term εὐθανασία as an “easy, happy death” (Liddell et al. [1843] 1996, 704; 714; 784). Steven H. Miles points out that this word does not appear in Greek literary texts before 280 BC. It is therefore a relatively new term. We find it used for the first time in one surviving fragment from the comedy *The Ant* (Μύρμηξ) by Posidippus of Cassandreia: “Of those things that a man [human] prays for from the gods, nothing is better to meet with than an easy (happy) death” (Ὡν τοῖς θεοῖς ἄνθρωπος εὐχεται τυχεῖν / τῆς εὐθανασίας χρεῖττον οὐδὲν εὐχεται).¹⁰ As follows from this example, the meaning of the word εὐθανασία in Greek literature did not mainly refer to assistance in dying, as we understand it today, but to the description of a natural, peaceful death with no unnecessary suffering (Miles 2004, 68).

It is also evident that the term εὐθανασία retained this meaning even in the much later Roman period. In one of his letters, Cicero quotes his friend Atticus, who reproached him for seeking “a noble death” (εὐθανασίαν), since after the assassination of Caesar in 44 BC he had considered leaving Rome in such difficult political times and going to visit his son in Greece. He thus wanted to exchange an easier and certainly more peaceful death abroad for the chance of a much worse death that would threaten him were he to remain at home (Cic. Att. 16.7; Eng. trans. Cicero [1918] 1961, 395). Similarly, the Roman biographer Suetonius describes the death of the emperor Augustus as follows: “[...] thus blessed with an easy death (*exitum facilem*) and such a one as he had always longed for. For almost always on hearing that anyone had died swiftly (*cito*) and painlessly (*nullo cruciatu*), he prayed that he and his might have a like *euthanasia* (*sibi et suis εὐθανασίαν similem precabatur*), for that was the term (*verbo*) he was wont to use (*uti solebat*)” (Suet. Aug. 99.2; Eng. trans. Suetonius [1913] 1979, 281).

A similar problem is linked with the Latin word *suicidium*, from which the English term *suicide* is derived. We do not find this word in classical Latin literary texts to designate the act of suicide. “The first uses of *suicidium* found so far are by Gauthier de Saint-Victor in 1177/8 and, in English, by Sir Thomas Browne in *Religio Medici* published in 1643, who probably invented it afresh. The nearest to a technical term in antiquity was *mors voluntaria* (voluntary death) and the Greek equivalent, verbal phrases being used for the most part” (Hornblower and Spawforth [1949] 2012, 1410). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that even in the two literary examples that we discuss in more detail in the text, we do not find established Latin phrases used to designate suicide. Atticus says that: “I am resolved to cease to nourish my malady” (*nam mihi stat alere morbum desinere*) (Nep. Att.

¹⁰ The Greek text is taken from (Meineke 1841, 519). The English text comes from (Miles 2004, 68).

21.5; Eng. trans. Cornelius Nepos [1929] 1984, 325), and Seneca, when describing Marcellinus's decision, only neutrally states: "he began to think about dying" (*coepit deliberare de morte*) (Sen. Ep. 77.5; Eng. trans. Seneca [1920] 1970, 171). The reader must therefore infer from the context that both actors in the story have decided to commit suicide.

What's more, as we will see, it is very difficult in antiquity to distinguish between suicide and assisted suicide, which is typical for modern bioethical thinking. In fact, people from the closest environment of the main actor of the plot are often actively involved in the preparation and execution of the act of suicide, and without them the suicide could not take place. It is also assumed that the final act of death will be carried out by the patient himself.

On the other hand, in contemporary bioethical discussions, a great deal of attention is paid to the search for a terminological distinction between the two basic forms of assisted death (euthanasia / assisted suicide). According to L. W. Sumner, the main distinguishing criterion is the question of agency, i.e., whether the lethal preparation for ending a life is administered by a doctor or the patient himself applies it with the doctor's assistance. Based on this specification, we can thus draw the main dividing line between the two forms of assisted death:

Assisted suicide is the self-administration by a patient of a lethal medication where (a) the patient intends the medication to cause his death as a means of relieving his suffering, (b) the patient's death is actually caused by the medication, and (c) the medication is provided by a physician for the purpose of facilitating the patient's suicide.

Euthanasia is the administration of a lethal medication to a patient by a physician where (a) the physician intends the medication to cause the patient's death as a means of relieving his suffering and (b) the patient's death is actually caused by the medication (2001, 18–19).

In both forms of assisted death as defined, a doctor is always present and is either the active initiator of the patient's death (euthanasia) or only provides the patient with a lethal means to carry out the act him/herself (assisted suicide). But as we will see, unlike in modern times, the figure of the doctor does not play such an important role in ancient discussions about suicide.

Aside from this basic terminological definition, a major subject of bioethical discussions is the legal framework of the conditions under which euthanasia must be carried out in order to be considered legal and therefore clearly

distinguishable from murder. In this context, Peter Singer points to Dutch legislation, according to which euthanasia is legal only when:

- it is carried out by a physician;
- the patient has explicitly requested euthanasia in a manner that leaves no doubt that the patient's desire to die is voluntary, well-informed and well-considered;
- the patient has a condition causing protracted physical or mental suffering which the patient finds unbearable;
- there is no reasonable alternative (reasonable from the patient's point of view) to alleviate the patient's suffering; and
- the doctor has consulted another independent professional who agrees with his or her judgment ([1980] 2011, 171–172).

In our view, these legal conditions include three fundamental factors that frame almost every bioethical controversy in regard to the legitimacy of euthanasia. For this reason, we will examine their presence or absence in more detail in the context of the two Latin texts mentioned above.

The nature of the illness

The legality of euthanasia in the Netherlands is only recognised in the case of illnesses that cause long-term physical or psychological suffering to the patient and no alternative that would alleviate this suffering is available. We also come across an effort to specify in more detail the illnesses with which suicide was permissible in Greek and Latin thought. Pliny the Elder, for example, mentions three specific diseases that, according to contemporary knowledge, caused “the sharpest agony” (*assperimi cruciatus*), and because of that people often voluntarily ended their own lives. These were “strangury from stone in the bladder” (*calculorum a stillicidio vesicae*), “disease of the stomach” (*stomachi*) and “pains produced by diseases of the head” (*in capite doleant*) (Plin. Nat. 25.7.23; Eng. trans. Pliny [1956] 1966, 153). Diogenes Laertius on the other hand, says that a Stoic sage, if he has rational reasons to do so, can commit suicide for five reasons: “on his country's behalf or for the sake of his friends, or if he suffers intolerable pain, mutilation, or incurable disease” (D. L. 7.130; Eng. trans. Diogenes Laertius 1925, 235). It is obvious that the last three mentioned reasons are clearly related to medical issues. If we imagine the possibilities of period medical or palliative care for acute and chronic illnesses, then it is evident that the option of voluntarily ending

one's life was sometimes seen as a much better solution than continuing to live in unbearable pain.

If we now look in more detail at two selected ancient cases, in the case of Atticus we are rather well informed in detail about the course and nature of the illness that ultimately caused Atticus to choose to voluntarily end his life. Cornelius Nepos writes:

In this fashion Atticus completed seventy-seven years, and up to that advanced age increased in dignity, as well as in importance and fortune—for he acquired many inheritances through no other cause than his good qualities. He also enjoyed such excellent health that for thirty years he required no medical treatment. But just at that time he fell ill of a complaint of which at first both he himself and his physicians made light; for they thought it was a dysentery, for which speedy and easy remedies were usually available. When he had suffered from this trouble for three months without any pain except what was caused by his treatment, suddenly such a violent form of the disease attacked his rectum, that finally fistulas discharging pus broke out through the lower part of his back. Even before this occurred, feeling a daily increase of pain attended with fever [...] (Nep. Att. 21.1–4; Eng. trans. 325).

As follows from the above example, Atticus probably suffered from some form of cancer in the lower digestive tract, most likely in the “rectum” (*in imum intestinum*), which initially caused him “dysentery” (*tenesmon*), i.e., frequent, futile and painful urges to defecate (Horsfall 1989, 108–111). Doctors initially treated this symptom with unspecified “speedy and easy remedies” (*remedia celeria faciliaque*). In his work *On Medicine* (*De medicina*), Aulus Cornelius Celsus includes, for example, “butter in rose oil” (*butyrum cum rosa*), “gum acacia dissolved in vinegar” (*acacia ex aceto liquata*), “wax-salve” (*emplastrum*), “liquid with rose oil” (*rosa liquatum*) and “alum wrapped up in wool” (*alumen lana circumdatum*) among such remedies (Cels. 4.25.2; Eng. trans. Celsus 1935, 439; cf. Plin. Nat. 28.59.211). Atticus initially handled the condition “without any pain” (*sine ullis doloribus*) for three months, but later the disease entered an acute phase and symptoms such as “fistulas discharging pus” (*fistulae puris eruperint*), “a daily increase of pain” (*dies dolores accrescere*) and “fever” (*febres*) occurred in his body. The quality of Atticus's life thus deteriorated radically; therefore, we can assume that he met the condition of long-term unbearable physical suffering caused by advanced cancer, probably with minimal hope of curing it (cf. Plin. Ep. 3.7.2). This illness also struck a man at an advanced age. Cornelius Nepos writes

that Atticus was seventy-seven years old, and his advanced age and the treatment options available at the time, coping with such a difficult diagnosis must have been very difficult.

In the case of Marcellinus, we have no detailed description of the course of the disease. Seneca merely describes the patient's diagnosis in these words:

Tullius Marcellinus, a man whom you knew very well, who in youth was a quiet soul and became old prematurely, fell ill of a disease which was by no means hopeless; but it was protracted and troublesome, and it demanded much attention; hence he began to think about dying (Sen. Ep. 77.5; Eng. trans. 171).

In this case, it was not an incurable disease (*non insanabili*), which is explicitly stated in the text, but an unspecified illness, the only symptom of which is "old prematurely" (*cito senex*). The author puts more emphasis on the social context of Marcellinus's decision to voluntarily end his life. Since he was a young man (*adulescens*) who still had his whole life before him, this "protracted" (*longo*) and "troublesome" (*molesto*) "disease" (*morbo*) "demanded much attention" (*multa imperante*). Therefore, he chose to die rather than be dependent on the help of others over a long period, thereby losing autonomy over his own life. Thus, Marcellinus most likely did not feel unbearable pain, but he was rationally aware that the quality of his life in the future would be so reduced by the long-lasting illness that he had no reason to continue such an incomplete life. It therefore becomes debatable whether we could sufficiently defend the reason for voluntary euthanasia in this case if we considered the patient's long-term physical or psychological suffering as the main criterion.

The desire to die

The second, very important bioethical aspect in the process of legal implementation of euthanasia in the Netherlands is the patient's request that it be done, which must be voluntary, well-informed and well-considered. That is, there should be no doubts about the person's true desire to undergo a voluntary death. Greek and Roman descriptions of the act of suicide enable us to reconstruct this request because the last moments of people's lives are often depicted in literary texts in a stylised form with a specific dramatic structure. The first characteristic feature is the "theatricality of these scenes". When reading them, we may have the feeling that we are in the role of a spectator watching a theatrical performance. A number of characters enter and leave the stage, alternating in front of us, thus bringing the entire dramatic process of voluntary dying closer to us. The second main feature

is the “social character of these deaths”. The characters who appear in the scene have close social ties with the dying person. Often, they are friends or family members, who sometimes argue with the patient, try to talk him or her out of committing suicide up to the last moment, or offer words of comfort. A third feature often present in literary texts, is the “calmness of the victim”. Compared with the other characters in the plot, the person committing suicide radiates an inner peace. He is not a troubled individual who would constantly tuck between a decision on life or death but usually stands firmly behind his own decision to die voluntarily and expresses care primarily for his loved ones and not for himself (Griffin 1986, 65–66). The question remains up to the present whether we can consider these descriptions of suicidal acts as real or only as a specific literary *topos* depicting this way of ending life in the literature of classical antiquity.

In both selected ancient texts, we come across such a micro-theatrical probe into the final moments of a suicidal person’s life. The main character in this drama is a suicidal person who publicly declares his intention to die voluntarily in front of friends or family members and at times asks them for advice or merely approval of this decision. After the aforementioned deterioration of his health, Atticus summoned his son-in-law Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa and two friends, Lucius Cornelius Balbus and Sextus Peducaeus, and told them:

How much care and attention I have devoted to trying to restore my health at this time, it is not necessary for me to tell you at more length, since you have been witnesses to my efforts. Having by these, as I hope, satisfied you that I have left nothing undone which would tend to restore me, it remains for me to consider my own welfare. I did not wish you to be ignorant of my purpose; for I am resolved to cease to nourish my malady. As a matter of fact, whatever food I have taken during these last days, by prolonging my life has increased my suffering without hope of a cure. Therefore, I beg you, first, that you approve my resolution; then, that you do not try by useless exhortations to shake it (Nep. Att. 21.5–6; Eng. trans. 325–327).

We see in this example that Atticus does not hastily decide to commit suicide or without thinking, but only after careful consideration of his health status. He reminds his friends that he has taken all possible measures to get well and only when he finds that “whatever food” (*quidquid cibi*) only prolongs his life and increases suffering without hope of cure (*produxi vitam ut auxerim dolores sine spe salutis*) does he decide to end his life. He states his decision publicly in front of his closest friends and asks them to approve of it and not to discourage him from

it. Cornelius Nepos further says that Atticus made this entire public confession “with such firmness of voice and expression that he seemed, not to be quitting life, but moving from one dwelling to another” (*tanta constantia vocis atque vultus, ut non ex vita, sed ex domo in domum videretur migrare*). This intention, however, provokes negative reactions in one of his friends. Agrippa tries to dissuade him from this decision, because he could remain alive for a long time and thus continue to be available to his friends. Atticus responds, however, to these pleas only “by obstinate silence” (*taciturna obstinatione*), which emphasises his firm decision to commit suicide (Nep. Att. 22.1–2; Eng. trans. 327).

Although we know from ancient accounts that Atticus was an Epicurean,¹¹ it is impossible for us to form a concrete picture of the author’s philosophical convictions from the literary description of the last moments before his death. It seems that Cornelius Nepos deliberately neglected to mention his affiliation with this philosophical school, and the reasons for this may be either personal (lack of interest in this philosophical trend) or the fact that he did not belong to the orthodox Epicureans (Atticus was also interested in the Academy). At the same time, Atticus’s words sound more Stoic than Epicurean. We can also read Atticus’s formulation of his intention to die as being philosophically neutral, i.e., not attempting to present any specific ideological position at all costs, but more to highlight the universal character of a peaceful reconciliation with death (Horsfall 1989, 110; Griffin 1986, 67; 76n6–7).

If, however, we assume that Atticus was an Epicurean, then this school of thought considered the issue of death to be very important and, through its physical theory, tried to find arguments about why death and the pain associated with it cannot be considered evil. We find a famous passage in Diogenes Laertius that attempts to answer this question:

Accustom thyself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply sentience, and death is the privation of all sentience; therefore, a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an illimitable time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality. For life has no terrors for him who has thoroughly apprehended that there are no terrors for him in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatsoever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is

¹¹ See Cic. Att. 4.6; Leg. 1.7.21; 1.21.54; 3.1.1; Fin. 5.1.3.

come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer (D. L. 10.124–125; Eng. trans. 651).

According to Epicurus, we fear death mainly because we fear pain. Death, however, represents the end of sensory perception. The atoms of the soul disintegrate after death; therefore, the soul can no longer feel pain, and as a result, death cannot appear bad from this point of view. When I am alive, I am here as a sentient being, but at that same time death cannot be present; after death, death is in turn present, but my sentient self is no longer there. Furthermore, the Epicureans identified good with pleasure and evil with pain. If, however, death means the true extinction of the sentient subject, it must automatically be connected with the absence of pleasure and pain, that is, with the absence of good and evil. Therefore, it has zero value from a moral point of view. Thanks to this knowledge, a person did not have to deal with the question of immortality but could instead focus his attention on the life he was currently living and accept responsibility for it. The philosophical principle by which a person should decide with each choice in life was “pleasure”, which represented the only good in Epicureanism. In contrast, “pain”, as an evil, was to be excluded from this decision-making process as much as possible (see D. L. 10.129).

However, the question is how did the Epicureans stand in regard to the issue of suicide within such an ethical position? Because, for example, if a person decided to commit suicide due to unbearable pain, it would in the end mean that evil (in the form of pain) became the cause of his action (voluntary death). He would thus be forsaking the mentioned principle of the primacy of pleasure in human decision-making. In his work *On the Happy Life* (*De vita beata*) Seneca tells of how the Epicurean Diodorus committed suicide and how this event stirred up great controversy among contemporary intellectuals. Some claimed that this act “was not following the teaching of Epicurus” (*negant ex decreto Epicuri fecisse*), while others saw in his act “madness” (*dementiam*) and still others “recklessness” (*temeritatem*) (Sen. Vit. Beat. 19.1; Eng. trans. Seneca [1932] 1965, 147). Thus, according to these critics, Diodorus was unable to overcome the fear of death and instead betrayed the fundamental principles of Epicurean philosophy. On the other hand, some other sources acknowledge that in the case of unbearable mental or physical pain, which showed no hope of improvement, and life ceased bringing any present or expected pleasure, suicide could have seemed an acceptable solution to a difficult life situation (see Cic. Fin. 1.12.41; 1.15.49; 2.29.95). Nevertheless, the preferred ideal of coping with death was that of Epicurus, who, according

to tradition, endured such great pain in his bladder on the last day of his life that it could not have been any worse. And yet, he balanced this state of mind with the pleasant memory of his teachings and discoveries (Cic. Fin. 2.30.96; cf. D. L. 10.22; Griffin 1986, 72; 77n19). Therefore, he did not take his life, but even attempted to ensure that the measure of pleasure as good (the pleasant memory of his own life) would balance the pain as evil (the present experience of unbearable suffering).

Similarly, in the case of Tullius Marcellinus, we are again presented with a theatrical portrait of a staged suicide:

He called many of his friends together. Each one of them gave Marcellinus advice,—the timid friend urging him to do what he had made up his mind to do; the flattering and wheedling friend giving counsel which he supposed would be more pleasing to Marcellinus when he came to think the matter over; but our Stoic friend, a rare man, and, to praise him in language which he deserves, a man of courage and vigour, admonished him best of all, as it seems to me. For he began as follows: ‘Do not torment yourself, my dear Marcellinus, as if the question which you are weighing were a matter of importance. It is not an important matter to live; all your slaves live, and so do all animals; but it is important to die honourably, sensibly, bravely. Reflect how long you have been doing the same thing: food, sleep, lust, —this is one’s daily round. The desire to die may be felt, not only by the sensible man or the brave or unhappy man, but even by the man who is merely surfeited’ (Sen. Ep. 77.5–6; Eng. trans. 171–173).

Therefore, Marcellinus’s decision to commit suicide is also subject to public verbalisation in front of three friends, who were supposed to definitively advise him about his intention to die. Each of them, in view of their character, presents a different view of the issue. The most philosophical advice was provided by the third friend, a Stoic philosopher, who downplayed death, considering it to be a part of the natural cycle of life in the world, therefore meaning it was without any specific positive value. But Seneca clearly states further in the text that Marcellinus had already decided to commit suicide because he “did not need someone to urge him, but rather someone to help him” (*Non opus erat suasore illi, sed adiutore*). That is, he needed some assistants who were meant to help him actually end his own life, rather than him listening to the advice of his friends. According to Seneca, he died “not without a feeling of pleasure (*non sine voluptate*), as he himself remarked, —such a feeling as a slow dissolution (*lenis dissolutio*) is wont to give. Those of us who have ever fainted know (*liquit animus*) from experience

what this feeling is". The Roman author at the same time after his death states that Marcellinus's death was "neither with difficulty nor with suffering" (*non difficilem nec miserum*) and that "he withdrew most gently, gliding out of life" (*mollissime excessit et vita elapsus est*) (Sen. Ep. 77.9–10; Eng. trans. 173–175). Marcellinus's death is therefore conscious, deliberate and even occurs calmly and with ease, with the assistance of those present in his household.

In contrast to the example with Atticus, we can in this case determine with more clarity Marcellinus's philosophical orientation, since a Stoic philosopher is present at his death, trying to support his decision with arguments; it is therefore likely that Marcellinus himself was a Stoic. First of all, we must be aware that, unlike today, when we consider death to be one of the worst things that can happen to us in life, for the Stoics it did not represent evil in itself. According to Diogenes Laertius, the Stoics divided things into three basic categories:

Of things that are, some, they say, are good, some are evil, and some neither good nor evil (that is, morally indifferent). Goods comprise the virtues of prudence, justice, courage, temperance, and the rest; while the opposites of these are evils, namely, folly, injustice, and the rest. Neutral (neither good nor evil, that is) are all those things which neither benefit nor harm a man: such as life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, fair fame and noble birth, and their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, ignominy, low birth, and the like (D. L. 7.101–102; Eng. trans. 207–209).

The third type of things is neutral or morally indifferent because we can use them in both good and bad ways. For example, wealth can be used for many charitable things (e.g., for the support of charity), but it can also be very easily abused (e.g., as a tool for corrupting political power). At the same time, these things are not necessarily needed to create happiness or unhappiness, i.e., we can be happy without them.

And death belongs to such a category of phenomena. By the fact that we were born, death simply became a part of our lives and no one can avoid it. Therefore, it is a necessary condition of human existence (Sen. Ep. 30.10–11). Death happened to our parents, ancestors, all the people who lived before us, and it will happen to all those who come after us, too (Sen. Ep. 77.12). Whether we perceive it as good or evil depends only on our individual attitude towards it. Death is in the true sense neutral; however, it can become honourable if it is carried out in line with virtues and with a mind that is prepared to scorn external things. Therefore, its positive or negative value (death = good / death = evil) always depends

on the specific case. Similarly, as we do not praise poverty or exile, but rather a specific person whom poverty does not subdue and exile does not break, then likewise no one praises death in itself, but a specific person who undergoes it (Sen. Ep. 82.11–12).

Since death is an inevitable element of human life, how we treat it can lend it a certain degree of dignity. This assumption also applies equally to suicide. Authentic human freedom is first and foremost confirmed in the act of suicide. And like death, life is neither absolutely good nor bad. The fact that a person lives is not good in itself; it is specifically the choice of a good life that makes him good. The human individual should therefore not live as long as he can, but as long as he needs to. On this issue, the Stoics opposed some philosophical opinions that believed that only nature can decide when life ends. In Seneca's view, however, nature has, unlike animals, endowed us with freedom. The law of nature has done nothing better than to set us one arrival into the world (nature determined that we are born – we have no free influence on this act), but it has also allowed us many departures, the implementation of which is already in our power (Sen. Ep. 70.14–15). A person thus has the opportunity to freely end his own life if, after rational reflection, he comes to the belief that his time spent in the world has been fulfilled, and that in life he will, for example, have only some physical or psychological suffering. If a person is unable to correctly estimate this moment for ending his life, however, it may happen that his further life will lose its moral value.

Therefore, the Stoic philosopher tells Marcellinus that “the unhappy man” (*miser*) or “the man who is merely surfeited” (*fastidiosus*) can also possess the will to die. In this case, however, such a death will not be considered good, dignified and appropriately chosen, because “it is important to die honourably, sensibly, bravely” (*magnum est honeste mori, prudenter, fortiter*). It must therefore be carried out by “the sensible man” (*prudens*) or “the brave man” (*fortis*), who selects it as a rational choice for which he has been preparing himself through long-term philosophical training (Sen. Ep. 77.6; Eng. trans. 173). And Marcellinus's death met these very characteristics.

The executioner

If discussions are currently taking place in bioethics about assisted death, then the doctor plays an important role in this consideration. It is the agents administering the lethal substance (doctor / patient himself) who is, as mentioned above, the distinguishing criterion between euthanasia and assisted suicide. In Greek and Roman literary texts, we find several testimonies about obtaining poison from a doc-

tor to end one's life, and the administration of this substance by a doctor was likely nothing exceptional (Gourevitch 1969, 507).¹² Several texts, on the other hand, also tell us that the assistance of a doctor may not always have been necessary in a voluntary decision to take one's life, or that although a doctor sometimes entered the dying process, this only happened when other options for voluntary death proved to be ineffective or could no longer be implemented for various reasons.

In the biography of Hadrian from *The Scriptorum Historiae Augustae*, for example, it is mentioned that when Hadrian had "the utmost disgust of life" (*ultimo vitae taedio*), he ordered his slave to "to stab him with a sword" (*gladio se transfigi*). This intention, however, was ultimately prevented by the summoned Antoninus and the prefects. Therefore, later, after writing his will, "he attempted to kill himself" (*se conatus occidere*), but they took the dagger from him, so that this attempt was also left unfinished. In the end, "he even demanded poison from his physician" (*petiit et venenum a medico*), who rather killed himself than have to fulfil this order of the emperor (Hist. Aug. Hadr. 24.8–13; *The Scriptorum Historiae Augustae* [1921] 1991, 75–77).

A similarly well-known literary description of Seneca's death in Tacitus begins by saying of Seneca and his wife "they made the incision in their arms with a single cut" (*post quae eodem ictu brachia ferro exolvunt*). However, since blood flowed only slowly from Seneca's old body, he "severed as well the arteries in the leg and behind the knee" (*crurum quoque et poplitum venas abrumpit*). Nevertheless, death still "continued to be protracted and slow" (*durante tractu*). Therefore, he asked his physician friend "to produce the poison" (*provisum venenum*), which he drank, "but to no purpose" (*frustra*), because his limbs were already icy and his body was impervious to the effects of the poison (Tac. Ann. 15.63–64; Eng. trans. Tacitus 1937, 317–319).

As can be seen in these examples, in Hadrian's case the doctor came onto the scene only after two unsuccessful suicide attempts, and in Seneca's case only after the dying process was taking too long and needed to be accelerated. These examples thus indicate to us that in the ancient understanding of a virtuous life the act of voluntary ending a life should be done mainly by the person himself, if circumstances allow it. The assistance of a doctor is secondary. He may be present, but at least initially he does not have to actively intervene in the act of dying, if it proceeds according to the planned scenario. The free decision to die voluntarily should thus be completed by the free act of self-killing. This accord between intention and act is expressed in both of our literary examples mainly in choosing

¹² See Hist. Aug. Hadr. 24.13; Tac. Ann. 15.64; Apul. Met. 10.8; Plin. Ep. 1.22.8.

the means of death, which, unlike in modern times, is starvation. Atticus was to abstain from eating for two days (*biduum cibo se abstinuisset*), then the fever suddenly subsided and the illness became more bearable. Nevertheless, he chose to endure the starvation and after five days died (Nep. Att. 22.3). Marcellinus abstained from food for three days (*triduo abstinuit*) and had a tent set up in his bedroom. A bathtub was brought to him, in which he lay for a long time, and from time to time, when hot water was poured into it, he slowly died (Sen. Ep. 77.9).

Anton J. L. van Hoof, who very precisely studied the phenomenon of suicide in antiquity, found that there is a significant correlation between a person's age and the choice of inducing death. In 61 documented cases of literary descriptions of suicides among the elderly in which the method of death is given, as many as 18 of them chose starvation as a tool for carrying out a voluntary departure from life. As we have already mentioned, Atticus was seventy-seven years old, and although Marcellinus was a young man, Seneca describes him as "old prematurely" after the onset of illness. From a philosophical point of view, this method of ending one's life was considered a manifestation of dignity and wisdom. The procedure of voluntary starvation itself consisted of a complete abstaining from all food and drink. If a person was able to endure this process, it was believed that it should lead to death on the seventh day. Starvation thus demonstrated the willpower and determination of a person and was used in front of an admiring or sympathetic audience (van Hooff 1990, 42–43). Perhaps the most prominent proponent of this type of death was the Cyrenaic philosopher Hegesias, who is said to have written a book called *Death by Starvation* (Ἀποκατεργῶν). King Ptolemy allegedly banned him from lecturing in public on the subject, because many people might commit suicide after hearing about this way of thinking about death (Cic. Tusc. 1.34.83–84).

The targeted refusal to eat is in modern times perceived historically as a form of civil protest against injustice on the part of a specific, mainly political authority, with the aim of asserting one's rights by threatening a publicly observed voluntary death (see O'Keeffe 1974). We come across it today only minimally, and suicides choose other ways of departing this life (hanging, gunshot or stab wounds, intoxication, jumping from a height, etc.). However, in antiquity this method was the greatest possible way to make others aware of a person's free and conscious decision to die. This form of suicidal action was at the same time unthinkable without the help of family, friends or servants, who were actively engaged in this process, because the dying person gradually lost the strength to actively manage certain actions through starvation. In Marcellinus's case, for

example, the servants saw to the pouring of hot water into the bathtub in which the patient was slowly dying. In Atticus's case, although this is not explicitly stated in the text, some servants must have also been present. We could thus liken suicide in both ancient literary descriptions to modern assisted suicide. Although the actors in literary texts do die alone, they do so by their own decision to refuse food; however, without the active support of other people, this lengthy and arduous process would probably be very difficult to pull off.

Of interest is the fact that, in contrast to today, a philosopher sometimes plays an important role in acts of suicide, entering in ancient literary texts into the process of dying in three temporal phases. As is evident from the case of Marcellinus, the philosopher encouraged his friend before his death not to be afraid to take his own life and lectured him with philosophical arguments that supported this view. He also ensured during this preparatory phase all the practical aspects so that the person could undertake to commit the act of suicide. It was the philosopher who finally convinced the servants not to be afraid to actively take part in their master's death, because this was his voluntary decision and for this reason, they had an obligation to help him with it. He also admonished Marcellinus himself to reward them financially for the way they had cared for him throughout his life (Sen. Ep. 77.7–8).

It is also very probable that the philosopher led various learned debates with his client during his death. In the work *On Tranquility of Mind* (*De tranquillitate animi*), for example, an anonymous philosophy teacher appears, who accompanies Iulius Canus, whom the Emperor Claudius had ordered to be executed, to his death. Canus has decided to study the truth to the very end, and his own death serves as an incentive for him to deepen his philosophical research. Therefore, on the way to the execution ground, his philosopher asks him: "What are you thinking of now, Canus, or what state of mind are you in?" (*Quid, Cane, nunc cogitas? Aut quae tibi mens est?*), and Canus replies to him with these words: "I have determined to watch whether the spirit will be conscious that it is leaving the body when that fleetest of moments comes" (*Observare, proposui illo velocissimo momento an sensurus sit animus exire se*) (Sen. Tranq. 14.9; Eng. trans. Seneca [1932] 1965, 271). In the case of starvation, the philosopher probably also encouraged the patient to maintain his intention while also providing him with philosophical advice that could help him in this process.

The philosopher's last task was perhaps to comfort the bereaved after the death of a patient. A certain analogy of this procedure is brought to us by the figure of the probably Stoic philosopher Areus from Alexandria, who worked at the court

of Emperor Augustus and had a great influence on him. In the work *On Consolation to Marcia* (*De consolatione ad Marciam*) Areus accompanies Livia Drusilla, the wife of Emperor Augustus, through the process of mourning after the death of her son Drusus. Since Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus died unexpectedly in 9 BC on a military expedition against Germania, his mother did not have the opportunity to say goodbye to him. Seneca mentions that Livia Drusilla sought out the help of Areus at the very first attack of pain, when a person feels misfortune most intensely. The philosopher approached her and advised her on how to behave towards friends who were unsure whether or not they should talk about her dead son in front of her or should remain silent. He encouraged her to preserve her son's memory by actively remembering him and not avoiding society, as it was with this specific attitude that she would show others that she could handle such interventions of fate with a calm mind (Sen. Marc. 4.1–5.6). A similar method of consolation could therefore have taken place among relatives of people who decided to end their lives by starvation. A philosopher here, acting as a kind of “grief therapist”, advised survivors about how to cope with the loss of someone very close to them, thus taking on the tasks that in modern times are part of the profession of psychologist or priest.

Conclusion

Both analysed descriptions of the act of suicide in Roman literature can be used to update some interesting problems of current bioethical discussions related to the issue of assisted death. First of all, if we analyse the nature of an illness that can lead to the decision to commit suicide, then in Atticus's case the terminal stage of rectal cancer can clearly be recognised, which can be considered a plausible reason for ending one's own life. In Marcellinus's case, this decision was driven more by the patient's fear of gradual dependence on other people, which would certainly be the result of a long-term, but not incurable, illness in the future. Second, the formulation of the intention to die in both actors of the plot is well thought through and voluntary in terms of content. The literary texts also present these decision-making processes to us in the form of a specific dramatic art, in which the main character appears in the role of a calm and composed patient who publicly declares his decision to voluntarily die to the other characters in the plot (family, friends, servants) and then debates with them on this topic. In both cases, the philosophical convictions of the literary characters behind the decision to commit suicide can also be seen, though Atticus's Epicureanism is less demonstrable than Marcellinus's Stoicism. Thirdly, in both literary examples the role of the doc-

tor is irrelevant and generally plays no important role for the Greek and Roman form of voluntary dying. The patient carries out his own death, but in doing so, he may use the help of other people in the household. Death by starvation, which was also the choice of both of our literary protagonists, was considered one of the most appreciated means of ending one's life. In contrast to today, in some Roman literary texts the figure of a philosopher plays an important role, sometimes actively taking part in the dying process even before the patient's death, by providing him, for example, with philosophical advice or by convincing hesitant servants of the legitimacy of such an act. Later, during the dying process itself, he may, for example, lead philosophical discussions with an educated patient about the immortality of the soul. And finally, after death, the philosopher comforts the survivors, helping them cope with the loss of a loved one. The two literary examples presented thus bring us closer to the broader context of the course of a deliberate suicidal act, which results from a painful illness or a decrease in the patient's future quality of life. Therefore, they can be an interesting source of inspiration for exploring this topic in a broader historical-philosophical perspective.

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Was Hesiod's Pandora a Posthuman?

Matúš Porubjak

Abstract: An important component of Hesiod's Promethean myth is a story whose relevance in association with the human enhancement is often overlooked. This is the story of the first woman – Pandora. This chapter will be devoted to an analysis of this story and a possible connection with the issue of human enhancement. In it I will first outline very briefly the origin of this myth and its transformations in a diachronic line from antiquity to the present. I will then focus on a detailed analysis of the context and the story itself in the form we find it in Hesiod. I will try to find answers to the following questions: Why did Zeus allow Pandora to be created? What did he intend to achieve? What qualities will Pandora have? And how will her arrival among humans change them? In the conclusion – based on Bostrom's definition of posthuman – I will assess to what extent it would be possible to perceive Pandora not only as the first woman (as she is depicted in Hesiod), but also as the first posthuman.

Keywords: Pandora. Posthuman. Enhancement. Hesiod. Women.

One of the great bioethical topics of our time is the question of human enhancement. The desire for human enhancement and the fear of the possible risks it may entail are, of course, not merely a modern phenomenon. They can be found in various myths across cultures. Our own culture, where we can trace this topic back to the myths preserved in the oldest written monuments of ancient culture – specifically in the epic works of Homer and Hesiod – is no different. It is in Hesiod where we find the story of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods in order to bring it back to people, a story that became “one of the central myths of Western culture” (Most 2010, lxvi).¹³

An important component of Hesiod's Promethean myth is another story whose relevance in association with the human enhancement is often overlooked. This is the story of the first woman – Pandora. This chapter will be devoted to an analysis of this story and a possible connection with the issue of human enhancement. In it I will first outline very briefly the origin of this myth and its transformations in a diachronic line from antiquity to the present. I will then focus on a detailed analysis of the context and the story itself in the form we find it in Hesiod. I will try to find answers to the following questions: Why did Zeus allow Pandora to be created? What did he intend to achieve? What qualities will Pandora have?

¹³ Regarding the issue of ancient inspirations for later technologies and posthumanism, see, for example, Mayor (2018); Chesi and Spiegel (2019); Saniotis, Mohammadi and Galassi (2024).

And how will her arrival among humans change them? In the conclusion – based on Bostrom’s definition of posthuman – I will assess to what extent it would be possible to perceive Pandora not only as the first woman (as she is depicted in Hesiod), but also as the first posthuman.

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Hesiod is usually considered a contemporary or early follower of Homer, the most famous Greek epic poet. The work of both poets can be located in time “somewhere towards the end of the 8th century or the very beginning of the 7th century BC” (Most 2010: xxv). The creation myth of the first woman is encountered in both of Hesiod’s key epics, the *Theogony* (*Th.* 570–612) and the *Works and Days* (*Op.* 54–105). In both works, this story is part of the broader Promethean myth as retribution for Prometheus’s theft of fire, and in both, at Zeus’s command, Hephaestus models the first woman from the earth (*gaiēs*; *Th.* 571, *Op.* 70) in the form of reverend maiden, and the resulting “outfit” of this marvellous piece of work is provided by Athena. Finally, in both cases, this “plastic woman” (*plastē gunaika*, *Th.* 513) is presented as a woe for mortals (*Th.* 592, *Op.* 83).

However, there are more differences than similarities between the two myths about the first woman. In *Theogony*, 14 verses are devoted to the description of the creation of the first woman (*Th.* 571–584). The first woman here is not given a name and, apart from Zeus as the “orderer”, only two gods take part in her creation – Hephaestus and Athena. Hephaestus creates the shape of the first woman from clay. Athena dresses her in silvery clothes and adorns her with garlands of fresh buds. She places a golden headband around her head on which Hephaestus has carved wild animals. When Zeus then presents her to the gods and humans, they are all astonished by the beauty of her jewels. The first woman here resembles a terracotta statue more than a living being, since Hesiod is mainly concerned with her visual appearance – from clothing to ornaments.

In *Works and Days*, Hesiod describes the creation of the first woman in 23 verses (*Op.* 60–82), which is nearly twice as many as in *Theogony*. It is here that the first woman also receives her name: Pandora. The main “orderer” is again Zeus, and here we again meet Hephaestus and Athena, but they now also give Pandora properties not mentioned in *Theogony*. The creator of the basic design is again Hephaestus, who, however, adds a human voice and human strength to the mixture of earth and water right from the start. Athena not only dresses her, but also teaches her crafts, specifically the typical and technologically sophisticated female skill of the period – weaving brightly coloured fabrics. Other goddesses also join in the decorating Pandora: the Graces, Persuasion and the Seasons.

Aphrodita sheds grace and painful desire and limb-devouring cares around her head. In the end, the messenger of the gods also plays a key role; the cunning Hermes sets a dog's mind into her breast: lies, guileful words and a thievish character. Hermes finally gives speech to the first woman and gives her the name Pandora (All-Gift), "since all those who have their mansions on Olympus had given her a gift – a woe for men to live on bread" (*Op.* 81–82). The significance of the ornaments and attributes that Pandora receives will be analysed in detail later. For now, we will only state that, in contrast to the beautifully decorated terracotta statue of *Theogony* in *Works and Days*, there stands a living woman adorned in beautiful clothing, brimming with speech, voice, life force and skills. Her personality radiates charm and desire, and her character allows her to deliberately and cleverly manipulate those around her to her advantage.

The myth of Prometheus very soon became the subject of many adaptations. Among the oldest, we can at least mention Aeschylus's *Prometheus* trilogy, of which only the first play – *Prometheus Bound* – has survived, and the so-called Protagoras' myth in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* (320d–322d). Ancient literary tradition later used the story of Pandora in the form of two main motifs. The first is the motif of the jar that Pandora received from Zeus as a wedding gift, from which all evils flew out when the lid was opened, leaving only hope at the bottom. This motif is indirectly referred to in some of Aesop's fables (*Fab.* 525, 526), the archaic lyric poet Theognis (ll. 1135–1150), and Aeschylus's play *Prometheus Bound* (ll. 248–251). Later authors present Pandora in the context of Pyrrha (daughter of Pandora and Epimetheus) and her husband Deucalion, who survived the flood sent by Zeus for the human race (Apollodorus 1,7,2; Strabo 9,5,23; Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 142). Pandora also rapidly gained popularity in the fine arts and sculpture. Her oldest depiction is considered to be a black-figure amphora attributed to the Diosphos Painter (525–475 BC). A depiction of Pandora – usually in connection with how Hephaestus is creating her – is also found in several other vase paintings from the classical period. Pausanias, a Greek traveller of circa the 2nd century A.D. in his *Description of Greece* (1,24,7) mentioned that the scene of the birth of Pandora was pictured in relief on the massive pedestal of the colossal gold and ivory statue of Athena inside the Parthenon.¹⁴ This would indicate that the story of Pandora was part of the Athenian cult associated with Athena and Hephaestus – patrons of arts and crafts and key gods of classical Athens.

¹⁴ The depiction of Pandora in the classical period is analysed in detail by Mayor (2018, 160–175), cf. Shapiro (1994, 66–67).

Interest in Pandora later revived, particularly in humanism and the Renaissance. In this period the original *pythos* (a large food storage jar) was replaced by a box, and the opening of Pandora's box became the inspiration for "more than a hundred medieval and modern retellings in poems, novels, operas, ballets, drawings, sculptures, paintings, and other artworks" (Mayor 2018, 172). In the industrial and post-industrial era, Pandora is frequently associated with dystopian motifs of robotic women. The novel *L'Ève future* by French author Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, published in 1886, is often cited as first such literary adaptation. The oldest film adaptation of this topic is considered *Metropolis*, a German expressionist silent film from 1927 directed by Fritz Lang and written by Thea von Harbou. Pandora today often retains the psychological profile of female horror archetype in category of scary young girls (King 2014, 174), or of a "fembot" designed to satisfy sexual needs (Radford 2024). Various treatments of this motif are at present criticised mainly from the position of feminism and gender studies (Ferrando 2015).

As has already been mentioned, the myth of Prometheus, of which the story of Pandora is an integral part, became one of the central myths of Western culture. Each interpretation develops this myth in a new and interesting way. However, it is at the same time always motivated and guided by the intention of the given author. This means, as Most correctly notes, that this is done "usually with little regard for the details or even the general import of Hesiod's own treatment of the tale" (2010, lxvi). Thus, Homer remains the most important and practically the only reliable source for understanding the context of Hesiod's work (Most 2010, xviii). For this reason, in the following interpretation of Hesiod's Pandora, I will work almost exclusively with the text found directly in Hesiod and with the necessary context that are found in Homer's epics.¹⁵

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Before analysing Pandora's qualities, we must briefly illuminate the cosmogonic process of the three generations of gods found in Hesiod's *Theogony*. This provides the necessary background to the story of the first people and the first woman. The initial procreative divine couple was Earth (*Gaea*) and Sky (*Ouranos*), who was born of her. From their union, in addition to the three Cyclopes and the three Hundred-Handers, six gods and six goddesses were born (*Th.* 133–153), whom Sky later named the Titans – the Strainers as a nickname for that they had strained

¹⁵ I cite Hesiod's works in the translation by Glenn W. Most (2010), Homer's *Iliad* in the translation by A. T. Murray, revised by William F. Wyatt (1999), and *The Odyssey* in the translation by A. T. Murray revised by George E. Dimock (1998). I have elaborated on some of the basic intuitions in interpreting Hesiod's Pandora in my recently published article (Porubjak 2024).

to perform a mighty deed in their wickedness (*Th.* 207–210). This wicked act was the castration of the father, which was carried out by the youngest of the descendants – Cronus at the request of mother Earth. By his act, he thus separated Heaven from Earth, stripped his father of his rule, and freed himself and his siblings from the bowels of Earth, from which Sky had originally not allowed them to emerge. Once Cronus cut off his father’s genitals, he threw them behind him. The blood from the genitals was received by Earth and gave birth to the mighty Erinyes and the great Giants and the Nymphs whom they call the Melian ones, which I will mention below. From the foam that formed in the sea around Cronus’ genitals, the goddess of love Aphrodite was eventually born (*Th.* 170–206).

With the rise of Cronus, the second generation of gods and a new cosmic order came to the fore. Cronus takes his sister Rheia as his wife and fathers with her three goddesses – Hestia, Demeter and Hera, and three gods – Poseidon, Hades and the youngest Zeus. He then repeats the “mistake” of his father. Although he no longer has the power to keep his children in their mother’s womb, he swallows them immediately after birth, thus enclosing them within himself. After consulting with Earth and Sky, Rheia tricks Cronus and instead of the newborn Zeus, she gives them a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes. Earth nourishes the rescued child, and when Zeus grows up and becomes stronger, with the help of a trick contrived by the ingenious Earth, he forces Cronus to expel his siblings and deprives him of his rule (*Th.* 453–506).¹⁶ Thus begins the third cosmic order, and now the third generation of gods, led by Zeus, takes over. It is here that the story we are following with Pandora also takes place.

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But where did humans come from? *Theogony* says nothing of their origin. They only arrive on the scene when Zeus deals with Prometheus. J. S. Clay (2010, 96–98) put forth an interesting hypothesis on the origin of the first humans. When describing the stealing of fire by the mortal, Hesiod speaks of humans as “born from ash-trees” (“*meliēsi*”, *Th.* 563).¹⁷ In *Works and Days*, Zeus creates a bronze race from ash-trees, which he characterises as terrible and powerful (*Op.* 145). Clay, after referring to these passages and in remarks in the scholia, concludes that the origin of humans can be linked to the Meliae, or Ash-tree Nymphs, who,

¹⁶ This struggle is not easy. Zeus must also defeat the Titans (which he succeeds in doing thanks to an alliance with the Cyclops and Hundred-Handers) and fight a duel with Typhoeus – the last monster born from the Earth (*Th.* 617–720, 820–880). For a stimulating commentary on the significance of these two struggles for the establishment of Zeus’s new just order, see Most (2010, xxxii–xxxiv).

¹⁷ A different reading of this verse is offered by Most (2010, 49) and before him by West (1966, 323), whose interpretation Clay disputes (2010, 108–109). Mueller criticises Clay’s interpretation (2016, 12, n. 41).

together with the Erinyes and the Giants, were born from the Earth when it absorbed drops of blood gushing from the severed genitals of Uranus. The birth of humans from the Earth would not be unusual. At the beginning of the myth of the generations, Hesiod states that he will tell a new story about “how the gods and mortal human beings came about from the same origin” (*Op.* 108). The mother or foremother of the gods is Gaea – “broad-breasted Earth, the ever-immovable seat of all” (*Th.* 117). As Kerényi documents (1996, 159–161), according to the majority myths of Asia Minor and Greece, the first humans sprung from the Earth. Humans, as beings born at the very beginning or during the reign of Cronus, are thus closer to the second generation of gods. Although they are mortal, they could – if they were to join Prometheus’s side – represent a potential threat, which is why Zeus deals with them, too.

In association with the myth of the first woman, it is also necessary to mention Cronus’s brother Iapetus. He took as his wife Clymene, who was one of Ocean’s daughters. She bore him strong-hearted Atlas, the very renowned Menoetius, the shifty, quick-scheming Prometheus (Forethought) and mistaken-minded Epimetheus (Afterthought) (*Th.* 507–512). Therefore, Zeus and Prometheus are in fact cousins. The first is a ruler who acquired his power by defeating his father; the second is from the family of Zeus’s uncle, the brother of his father, who may represent a potential threat to Zeus. Therefore, Zeus resorts to the following preventive measures: He throws the outrageous Menoetius to Erebus with a thunderbolt, assigns Atlas the task of supporting the firmament and finally chains the shifty-planning Prometheus to a rock and sends an eagle to eat his liver every day, which grows back overnight, as punishment for having contended in counsels with him. Epimetheus ultimately succumbs to the beauty of the first woman and takes her into his house, thereby all but bringing himself to the level of men and thus dropping out of the power game (*Th.* 507–534).

The chaining of Prometheus to a rock is the result of a battle of wits between himself and Zeus, and it is here that humans (*anthrōpoi*) also enter into the game. This is a kind of “chess game”, in which the chessboard is Mecone, where important questions between humans and gods were decided; Zeus and Prometheus are the chess grandmasters, and the pieces on the chessboard are – as it eventually turns out – human beings themselves. The subject of the decision is sacrifice to the gods. Prometheus takes on the role of sacrificial priest and divides the sacrificial ox into two parts. On one side he puts the long bones covered in the tempting white fat, and on the other the meat, which he wraps in an unattractive rumen; he then lets Zeus choose. In his wisdom, Zeus suspects Prometheus’s trick, but he

chooses the part with the fat in which the bones are hidden (*Th.* 535–557).¹⁸ As a reckoning for the unequal division of the sacrifice made by Prometheus, Zeus takes fire away from humans. They now have a problem: they must burn the white bones on the altars to the gods and eat the remaining meat as food, which they cannot prepare without fire. As a countermeasure, Prometheus steals the divine fire and takes it back to people (*Th.* 561–569). Zeus then comes up with the final move – the first woman, who enters the lives of people through Epimetheus (*Th.* 570–589).

In *Theogony*, focused mainly on the world of the gods, this first woman is still nameless. As we have briefly mentioned above, she was made by Hephaestus¹⁹ and Athena on the command of Zeus. Hephaestus first “forged from earth (*gaiēs*) the semblance of a reverend maiden” (*Th.* 571–572). Athena girdled and adorned her with silvery clothing, hung a highly wrought veil from her head and placed there freshly budding garlands that arouse desire. She then adorned her with a golden headband, on which Hephaestus had carved a number of wild animals with such skill that they were almost indistinguishable from living ones.²⁰ The whole work became “a wonder to see” (*Th.* 575, 581). When Zeus later presented her to the gods and men, they were all struck with wonder (*thauma*, *Th.* 588) at the beauty of her jewels. The first woman in *Theogony* more resembles a terracotta statue than a living being, since Hesiod focuses mainly on her appearance, from her clothing to her adornments. The description of her adornment recalls the process of *kosmēsis* – a ritual in which the Greeks dressed their gods (especially goddesses) in textiles and adorned them with garlands (Wickkiser 2010, 559–561).

What was the essence of Zeus’s trick, and how did the arrival of the first woman weaken people? With the female generation, with this “beautiful evil”

¹⁸ An interesting interpretation of Zeus’s choice is provided by J. P. Vernant (2001, 50). Prometheus, through his trick, provided humans with an edible part of the sacrifice – meat wrapped in an unappealing stomach. This is not about the better or more valuable part, however; those are rather bones wrapped in tallow, which do not rot and persist even after the death of a person or animal. What’s more, the bones contain a substance that the Greeks associated with male seed, that is, with that which carries life. Therefore, Zeus deliberately chose from the sacrifice what was closer to the immortal and divine and left to humans what was subject to decay. Prometheus’s guilt thus does not lie in the actual division of the sacrifice, but in the fact that he wanted to deceive Zeus.

¹⁹ Hephaestus, in the description of the creation of the first woman in *Theogony*, is not called by his own name but by the nickname the Lamé One. In contrast, in *Works and Days* he is called both Hephaestus (*Op.* 60) and the Lamé One (*Op.* 70). Bronwen L. Wickkiser (2010, 562, n. 14) interprets the exclusive use of the nickname Lamé One in *Theogony* as follows: “The emphasis on his physical disability throws even more favourable light onto his visually flawless creation.”

²⁰ Hesiod devotes four entire verses to the description of the headband (*Th.* 581–584). The creation of the first woman from the earth and the symbolism of wild animals on the headband place her close to chthonic deities.

(*kalon kakon*; *Th.* 585), it is not baneful poverty (*Peniē*) that enters into a man's house, as Hesiod emphasises in *Theogony*, but the desire for wealth and abundance (*Koros*; *Th.* 593). From this point on, men need to do much more to acquire enough wealth to provide for their wives and the children they will bear. And in the view of Hesiod, it is no longer possible to avoid this fate. Because if a man also avoids marriage, he will not be improved, but worsened – in his old age there will be no one to take care of him, and when he dies, his property will be divided among distant heirs whom he never even knew (*Th.* 603–606). In such a state of affairs, the one who gets a bad wife and unsuccessful children is relatively the worst off, and the one who gets a kind and devoted wife is relatively the best off – in the life of such a person, good and evil will balance each other out (*Th.* 607–612). The essence of Zeus's ensnarement with the first wife consists in the introduction of family and economic ties. People will from now on have to focus their energy to providing enough resources for their loved ones and will have no strength left for potential pacts with the gods, who could threaten the order established by Zeus. Thus, the first key motif of Zeus's trick with the first woman is revealed to us in *Theogony*.

While *Theogony* primarily follows the divine world and “explains how Zeus came to establish his rule of justice within the world”, *Works and Days* follows the world of people and “indicates the consequences of that rule for human beings” (Most 2010, xliii). Therefore, the description of the creation of the first woman is more extensive in *Works and Days*; she is given a name, and new qualities are added to her. Hesiod devotes 63 verses to the whole story in *Works and Days* (*Op.* 42–105). They also include a brief summary of what we know from *Theogony*: the statement that Prometheus deceived Zeus, the taking of fire from humans, its theft and return, and finally a new, much more extensive description of the creation of Pandora, her qualities, and the consequences of Zeus's trick.

In the very first verse of the entire story, however, a completely new motif appears which we do not find in *Theogony*. This is the statement that “the gods keep the means of life (*bios*) concealed from human beings” (*Op.* 42). If they had not done this, Hesiod continues, it would have been possible in a day to obtain as much as can be obtained now in a whole year, and people could have dispensed with heavy peasant labour or dangerous trade journeys (*Op.* 43–46). Hesiod then elaborates on this motif a few verses later – immediately after Epimetheus welcomes Pandora into his home and she opens the legendary jar (*pithos*) containing all evils – when he states that “previously the tribes of men used to live upon the earth entirely apart from evils, and without grievous toil and distressful diseases,

which give death to men” (*Op.* 90–92). Such a life notably recalls Hesiod’s golden age, in which the first people, living under the reign of Cronus (*Op.* 111), lived without any effort or suffering, enjoyed festivities, never grew old, died in full strength as if overcome by sleep, and the soil of its own accord bore them an abundance of fruits, and they were “dear to the blessed gods” (*Op.* 109–120).

We do not have space in this chapter to address the question of the precise temporal alignment of the story of Pandora with the story of the five human races (*genos*; *Op.* 106–201). What I believe Hesiod wants to stress here is the difference between the life of humans before and after Pandora’s appearance. The process of Zeus’s dealings with humans in *Works and Days* begins with the hiding of the means of life (which could have been the trigger for that negotiation between humans and gods at Mecone, which Prometheus unhappily intervened in by dividing the sacrifice) and ends with the final release of the evils from Pandora’s jar. This is a process in which Zeus introduces his new order among the humans born under Cronus’s reign by forcing them to sacrifice burnt offerings to the gods, to care for themselves and their descendants, and to struggle with disease, misfortune, and old age. He thus weakens their position and deepens the gap between humans and gods.²¹

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What exactly does Pandora bring to people? To answer this question, we must examine all the qualities and abilities that she receives from the gods in *Works and Days*. The first verses describing her creation resemble the approach in *Theogony*. The main “orderer” is Zeus, and the first actors on his will are Hephaestus and Athena. The creator of the basic design – a being with the appearance of a reverend maiden and a face similar to an immortal goddess – is again Hephaestus; however, he now adds a human voice (*audē*) and human strength (*sthenos*) to the mixture of earth and water at the very beginning of the whole process. Athena in this case, too, girdles her and combines all the adornments on her body into a graceful whole. But first she teaches her in performing works (*erga*), specifically in the typical and technologically sophisticated female skill of the period – weaving richly worked cloth (*Op.* 60–64).

²¹ Most also presents this situation in a similar way: “Whereas in the *Theogony*’s account of Prometheus the emphasis had been upon the punishment of Prometheus himself in the context of the other rebellious sons of Iapetus, and Pandora (not yet named there) had been responsible only for the race of women, in *Works and Days* the emphasis is laid upon the punishment of human beings, with Pandora responsible for ills that affect all human beings as such. [...] We ourselves might think it unfair that human beings must suffer for Prometheus’ offence. But that is not for us to decide” (2010, xl).

Here we must stop and take a brief journey into Homer. The first woman of *Theogony* and Pandora in *Works and Days* is not the only awe-inspiring maiden created by Hephaestus. We also come across a similar creation of this divine blacksmith in *The Iliad*. Let us quote the whole relevant passage: “...and there moved swiftly to support their lord [Hephaestus] handmaids made of gold in the semblance of living girls. In them is understanding (*noos*) in their minds, and in them speech (*audē*) and strength (*sthenos*), and they know cunning handiwork (*erga*) by gift of the immortal gods” (*Il.* 18, 417–421).²² When we compare this passage with the just-mentioned description of the creation of Pandora in *Works and Days*, we find that all the attributes of the golden maidens also apply to Pandora. Hephaestus right from the start equips her with the ability to speak (*audē*) as well as strength (*sthenos*) (*Op.* 61), and Athena gives her with instruction in works (*erga*) (*Op.* 63–64).²³ The ability to understand (*noos*) is also found in Pandora’s mind – however, in the *Works and Days* she does not receive it from Hephaestus but from Hermes, and with the characteristic of a “dog’s mind” (*Op.* 68). If we pass over this detail (which we will come back to), then both Pandora and the golden maidens have the same “technical specifications” – they are capable of thinking and communicating, and they have the strength and ability to do work. If Pandora had remained with only these traits, she would have been just another android, or rather gynoid, of the ancient myth-making imagination.²⁴

The three skills mentioned – thinking, speech and the ability to perform complex acts – we here call technical. Let us now examine in detail the remaining

²² We must point out for the sake of accuracy that in Homer’s text Hephaestus is not directly mentioned as the creator of maidens. However, the golden maidens appear in the part in which Thetis visits him on Olympus. She enters his forge at the moment when he is finishing twenty automatic tripods that are to enter the assembly of the gods and return by themselves (*Il.* 18, 369–381; cf. the golden and silver dogs that he created with his cunning skill to guard the palace of the Phaeacians in *Od.* 7, 91–93). It is thus highly likely that the maidens are another of his marvellous automatic creations.

²³ In the case of the golden maidens in the *Iliad*, only gods in general are mentioned. However, Athena would be a prime candidate here, too, similar to the *Odyssey* where Homer describes the excellent qualities of Phaeacian women: “so are the women cunning workers (*technēssai*) at the loom; for Athene has given to them above all other knowledge of beautiful handiwork (*erga*), and excellent character” (*Od.* 7, 111).

²⁴ Adrienne Mayor is convinced that “Hesiod’s language makes Pandora ‘essentially indistinguishable’ from the golden automata described by Homer. Pandora ‘begins as inert matter – in this case not gold but clay’ – and she becomes a ‘humanoid machine’ endowed with mind, speech, and strength, knowledge of crafts from the gods, and the ability to initiate action” (2018, 160). Even if we overlook the other properties that Pandora acquires in *Works and Days* and which will be discussed shortly, Mayor’s argument has a fundamental flaw. The key matter in comparison of golden automata and Pandora is a matter. The gold from which the maidens are made in Homer can be understood as an inert material, but clay (*gaea*) and water (*hudōr*) are certainly not. These components are the bearers of life and enable Pandora’s fertility. In modern wording, Pandora in Hesiod is certainly not a “humanoid machine”, but rather a product of “biological engineering”.

skills and qualities that Pandora will be given. Let us begin with a seemingly trivial trait – her beautiful appearance (*kalos eidos*; *Op.* 63). Its purpose and the abilities connected with it are indicated by the names of the goddesses who cooperate in its creation. Aside from the already mentioned Athena, these are: “the goddesses Graces (*Charites*) and queenly Persuasion (*Peitho*) placed golden jewelry all around on her body and the beautiful-haired Seasons (*Horai*) crowned her all around with spring flowers; and Pallas Athena fitted the whole ornamentation to her body” (*Op.* 73–76). In order to understand what Pandora acquires through these goddesses, let’s take a closer look at them.

The first goddesses mentioned are the Graces (*Charites*). In *Theogony*, Hesiod mentions the Graces as the daughters of Zeus and Oceanus’s daughter Eurynome (Broad-minded). There are three of them: Aglaea (Splendor), Euphrosyne (Joy) and Thalia (Good Cheer / Festivity) and “from their eyes desire, the limb-melter, trickles down when they look” (*Th.* 907–911). Another goddess who cooperates in the creation of Pandora is Persuasion (*Peitho*), the daughter of Oceanus and Tethys. The last of the goddesses mentioned are the Seasons (*Horai*) – “They make everything ripe (ὥραϊός) and hence beautiful” (Verdenius 1985, 56). It also needs to be recalled that, according to *Theogony* (901–903), the *Horai* are the daughters of Zeus and his second wife Themis (Justice). As with the Graces, there are also three of them. They are called Eunomia (Lawfulness), Dike (Justice) and Eirene (Peace), and they are the deities “who care for the works of mortal human beings” (*Th.* 903). This is in agreement with the narrative that Hesiod repeats more than once in *Works and Days*, that the gods reward with prosperity those who acts justly, according to law and in peace (*Op.* 225–247, 274–285). All the traits bestowed by the *Charites*, *Peitho* and the *Horai* are ultimately brought together in a graceful order by the wise Pallas Athena (*Op.* 76). We thus have the first important complex feature of Pandora – the persuasiveness of harvest festivals – a joyful celebration of enjoying the abundance of the peacefully acquired fruits of agricultural labour.²⁵

Another of the key goddesses who contributes to Pandora’s equipping is Aphrodite, who ensures that Pandora radiates “grace (*charis*) and painful desire and limb-devouring cares (*pothos*)” throughout her whole personality (*Op.* 65–66). This is a difficult passage to translate,²⁶ in which the main concepts are *pothos*

²⁵ Let us recall that according to *Theogony*, Pandora does not come to the house of man with baneful *Penie* (poverty), but with a desire for *Koros* – wealth and abundance (*Th.* 593). Let us further note that while the first woman of *Theogony* reminds us of a kind of Paleolithic goddess with her rigidity and headband with carved wild animals, in *Works and Days* she appears to us more like a Neolithic goddess.

²⁶ For comments on her, see e.g., Verdenius (1985, 51–52).

– longing, yearning, regret, love and desire and *charis*, a word we encountered in the personalised form of Charites (Graces) above. *Charis* can be translated as outward grace or favour, beauty. It also has other important meanings, however: kindness, goodwill for or towards one on the part of giver, and on the part of the receiver sense of favour received, thankfulness, gratitude. *Charis* in this sense “is both the initial favour that one person does for another and the gratitude or recognition that is shown in return” (Pearson 1962, 86).²⁷ If we were to combine the terms *pothos* and *charis* into a single quality, then we could say that Aphrodite endows Pandora with charisma, making her a charismatic being, someone to whom we look up with longing because she possesses qualities that we admire. Someone from whom we receive kindness and to whom we feel an essential need to express our gratitude.

The last key player in the creation of Pandora’s character is the cunning Hermes – the messenger of the gods, a great orator and liar, the son of Zeus and Maia (*Th.* 938–939).²⁸ Zeus entrusted him with putting a dog’s mind (*kuneos noos*) and a thievish character (*epiklopos ēthos*) into the woman’s nature. (*Op.* 67–68). The expression *kyneos noos* (dog’s mind) is usually translated as “shameless” or “impudent mind”.²⁹ I am convinced that Hesiod specifies the meaning of this phrase a few verses later, when he describes how Hermes did it: “Then into her breast the intermediary, the killer of Argus, set lies (*pseudea*) and guileful words (*haima logoi*) and a thievish character (*epiklopos ēthos*), by the plans of deep-thundering Zeus” (*Op.* 77–79). The thievish character recurs in both cases. Instead of a “dog’s mind”, however, two skills are presented here – lying and flattery. The “dog’s mind” thus appears to be the ability to tactically alternate flattering with deception.

The last thing that Hermes puts into Pandora is speech (*fōnē*) (*Op.* 79). We came across the ability to speak at the beginning, when Hephaestus gives Pandora a voice. In Hephaestus’s case, the term *audē* is used, in Hermes’s case *fōnē*. These are synonyms; however, the word *audē* means voice rather in the sense of something that makes a sound, something “audible” (*audē* can be made, for example, by a bowstring). The word *fōnē* is used for the sound made by the lungs and throat, and it overwhelmingly denotes human speech that is the bearer of some meaning.³⁰ Hephaestus gives Pandora a voice as a “technical” feature, whereas Hermes

²⁷ Cf. Liddel, Scott and Jones (1996: s.v. πόθος, s.v. χάρις).

²⁸ For Hermes’s character, see e.g., Kerényi (1996, 126–132), Yona (2016, 367).

²⁹ See Verdenius (1985, 53), where examples from Homer are also given, Cf. Liddel, Scott and Jones (1996, s.v. κύνιος).

³⁰ Cf. Liddel, Scott and Jones (1996, s.v. αὐδή, s.v. φωνή).

as a social-communication skill. Hermes thus completes the work of the other gods and creates from Pandora a skilled communicator capable of strategically hiding her intentions and winning others over to her goals.³¹ We above called the qualities that Hephaestus and Athena give Pandora at the beginning of the story *technical* (strength, skill in work, voice). The rest of the skills she gets from other gods and goddesses are generally social skills – persuasiveness, charisma, a clever nature and the ability to flatter, mislead and persuade with speech.

In the end, Zeus still has to get Pandora among the people, so he sends Hermes to take her to Epimetheus, who forgets his brother’s warning never to accept any gift from Zeus and becomes the first to accept this new version of man – a woman – into his house (*Op.* 89, *Th.* 513), thus creating, or rather confirming, the institution of marriage. A “dowry” also comes with Pandora, which she receives from Zeus – a large jar, which, if opened, releases painful diseases that bring death, miserable suffering and other evils that silently attack people, since Zeus has taken away their voice (*Op.* 100–104). Only the gift of Hope (*Elpis*) remains in the jar, which did not have time to fly out due to Zeus’s will.³² Throughout this entire story, Prometheus and Epimetheus are evidently close to people. Prometheus’s attempt to outwit Zeus, however, will ultimately bring misfortune to people. The cascade of catastrophes is triggered by his division of the sacrifice and culminates in the receiving of Pandora with her “dowry” into Epimetheus’s house. The second generation of gods is no match for the third generation. In short, as Hesiod concludes the whole Prometheus-Pandora story: “Thus it is not possible in any way to evade the mind of Zeus (*Dios noon*)” (*Op.* 105).

³¹ On this point, I would again like to disagree with Arienne Mayor’s claim: “Pandora is endowed with a low sort of intelligence (Hermes gives her the “mind of a female dog” according to Hesiod, *Works and Days* 67). It is unclear whether Pandora has the ability to learn, choose, or act autonomously. Her only mission is to open the jar of all human misfortune” (2018, 160). Hermes is one of the smartest gods, and what Pandora is endowed with are highly sophisticated mental skills. As for Mayor’s doubt in regard to learning, if Pandora were not capable of learning, then Athena would not be able “to teach her crafts (*erga didaskēsai*), to weave richly worked cloth” (*Op.* 64). The question of decision-making and autonomous action cannot be answered directly from the text. However, since Pandora receives *noos* from Hermes, albeit with the adjective “dog-like” (which rather indicates the orientation of her mind than the performance itself), it is highly likely that she can make her own decisions. Compare, for example, the verse from *Op.* 105, which we quote in the following paragraph, which says: “Thus it is not possible in any way to evade the mind of Zeus (*Dios noon*),” where *Dios noon* also means his decision. Regarding the various meanings and functions of *noos* in Homer, see Snell (1960, 12–19), Liddel, Scott and Jones (1996, s.v. νόος).

³² The character and role of Hope in Hesiod’s work is the subject of long academic debate. I have discussed it in more detail in an article Porubjak (2023, 249–250), see also, e.g., Clay (2010, 102–104), Vernant (2006, 42–43), Verdenius (1985, 66–71), Noorden (2015, 54), Scarnera, (2016, 20), Mayor (2018, 175–177).

We will now attempt to reveal what Zeus's intentions actually were and how he changed humanity through Pandora. First, however, let's take a look at how the life of people in the pre- and post-Pandora periods appeared from the perspective of the Promethean-Pandora myth.³³ It seems that before Pandora people did not know the necessity of (sexual) reproduction of their species. They were either long-lived descendants of the Ash-tree Nymphs and Giants, as Clay (2010) suggests, or they were born directly from the earth, as indicated by the myth of the golden generation and references to other original stories about the first people. Pandora is created from the earth (otherwise she could not give birth), and with her arrival she conveys its procreative ability to people while also distancing them from this original chthonic power (thus weakening it). Another difference is connected with the earth/soil. Prior to Pandora, people did not need to make any effort to ensure their livelihood. On the one hand, their sustenance was not hidden from them, and the earth itself provided them with everything they needed; on the other hand, they were not forced to support their families. With Pandora, the institution of marriage finally comes to people, and it combines the ability to procreate with the need to ensure sustenance while bringing into people's lives the struggle for economic prosperity and the social status of families and clans.

Another key difference between life before and after Pandora is the *technai*. It seems that the need for the *technai* first emerge during the events that create Pandora herself. The concealment of sustenance gives rise to the need for agricultural and commercial skills. Zeus's decision to have people sacrifice to the gods and Prometheus's division of the spoils suggest the need for the art of ritual and divination,³⁴ as well as the art of cooking food. The taking and returning of fire suggests the discovering of technologies associated with working with fire and making the tools needed for agriculture and the struggle for resources. Pandora herself comes among people equipped with the sophisticated art of weaving cloth. The final releasing of deadly diseases, sufferings and evils indicates the need for the discovery of the healing arts, including the art of the Muses' servants – poets – whose singing dissolves sorrow and helps to forget all suffering (*Th.* 94–100).

Another key issue comes to people with Pandora – complex social ties. When we spoke of the abilities that Pandora got from the goddesses and gods at Zeus's command, we divided them into technical and social. It is the social skills that enter the world through Pandora that will interest us now. Pandora represents

³³ The issue of how to characterise basic human qualities is addressed, for example, by T. Károly (2024).

³⁴ Divination from the entrails of sacrificed animals is among the most widespread divination techniques of (not only Greek) antiquity.

a highly complex social being. On the one hand, the Charites, Peitho and the Horai participate in her creation. As mentioned, these goddesses are close to Hesiod's agrarian activity, which, due to its complexity (at least during the time of harvesting and processing the crop), requires the cooperation of the whole group. The three Horai – Lawfulness, Justice and Peace – are the basic condition for cooperation that brings prosperity to a community. On the other hand, are the gifts of Hermes – a cunning nature and the ability to speak persuasively – which, through flattery and deception, enable individual interests to be promoted at the expense of the whole. This is all crowned by the irresistible charisma that Aphrodite gives Pandora. Pandora thus becomes the bearer of the qualities of a charismatic politician – she balances on the edge between her own interests (of the family or clan) and the interests of the entire community.

Zeus is a very skilled politician himself and secures his power not only through force, but also through far-sighted political alliances and decisions.³⁵ He will also use his cunning on beings born and close to the second generation of gods – humans. Pre-Pandorian humanity is an “outdated version” for life in an age governed by the third generation of gods. Since Zeus has no intention to exterminate humanity or throw it to Erebus with a thunderbolt, he creates its “upgrade” through Pandora, a less dangerous version adapted to his form of government and goals. He weakens their closeness to the earth and their original strength with diseases and the necessity to reproduce, feed themselves and offer burnt offerings to the gods. But he also allows them to acquire new skills in survival techniques. Through Pandora, the institution of the family is introduced among people, and in an agrarian society, these families are forced to cooperate, to unite into clans and villages. This creates complex social ties, for which Pandora is furnished with adequate skills. In the end, Zeus creates a political community from people. Pandora thus successfully leads humanity from the order of the second to the order of the third generation of gods.

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At the conclusion, let us look at Hesiod's Pandora from a posthumanist perspective and answer the following question: Can Pandora be understood as a posthuman? We will take the definition of a being called a posthuman from Bostrom's text *Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up*. In the introduction to his text, Bostrom defines a posthuman as follows: “I shall define a *posthuman* as a being that has at least one posthuman capacity. By a *posthuman capacity*, I mean a general central capacity greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any

³⁵ Cf. Hesiod (*Th.* 390–403; 644–663).

current human being without recourse to new technological means” (2008, 107). Bostrom then defines three general central capacities: health span, cognition and emotion. For our purposes, we must also stake out a frame of reference against which we will judge Pandora as a posthuman. Humanity before Pandora is offered as such a frame. For this reason, we have above evaluated the lives of people before and after Pandora.

Before we assess to what extent Pandora and humanity after Pandora fulfil the three general central capacities listed by Bostrom, we will make three preliminary remarks. First, Pandora is created as a model that suits the third generation of gods and the just order arranged by Zeus. It is reasonable to assume that without this “upgrade” humanity in the third age would likely have not had a chance to adapt to the new conditions and would be threatened with extinction. Second, the concept of Pandora is invented by Zeus himself and its implementation involved nine goddesses (Athena, Aphrodite, Peitho, the three Graces and the three Horai) and two gods (Hephaestus and Hermes), all of whom are either direct descendants of Zeus or are fully loyal to him. It can be reasonably assumed that all the (divine) properties granted by them surpass the abilities of people of the pre-Pandora period. Third, Pandora is created such that the original people can reproduce with her.³⁶ Therefore, it makes sense to assume that her properties were gradually disseminated among people through her descendants. In general, it can be stated that Pandora – as a product of divine creation – exceeds the capacities of people of the pre-Pandora period and is an enhanced version of them.

Let us now evaluate how Pandora and her offspring satisfy Bostrom’s three general central capacities. The first is health span. Hesiod does not state how old Pandora lived to be, nor in what state of health. Given the qualities directly supplied by the goddesses and gods, however, it can be assumed that she herself was very well in this area. The situation is different with people themselves, however. Before Pandora, people lived far from evils, toil and diseases. However, after the opening of the jar, painful diseases carrying death, bleak suffering and other evils that silently attack people spread into the world. Therefore, the first central capacity remains negative, and Pandora does not bring improvement in people’s health span, but in fact, its deterioration.

The second general central capacity is cognition. With Pandora, the technique of weaving comes among people, or minimally its great improvement,

³⁶ “For from her [Pandora] comes the race of female women” (*Op.* 590). Pandora’s offspring was the subject of Hesiod’s now lost text called the *Catalogue of Women* or *Ehoiai*, which was apparently “a systematic presentation in five books of a large number of Greek legendary heroes and episodes, beginning with the first human beings and continuing down to Helen” (Most 2010, il).

which the goddess of crafts herself, Athena, teaches her. The changed living conditions, as we mentioned above, will eventually lead people to develop skills that probably did not exist in the pre-Pandorian period, since they were not needed. These are agricultural and commercial skills, the arts of ritual and divination, techniques generally associated with the use of fire – from cooking food to making agricultural tools and probably weapons – then the medical and performing arts, and finally probably political arts, in connection with the need to balance the interests of one's own family and the wider community. Regarding the second central capacity, therefore, we can state a significant improvement that far exceeds the capabilities of people in the pre-Pandorian period.

The third central capacity – emotions – is the most complicated to assess. If we take the people of the golden generation, who did not age, did not work, lived in constant festivities and were loved by the gods, as a reference point, then the post-Pandorian period is a clear deterioration of the situation. However, with Pandora and the new conditions, far more complex social ties appear among people, conditioned by the creation of the family. The presence of children probably increased the ability to empathise, and the necessity to cooperate brought stronger bonds of friendship and mutual devotion. The new complexity of social ties could have been a factor that ultimately brought about an improvement in the ability to enjoy life and respond appropriately to the lives of other people, which are, in Bostrom's view, the main characteristics of this central capacity (2008, 108). On the other hand, the increased gap between people and the gods, the necessity to secure a livelihood and the unpredictability of evils could have significantly worsened people's emotional settings and their behaviour towards others. I therefore leave the answer to the question of improvement in this central capacity as undecided.

The above-quoted Bostrom definition of a posthuman states that it is a being who has at least one posthuman capacity, i.e., one of the central capacities that surpasses the maximum achievable by any current human being. Of the three central capacities mentioned, cognition is the one shown to be clearly improved in connection with Pandora (in the context of the capacities of people before and after Pandora). The statement of the improvement of cognitive capacity is in line with the Promethean myth, as we understand it today – as a desire for improvement and the (mostly cognitive) ability to realise this improvement. In my interpretation, however, the main bearer of this ability is not Prometheus, but Pandora. She is endowed with all the latest capabilities of the third generation of gods and

disseminates them among people with her arrival. In this sense, I would dare to describe Pandora as the (first mythological) posthuman.

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Dystopia as a Moral Experiment: The Educational Potential of Literature

Denisa Mišinová

Abstract: This chapter focuses on the analysis of dystopian literature as a tool for developing moral competencies in adolescents. The research is based on a transdisciplinary framework linking philosophy, literature, psychology and pedagogy, with particular attention paid to the question of the innateness and acquired nature of morality. The aim is to critically assess the extent to which dystopian literature, through its thematization of ethical dilemmas, social structures and questions of justice, contributes to the formation of moral values in young readers. At the same time, it seeks to refute the thesis that the moral development of adolescents is independent of literary stimuli and, on the contrary, based on available literature and theoretical concepts, supports the argument that dystopia can play a key role in the process of ethical maturation. Currently, dystopias for young readers, known as Young Adult dystopias, have become especially popular and have evolved into a distinct literary sub-genre. They are characterised by a combination of suspense, fantastical worlds and philosophical reflections, offering not only powerful narratives but also valuable tools for reflection. Analysis shows that dystopian works, due to their complexity and emotional impact, activate not only the cognitive but also the affective components of the reader's personality, thereby promoting deeper reflection on values, identity and responsibility. This aspect plays an essential role in the development of the discussion on the practical use of literature in the educational process and underlines the importance of fiction as a tool for shaping world-views in a period of dynamic development. The primary aim is to actively participate in the obvious growth in popularity of the genre and to capitalise on its many positive aspects.

Keywords: Dystopia. Transhumanism. Bioethics. Moral autonomy. Adolescents.

Introduction

Philosophy is a field that has dealt with fundamental questions of human existence, society and morality since its inception. Since ancient times, philosophers have attempted to theorise the ideal order of the world, which has led to the development of utopia and dystopias. While utopia may be an attempt to approach a perfect state, dystopias often serve as a warning of possible negative consequences. They are not just a leisure activity for readers of fiction, but also have a deep philosophical meaning that touches not only on theoretical considerations but also on practical problems in society. Currently, dystopias for young readers, known as Young Adult (YA) dystopias, have become particularly popular and have developed into a distinct literary sub-genre. In an ever-changing world where

technological advances bring new bioethical dilemmas, literature remains a key medium for shaping reflections on the future of humanity.

The main objective of this chapter is to analyse and critically evaluate the potential of YA dystopias as a tool for shaping the moral values of young readers with an emphasis on a transdisciplinary approach encompassing philosophy, psychology and literary studies. The target group we will focus on is adolescents. Through thought experiments, dystopias enable young readers to develop the ability to critically assess ethical issues of freedom, identity and social justice that humanity will face in the future. These consequences can be supported by characteristic elements of the neuropsychological development of adolescents, in particular the processes of value formation, empathy and ethical reasoning, which are essential during adolescence. The analysis will answer the following question: How do dystopias influence young readers at the developmental level? At the same time, our goal will be to refute the thesis that the moral development of adolescents is independent of literary stimuli and, conversely, to support the argument that dystopian literature can play a significant role in the process of ethical maturation.

By reflecting on the practical significance of literary works in the educational process, we will provide recommendations for the effective use of fiction to support philosophical and ethical development. The primary aim is to actively participate in the obvious growth in popularity of the genre and to capitalise on its many positive aspects. Dystopian literature is a useful tool not only for entertaining readers, but also for developing their critical thinking, value system and ethical awareness.

Dystopia as a warning against negative consequences

Dystopias (from the Greek *δυσ-τόπος*) are the antithesis of utopia.³⁷ “Derived from the literary genre of utopia, it has absorbed the logical principles of *euchronia* (situating oneself in the future). The near or distant future becomes the dominant setting for dystopian literature. The basic principle is dissatisfaction with the current social situation” (Pavlova 2018, 113). They depict a world where attempts to create an ideal society have degenerated into a totalitarian, repressive or otherwise dysfunctional system. They combine artistic, philosophical and educational potential. Dystopia is not just a literary genre, but should be understood as a

³⁷ In this work, we will not deal in detail with the differences between the concepts of dystopia and anti-utopia. Although these are different terms with specific meanings (e.g., the motif of hope), as many authors have pointed out (Vieira in Pavlova 2018, 110–114), for the sake of simplicity, we will stick with the term “dystopia” for the purposes of this study.

broader cultural phenomenon encompassing works of art (fiction, comics, films, etc.) that are directly or indirectly based on the dystopian model (Ibid., 111). They are a creative representation of the negative development of society, which can also be viewed from a philosophical perspective as a thought experiment and a warning prognosis. They often serve as a warning against unethical interventions in human life, dysfunctional regimes or ecological disasters. The stories are dominated by themes of moral decline, restrictions on freedom, control of individuals, media manipulation and loss of individual autonomy. They reflect society's fears about the future and offer a critical analysis of the possible consequences of current political, technological and environmental trends (Campbell 2019, 8–10).

Dystopian literature has undergone significant development from its earliest manifestations to its modern popular forms, with its themes adapting to changes in society, technology and philosophical concepts. It developed as a reaction to utopian literature, which dominated European philosophical tradition from Plato's *Republic* through More's *Utopia* [1516] to Campanella's *The City of the Sun* [1602] and Bacon's *The New Atlantis* [1627]. However, these visions of an ideal society often contained elements of authoritarian control and social engineering, which later authors began to criticise (Perný 2020, 7–8). The first literary warnings about social and technological threats can be found as early as the 18th and 19th centuries. The Industrial Revolution, the growing role of the state, and the first totalitarian regimes contributed to the emergence of dystopian works reflecting fears about modern society. However, in the first half of the 20th century, published studies (Mannheim 1985; Buber 1996) make no mention of dystopia as a genre. The first mentions appear only in the 1950s.

In the 20th century, utopian ideals definitively clashed with the reality of totalitarian regimes, leading to a significant rise in dystopian literature. A characteristic feature of dystopias of this period is the binary opposition of the power structure to the general population, i.e. the position of “us” versus “them” (Pavlova 2018, 112). An example is Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* [1921], which is also considered the first modern dystopia. The vision of a totalitarian society governed by mathematics and logic inspired Orwell's *1984* [1949] and Huxley's *Brave New World* [1932]. George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Yevgeny Zamyatin created models of societies where the pursuit of perfection led to the suppression of individuality and freedom. With the advent of the computer age, dystopias focused on information technology, artificial intelligence and corporate power emerged. They serve as a warning against the consequences of technological

progress, political oppression or biological manipulation. The first significant cyberpunk novel is *Neuromancer* [1984] by William Gibson.

In the 21st century, dystopias have transformed to meet increased market demand and expand their readership to include young readers. This has given rise to the famous Young Adult³⁸ works such as *The Giver* [1993] by Lois Lowry, *Uglies* [2005] by Scott Westerfeld, *The Hunger Games* [2008] by Suzanne Collins, *Matched* [2010] by Ally Condie, *Divergent* [2011] by Veronica Roth, *Delirium* [2011] by Lauren Oliver or *Scythe* [2016] by Neal Shusterman. The main themes are repressive societies, the resistance of young heroes, and philosophical debates about the nature of humanity, control over the human body, and the limits of human autonomy. While early dystopias warned against totalitarianism, modern dystopias reflect technological progress, genetic engineering, transhumanism, biotechnology, bioethics, and the climate crisis.

Classification of dystopias

Despite their common basis in depicting a disturbing future, individual literary works can be divided into several categories according to their central focus. We identify three primary thematic areas of narratives: political, bioethical, and environmental dystopias.³⁹ In defining specific differences, we draw on a detailed analysis of the content of key dystopian works and the common features they exhibit.

Political dystopias focus on issues of power, totalitarian regimes, manipulation of the population, suppression of individuality, and social engineering. They depict societies in which the ruling entity has absolute control over individuals, restricting their freedoms and regulating their thinking through propaganda, surveillance, and censorship. Orwell's *1984* [1949] and Zamyatin's *We* [1921] are among the most significant examples of this category, reflecting fears of authoritarian regimes and their ability to reshape reality through language, ideology, and institutional surveillance. Another common theme is the emphasis on extreme socio-economic differences between the rich and the poor (e.g. *Hunger Games* [2008] by Suzanne Collins). Equally popular is the depiction of societies that sought to create an ideal world through extreme social engineering but ended up as dystopias (e.g. *Matched* [2010] by Ally Condie, *The Giver* [1993] by Lois Lowry, *Brave New World* [1932] by Aldous Huxley). These dystopias often also

³⁸ "Young Adult" (YA) literature is intended for readers aged approximately 12–18 years.

³⁹ Olga Pavlova (2018, 115) distinguishes three categories according to the central theme of the work: political, ecological and technological.

address the issue of resistance to the system, with the heroes attempting to rebel against the repressive apparatus.

Bioethical dystopias explore the impact of technological progress on the biological nature of humans and ethical issues related to genetic modification, immortality, the elimination of emotions, artificial intelligence and eugenics. Such stories usually depict a society in which scientific progress is not regulated by moral principles, leading to the suppression of individuality or the dehumanisation of the human being. The emphasis is on the conflict between technological efficiency and human authenticity, serving as a warning against the consequences of excessive interference with human nature. The context of ethics and political philosophy allows the topic of technology to be confronted with social issues, human rights, and concepts of equality, justice, and freedom. Examples include *Uglies* [2005] by Scott Westerfeld, *Scythe* [2016] by Neal Shusterman, *Delirium* [2011] by Lauren Oliver (as representatives of youth literature) and *Neuromancer* [1984] by William Gibson, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* [1968] by Philip K. Dick, *Future* [2013] by Dmitri Glukhovsky (as representatives of adult literature).

Environmental dystopias focus on ecological disasters, climate change, or the depletion of natural resources and their impact on the structure of society. The plots deal with topics such as natural and unnatural overpopulation (*The Rule of One* [2018] by the Saunders sisters), the extinction of animal species (*The History of Bees* [2015] by Maja Lunde), the drying up of water bodies (*The End of the Ocean* [2017] by Maja Lunde), the waste of precious resources, and the shortage of food and drinking water (*Dry* [2018] by Neal and Jarrod Shusterman). These are worlds where humanity is struggling with environmental degradation that has either led to the collapse of civilisation or the creation of strictly regulated social systems designed to manage the distribution of limited resources. The fundamental theme is the question of survival, the ethical dilemma associated with the distribution of limited resources, and criticism of reckless technological or industrial development.

The relationship between political, bioethical and environmental dystopias is often close and intertwined. In many cases, their elements cooperate and together create complex images of the future, thereby more adequately reflecting the complexity of the real world. This aspect is particularly prominent in works such as *Scythe* [2016] by Neal Shusterman, as the issue of immortality can be viewed from all the perspectives mentioned above, which also highlights the close interconnection between politics, technological progress and environmental

challenges. Dystopian literature thus provides not only a critical insight into current trends, but also space for reflection on the direction in which civilisation may be heading.

Potential of Young Adult dystopias

The year 2000 became the focal point for the emergence of dystopian novels and films aimed at young audiences, but during this period it was customary to combine the dystopian genre with science fiction (Campbell 2019, 8–10). YA dystopias rapidly gained extraordinary popularity and at the same time enriched the education system with new creative opportunities. In terms of content and intentionality, they have the potential to contribute to the mental, ethical and aesthetic education of readers and are specifically tailored to them. Their characteristic features stimulate the development of cognition, critical thinking, social motivation and emotional development. Especially for young readers, reading fictional stories is a valuable tool, providing space for exploring and understanding moral dilemmas, which is valuable for adolescents as they form their values and attitudes towards various aspects of life.

In this respect, adolescence is a period of significant progress in learning, adaptation to social contexts and cultural influences (Crone and Dahl 2012, 638). Cognitive development can be significantly influenced by reading, which has far-reaching positive effects on the development of a wide range of cognitive abilities. “Your children read. From their reading they get knowledge they would not have if they had not read. If they study, the imagination catches fire and intensifies in the silence of their rooms” (Rousseau 1979, 218). The consequences go beyond their primary task (immediately understanding the meaning of a particular passage). Reading promotes abstract reasoning, creative thinking, memory functions, logic, concentration, perception, the ability to recognise cause and effect, and expands vocabulary (Cunningham and Stanovich 1998, 140). The brain becomes more efficient at connecting different pieces of information and making faster decisions. Adolescence can therefore be described as a period of significant neurobiological changes that affect the way young people process information and respond to stimuli from their environment (Giedd 2008, 336–337). “These changes and the enormous plasticity of the teen brain make adolescence a time of great risk and great opportunity” (Giedd 2008, 341).

The settings and characters of YA fiction interact with the biological and psychological processes and intellectual changes that occur during adolescence. Unexpected twists and turns and the fast pace of adventurous plots keep readers

in constant suspense, stimulating the hypersensitive dopaminergic system (Vágnerová 2012, 372). It is a safe space for exploring emotions without adolescents having to experience real trauma. They provide inspiring characters, and according to research by Justin Scholes (2013, 14–18), a significant part of the success of youth literature can be attributed to the personalities of the main characters, with whom adolescents can easily identify. The central protagonist is a courageous teenager who rebels against an unjust system and fights for social balance. They solve problems in a way that inspires hope for a better future in the reader and a feeling that morally correct decisions can influence the world. At the same time, however, they share the common problems of adolescents, such as love and friendship, which make it easier for young readers to relate to the fictional character and accept the attitudes and moral standards presented as their own. Examples include Beatrice “Tris” Prior from the *Divergent* trilogy (Roth 2011), Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008) and Tally Youngblood from the *Uglies* trilogy (Westerfeld 2005). Tris fights against a caste system that suppresses individuality – and consciously refuses to choose only one of the five fractions. Katniss reveals the true face of political propaganda, through which the elites of the capital oppress the poorer peripheral areas and create social inequality. Tally matures from a girl who ignores the politics of her own nation into a conscious opponent of mainstream ideology that celebrates a superficial ideal of beauty. Dystopian novels often focus on the clash between personal values and a repressive society and show how individuals can defend their beliefs even at the cost of personal risk. When fictional heroes find themselves in danger, the limbic system of adolescents responds with strong empathy, which strengthens their connection to the story. At the same time, readers are inspired to seek their own moral boundaries and understand the importance of values in their lives.

Cognitive changes, especially the development of abstract thinking and the ability to reflect on ethical dilemmas, enable adolescents to think more critically about moral issues. Reaching adulthood is a transition from naivety to independence and responsibility. The ability to understand complex concepts, metaphors and moral dilemmas increases, leading to greater interest in philosophical questions, ideologies and politics. While children tend to accept the world as it is, adolescents ask questions. “The development of thinking at this time is characterised by a gradual release from dependence on concrete reality. (...) Reality is only one option among many for them. Adolescents are able to think hypothetically, about various possibilities, even those that do not really exist or are even unlikely” (Vágnerová 2012, 379). The metamorphosis from the strictly black-and-white

view of children to the more mature prism of adults can, in the course of the process, cause feelings of uncertainty about subjective responsibility, future expectations and one's own identity. As they develop, adolescents are better able to understand abstract concepts and consequences on a global scale, and their brains are more receptive to ethical issues. This leads to a deeper exploration of concepts such as justice, freedom, or responsibility, which often take on personal meaning through experience and confrontation with real-life problems. Dystopian stories often require readers to consider the correctness of the characters' decisions. In this way, they not only develop their thinking, but also show an interest in social issues (Steinberg 2005, 11–19).

This stage of development is consistent with Kant's concept of moral autonomy, according to which truly ethical behaviour is based on an individual's ability to follow universal principles rather than external authorities (Kant 2012, 35–45; Wood 2008, 106–122). In practice, this means that individuals not only have the right but also the duty to make decisions based on their own reason and conscience, even if this contradicts current political positions. That is why Kant's ethics are often associated with the idea of individual responsibility and civil disobedience when the social order conflicts with moral principles (Wood 2008, 193–205). However, in the context of post-modern scepticism, the question arises as to whether these universal principles are truly achievable or whether morality is rather a construct dependent on cultural or other contexts.

Possibilities and prerequisites of morality: Can morality be shaped by reading and education?

The debate about whether morality is primarily innate or acquired through learning has accompanied philosophy since ancient times and directly influences our understanding of an individual's moral development, as well as the role that external factors such as literature can play. To what extent is human rationality determined by biological processes, and what role does free will play? Recognising the dynamics of this dichotomy is important not only for psychology and neuroscience, but also for the analysis of social phenomena such as the formation of ethical values in education or the mediated influence of the media on moral decision-making. The direction of research into the potential of dystopias therefore requires us to define our position on this issue.

The philosophical discourse on the innateness of morality is based on evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, arguing that basic moral abilities are universally biologically given to humans, independent of individual upbringing and

social environment. Proponents of morality as an innate phenomenon argue that it is a natural intuition resulting from the evolution of the human species in the context of natural selection and the facilitation of social cohesion (Haidt and Craig 2004). Jonathan Haidt, in his theory about modal foundations (*Moral Foundations Theory*), argues that moral thinking is based on evolutionary predispositions that are modified by cultural and individual experiences. Morality is not exclusively the result of rational thinking, but rather a set of intuitive responses that are evolutionarily rooted (Haidt and Craig 2004, 55–66). Haidt draws on empirical studies showing that people around the world share certain basic values, such as justice, care for others, and respect for authority. These values also appear in very young children (Hamlin, Wynn and Bloom 2007; Warneken and Tomasello 2006), which, according to him, suggests their biological basis. Marc Hauser shares a similar view with his moral grammar hypothesis, which is based on an analogy with Chomsky's theory of linguistic grammar. Hauser argues that people instinctively practise moral decisions without being explicitly taught, similar to their innate ability to acquire language. There are universal moral intuitions, such as disapproval of harming others and aversion to injustice (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003, 785–791).

If we accept the view that morality is exclusively innate, then its formation through education, literature or other cultural stimuli would be limited, and moral development would be primarily biologically predetermined. From this perspective, dystopian literature could at most stimulate existing mechanisms, but could not fundamentally modify them. However, the preference for innate morality has several obvious weaknesses that can be pointed out. First of all, it overlooks the dynamics of development and the influence of the environment in which an individual grows up. If morality were truly an evolutionary intuition inherent in every human being, we would not see cultural differences in what different societies consider acceptable or unacceptable. For example, issues such as the death penalty, minority rights, and gender equality are perceived differently, suggesting that these values are not universal but are subject to social formation.

Conversely, theories that consider morality to be acquired emphasise the influence of the social environment, upbringing and cultural factors on the formation of values. This approach was advocated, for example, by John Stuart Mill, who emphasised the influence of upbringing and culture on the moral formation of the individual. "The moral feelings are not innate, but acquired, they are not for that reason the less natural. [...] Like the other acquired capacities above referred to, the moral faculty, if not a part of our nature, is a natural outgrowth from

it; capable, like them, in a certain small degree, of springing up spontaneously; and susceptible of being brought by cultivation to a high degree of development” (Mill 2009, 55–56). Aristotle, too, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, argued that virtue is not innate but acquired through repeated practice of good conduct: “None of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature” (*EN II*. 1103a15–1103b25). Albert Bandura, through his social cognitive theory, showed that moral behaviour is the result of observational learning and imitation of models, with an emphasis on the influence of family, peers, media and culture (Bandura 1977, 140–180; Janoušek 1992, 385–398). Bandura’s theory assumes that moral behaviour can be taught, modelled and reinforced through the environment, upbringing and cultural context. From this perspective, morality not only evolves but is also susceptible to influence. Nevertheless, such an approach would not be consistent, as it would ignore the neurobiological subtext and empirical research proving the existence of predispositions, which we will discuss in the following paragraphs.

Goldberg (2001, 140–142) points to correlating changes in personality and moral judgement in case studies of frontal lobe damage, implying a significant influence of the biological structure of the brain on behaviour and morality.

A moral code can be thought of as the taxonomy of sanctioned actions and behaviours [...] Could it then be that, by analogy, the prefrontal cortex contains the taxonomy of all the sanctioned, moral actions and behaviours? And could it be that, just as damage or maldevelopment of the posterior association cortex produces object agnosia’s, so does damage or maldevelopment of the prefrontal cortex produce, in some sense, moral agnosia? (Goldberg 2001, 142)

If the proper functioning of the frontal lobes is necessary for adequate moral judgement and social behaviour, it can be inferred that the biological structures of the brain provide the basis for moral behaviour. However, this is further shaped by experience and learning. This view is consistent with the claim that morality is the result of the interaction of innate neurological structures and social influences. Therefore, we cannot accept the thesis that morality is either solely innate or solely learned – it is biologically conditioned, but its specific form is demonstrably shaped by external influences.

Empirical support for this hypothesis can be found in studies of moral decision-making in six- and ten-month-old infants, who show an ability to judge fairness and unfairness even before they undergo formal socialisation. Early development supports the view that social evaluation is a biological adaptation

(Hamlin, Wynn and Bloom 2007, 557–559). However, it can be argued that the research only verifies the existence of innate intuitive mechanisms, and these manifestations do not automatically confirm the exclusive innateness of morality. The result is rather a synthesis of innate and acquired factors that determines the final form of thinking and behaviour. A study by Warneken and Tomasello (2006, 1301–1303) also works with similar conclusions, demonstrating that children exhibit spontaneous altruistic behaviour at a very early age (they intervene spontaneously when they see someone in need) without being motivated by reward, suggesting the existence of innate mechanisms for pro-social behaviour and empathy. At first glance, these results again support the hypothesis that some of the foundations of moral behaviour are innate. At the same time, however, the studies implicitly confirm that innate predispositions serve as a basic framework that is further developed and shaped through social interactions and experiences. Although early manifestations of altruism are evident, the specific form, degree and extent of pro-social behaviour may vary depending on the context in which the child grows up. In this way, Warneken and Tomasello's studies contribute to a model of synthesis of innate and acquired factors, where evolutionarily determined predispositions interact with the environment, influencing the final form of moral development.

The study by Fehr and Fischbacher (2003, 785–791) focuses on the phenomenon of altruistic punishment, i.e. the willingness to punish dishonest behaviour even without direct personal benefit. The data show that this mechanism functions as a tool for maintaining cooperation in groups, as inappropriate behaviour by individuals that threatens the stability of the collective is effectively suppressed. Most cultures show an aversion to injustice, but the influence of culture is crucial in determining the degree of this aversion, with some societies being more tolerant of inequality than others. On the one hand, these results suggest that certain moral intuitive responses (aversion to injustice) may be evolutionarily determined. On the other hand, however, they show that the degree and manifestation of altruistic punishment varies across cultures, confirming the importance of socialisation and cultural factors in shaping these moral responses. “As already mentioned, people are neither driven exclusively by internal forces nor automatically shaped exclusively by the external environment, but contribute to their own motivation, behaviour and development through reciprocal influences. Basic human abilities contribute to this. These abilities are either cultivated or remain undeveloped in individual development, and people differ in their specific form” (Janoušek 1992, 387). The studies mentioned above show that moral pre-

dispositions are inextricably linked to an individual's neurobiological development, but their specific manifestations are shaped by upbringing, education and culture.

From a perspective that considers morality to be a synthesis of the interaction of innate predispositions and social learning, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of the cultural environment for the formation of moral reasoning. Decision-making involves both innate emotions and the cognitive processing of complex ethical dilemmas that we learn to resolve throughout our lives. Evolutionary factors are necessary prerequisites for moral intuition, but environmental influences shape the individual form of morality. Frans de Waal (2006, 160–175) proposes a concept of three stages that illustrate the evolutionary continuity between animal and human behaviour. Primary instinctive responses include empathy, compassion, altruism, caring behaviour, resource sharing and mutual support, and these biological foundations of morality can be observed not only in mammals but also in birds, for example. In intelligent species (primates), we observe deeper reciprocity, a sense of justice, punishment of cheaters, strategic trust-building, and awareness of reputation. This stage reflects justice as a function of social cohesion. The highest level is purely human normative morality, which requires the ability to think abstractly and includes language as a tool for sharing, the formulation of general norms, sophisticated moral reasoning, and responsibility without the need for direct social pressure. We therefore also observe predispositions in animals, but according to de Waal, the human species is capable of cultivating them; otherwise, they would remain at their basic level as a biological adaptation mechanism.

Although the question of whether morality is innate or acquired remains open, current philosophical research, evolutionary biology experiments, and findings in psychology and neuroscience tend to support a synthetic approach. From this perspective, moral competence is understood as the result of interaction between biological predispositions and social learning. People enter the world with a certain potential (the capacity for empathy and reciprocity), but the full development of these attributes depends on the external stimuli to which they are exposed. This opens up space for the practical application of literature. If we accept that morality is neither fully innate nor purely learned, then dystopian fiction can play a significant role not only as a passive mirror of society, but also as an active tool for moral formation.

Suggestions for working with young readers

The complex nature of moral development as a process shaped by both biological predispositions and socio-cultural influences opens up space for a philosophically, psychologically and pedagogically usable framework in which literature ceases to be merely an aesthetic object and becomes a powerful tool for education. Dystopias are a promising educational tool if they are appropriately integrated into the educational process and used to develop moral autonomy, empathy and critical thinking. We now turn to the question of the practical use of literary means in the process of moral maturation of young people.

The desired state is to incorporate examples from dystopian works into lessons. Unfortunately, in the domestic education system (Czech Republic, Slovakia), dystopias do not appear very often on the lists of compulsory or recommended reading. In a survey of librarians, in which 142 respondents from the Czech Republic participated (Lišovská 2022), the recommended titles for secondary schools included *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (8), *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (1), *Scythe* by Neal Shusterman (3), *Unwind* by Neal Shusterman (2) and the *Divergent* trilogy by Veronica Roth (1). Considering the importance of analysing dystopian works in the presence of an adult, these numbers are insufficient. They point to the fact that dystopias are only minimally represented in educational practice and their interpretation is thus left to the readers themselves without pedagogical mentoring. Our goal should therefore be to integrate dystopian fiction into general awareness and to work with young readers in an appropriate manner.

A suitable method that can be applied is the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD). It is a practical and easy-to-use tool for developing moral competence in children, adolescents and adults. It was developed by Georg Lind based on Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory, which understands moral development as the gradual acquisition of increasingly complex forms of moral reasoning (Lind 2006, 190; Lind 2019, 97–98). However, Lind enriched the theory with a didactic dimension, making the method ideal for use in educational or counselling settings. In the context of working with literature, it represents a methodological bridge between literary analysis and ethical education, as dystopian fiction is often based on moral conflicts and extreme situations that can be easily translated into dilemmas suitable for guided discussion. KMDD has nine specific phases divided into an introductory, discussion and concluding part (Lind 2019, 161–163).

In the introduction, participants are introduced to the chosen dilemma, guided to understand the context, and encouraged to think critically about the consequences. An essential factor when working with fictional excerpts is to avoid merely reading the text mechanically, which could result in the subconscious acceptance of theses that are not fully understood, thus wasting the opportunity to build positive values. At the same time, the chosen example should be neither too easy nor too difficult, otherwise students may distance themselves from participating in the discussion (Lind 2019, 99). For secondary school pupils (adolescents), understanding dystopian narratives (e.g. human rights) can be problematic without expert mentoring, as they may not yet have sufficient experience with similar topics. Therefore, teaching should include information that helps students understand the issues addressed in the work so that they are able to comprehend the content and argue in favour of their position. For example, according to Amber M. Simmons (2012, 22–34), Suzanne Collins’⁴⁰ *The Hunger Games* is an ideal tool for stimulating literacy and social engagement among young people, provided that the reading is supplemented with lecture materials focusing on global issues (famine, forced labour, modern slavery, child fighting, violence against children, etc.). In this way, students can recognise the parallels between the fictional world and reality, learn about real organisations fighting for justice, and possibly get involved in socially beneficial activities themselves.

The central phase is discussion. The dilemma is clearly presented and participants are invited to share their initial thoughts. Each participant decides independently how they would act in the given situation and argues in favour of their position, while reflecting on their own moral reasoning and that of others. Possible solutions are discussed in groups, taking into account different perspectives, which promotes the development of empathy, the ability to understand opposing views and to re-evaluate one’s own position. An essential aspect is the effort not to stop at a basic understanding of the main idea of the text, but to encourage readers to form well-reasoned opinions. They must have the opportunity to discuss and compare their positions with their classmates, with the teacher acting as a mediator to guide the discussion and provide additional information related to the topic. The teacher’s task is not to provide the correct solution, but to develop the participants’ ability to argue, encourage equal participation, ensure a safe

⁴⁰ Since its publication, *The Hunger Games* has earned a place as a seminal work of modern fiction, and thanks to its timelessness, it is often incorporated into school curricula in the United States (Ames 2013, 10).

environment for expression, and keep the discussion within the boundaries of the chosen topic (Lind 2019, 102).

The key arguments and outcomes of the discussion are summarised at the end. Participants integrate their newly acquired knowledge into their understanding of moral dilemmas. After the discussion, each individual has the opportunity to change their decision, this time taking into account the arguments they have heard. Changing one's decision is not the primary goal, but a valuable indicator of the development of thinking. The session concludes with a final reflection in which the group shares which moments of the discussion appealed to them the most and which arguments surprised them. The recommended length of a single session is 80–90 minutes to give students enough time to fully understand the core of the dilemma and think through their arguments. The most effective way to structure the curriculum is to include a smaller number of lessons over a longer period of time, with one lesson every two or three weeks being a suitable interval (Lind 2006, 192; Lind 2019, 104).

Another possible example from pedagogical practice was presented by Váchová (2023), who developed a six-hour teaching framework using dystopian literature, part of which was implemented in a Year 9 primary school class (the target group was 15 pupils of mixed gender). Using selected excerpts from the YA dystopias *The Giver* [1993] by Lois Lowry and *The Grace Year* [2019] by Kim Liggett, she presented the importance of human rights, which proved to be quite challenging for this age group. In her subsequent reflection on her own case study, Váchová recommends not choosing the topic of human rights on an ad hoc basis, but using it as an introduction to a deeper exploration of the issue. The lesson also revealed a negative feature that we had expected, namely a strong social impact and the adaptation of opinions to the group. “The boys supported each other in the view that equality (between men and women) is not important, which is why the boys’ groups ranked this right last, while the girls’ groups ranked it very high. This was apparently encouraged by mutual provocation, with the boys deliberately provoking the girls by saying that women belong in the kitchen” (Váchová 2023, 75). The results of this research confirm the initial hypothesis that adolescents are highly malleable and that their value and cognitive structures are shaped by external stimuli. It appears that without adequate mentoring, adolescents may interpret the text superficially or distortedly, while the presence of an adult moderates their perception and provides context, which can help to form a balanced world-view. Váchová’s method takes a different approach in this respect, as it prioritises the educational dimension aimed at the general enlightenment of young

people, unlike KMDD, which focuses on the development of moral competences. The status of the lesson leader is also different, with KMDD referring to a moderator or mediator, while standard educational practice requires a mentor.

To mitigate the emotional impact of negative scenarios, mental hygiene in the form of artistic activity can also be incorporated. In her case study, Jacobs (2006, 112–120) uses fictional stories to process emotions (so-called bibliotherapy) and examines whether artistic activities can support the personal growth of juvenile delinquents. The group studied consisted of boys aged 13–17. During the sessions, the boys were read a selected text, which they then had to reflect on through artistic expression. This was followed by individual interviews in which the participants described their creations, discussed connections with personal experiences, and presented the emotions that reading evoked in them. Through her research, Jacobs found that the combination of YA literature and subsequent artistic creation provides young people with a safe space to express their emotions and reflect on their experiences. This approach promotes a deeper understanding of the text, but also helps develop communication skills and self-reflection. Participants showed increased interest in reading and art, which suggests that integrating similar methods can be effective in working with at-risk youth, but also with youth at a time when they tend to engage in risky behaviour. The study highlights the importance of using a combination of literature and art as tools for the personal development of young people, especially those facing social and emotional challenges.

Conclusion

As we have demonstrated, reading has a significant impact on the development of young people. Dystopian literature appeals to adolescents at a key stage of identity formation, when physical, psychological, hormonal and neurological changes are taking place, which are also linked to the development of cognitive abilities, empathy, emotional intelligence, self-concept, behavioural skills and social motivation. We have observed positive results in the development of vocabulary, complex reasoning, critical thinking, but also in the acquisition of moral values, the promotion of self-confidence and the formation of one's own "self". The bioethical themes presented in dystopian scenarios, in turn, encourage young readers to think innovatively about the challenges of the modern age. Based on an analysis of the influence of YA dystopias on young people, it can be concluded that these literary works have considerable educational potential, which stems not only from

their thematic focus, but also from the specific psychological and neurological development of adolescent readers.

Dystopias are not just an escape from reality; they represent a safe haven. While readers watch the decisions of the central protagonists Tris, Katniss or Tally, they do not just consume the tension arising from the adventurous plot; something deeper happens – the simulation of their own ethical choices. In a fictional literary world, adolescents can experience dilemmas, failures, sacrifice and rebellion without it having a real impact on them. Neuropsychologists would describe this phenomenon as a form of internal anticipation and empathic resonance, while educators would refer to it as the basis of moral competence. If handled correctly, dystopias can shape the reader's ability to see the world as a space where they must take responsibility for their decisions.

The aim was to analyse the transdisciplinary contribution of dystopias, i.e. their ability to connect literary, philosophical, psychological and social perspectives in the process of readers' cognitive and moral maturation. The results confirm that dystopian literature can be an effective tool, with its impact being fundamentally influenced by the way it is presented in an educational and upbringing context. Adequate work with this medium should maximise its benefits and eliminate possible risks. Specific case studies underline the fundamental importance of pedagogical support in the process of cognitive and moral maturation of young people. Reflection supported by a mentor contributes to a deeper understanding of the text, but also to the development of critical thinking and ethical reflection. The practical significance of these works in the educational process therefore lies not only in stimulating intellectual growth, but also in strengthening young people's ability to reflect on reality and develop active civic engagement. Beyond entertainment and amusement, literature fulfils an important educational function and is therefore undoubtedly a beneficial tool that should be utilised.

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Narrative Abilities and Moral Competencies: Inspiration from the Works of Martha C. Nussbaum

Jana Tomašovičová

Abstract: This chapter builds on the analysis presented by Norbert L. Steinkamp, Bert Gordijn, and Henk ten Have (2008), according to which current decision-making in complex moral cases should take into account not only professional ethical expertise but also the moral competence of the relevant actors in moral action. In this context, we consider it legitimate to ask how moral competence can be developed so that it functions as an effective element of moral reasoning. Based on the Aristotelian tradition of moral character formation, we will examine the connection between strengthening narrative abilities and increasing moral competence. We will draw on the analysis of the works of Martha C. Nussbaum, a moral philosopher who examines the influence of narrative imagination on moral reasoning against the backdrop of a dialogue between literature and ethics. According to the author, the interpretation of moral conflicts depicted in literary texts and the ways in which they are resolved stimulate moral imagination, which is a preparation for moral action. With these reflections, Nussbaum provided strong inspiration for later development of the narrative approach in narrative bio/ethics and narrative medicine. In this chapter, we will examine the method of reflective equilibrium, which can be used to incorporate moral intuitions and beliefs gained through narrative-ethical analysis into moral judgement. In the last part, we will present some forms of narrative representations in bioethics and evaluate the importance of the narrative approach and narrative abilities for moral reasoning.

Keywords: Ethical expertise. Moral competence. Narrative abilities. Narrative imagination. Reflective equilibrium.

Introduction

The study of the interrelationships between literature and bioethics has gained professional recognition from many researchers in recent decades. On the one hand, they note new themes, inspirational motifs, and complex moral dilemmas that literature finds in bioethics and that arise alongside the development of biotechnology and its gradual application in biomedicine. They analyse the impact of new knowledge and biotechnological innovations on artistic works (Lesch, Leniger et al. 2022; Lacko 2024; Károly 2024). On the other hand, they reflect on how bioethics increasingly uses high-quality literary texts to supplement rational argumentation and illustrate bioethical problems. An important role is played by the ability of literature to intensively stimulate bioethical discussions, to describe in detail the circumstances of decision-making, its prerequisites and conse-

quences, and to perceive the motivations and expectations of the persons concerned in the broadest possible context (Lindemann Nelson 1997; Charon and Montello 2002; Wöhlke et al. 2015; Wohlmann et al. 2022).

These interactions between literature and bioethics are currently taking on another significant dimension. This can be seen against the backdrop of the extensive debate on the limits of normative ethics and ethical expertise, which is analysed in detail by renowned authors Norbert L. Steinkamp, Bert Gordijn, and Henk ten Have in their article *Debating Ethical Expertise* (2008). In the article they point to the fact that current ethical decision-making in clinical practice, i.e. decision-making in complex moral cases, should take into account not only professional ethical expertise but also the moral competence of the relevant actors in moral action.

Ethical expertise usually presents “strong justifications for moral judgements” (2008, 177), in which ethical norms and principles are applied deductively, so to speak “top-down”, to solve specific moral problems. However, such an analytical concept of ethical expertise often appears too abstract in a clinical setting and raises concerns that it will lose sight of the complexity and specificity of the moral situation under consideration. This is one of the reasons why bioethics seeks other possible approaches that could better deal with the tension between the claim to universal validity and sufficient consideration for unique life experiences (Arras 1997; Lesch 2003, 185).

In this context, Steinkamp, Gordijn and Have argue that especially in clinical practice it is important to focus not only on professional ethical expertise, but also to take into account the moral intuitions and judgements of healthcare personnel who are important moral actors (2008, 186). Based on their professional experience and many years of practice, doctors and nurses have the ability to intuitively recognize the key elements of a moral problem and make a moral judgement without having to refer to specific ethical principles or norms. Their moral competence is based on professional experience, intuition and relationships, and although it is not in itself a sufficient criterion for correct action, it is an important internal disposition of every acting subject. Therefore, Steinkamp, Gordijn and Have support processes that would guarantee complementary interaction between ethical expertise and moral competence (2008, 184). Although the two concepts are characterized by different styles of reasoning, the principle of complementarity could multiply their contribution to solving a specific moral problem.

Based on the above considerations, which regard moral competence and the maturity of the moral subject as a correlate of normative ethical theories, it is

legitimate to ask how moral competence can be developed and supported so that it functions as an effective element of moral reasoning. Since according to the Aristotelian tradition moral competence or practical wisdom is achieved through effort, practice, experience and repetition, in the following chapter we want to explore the connection between strengthening narrative abilities and increasing moral competence. We will draw on the analysis of the works of Martha C. Nussbaum, a moral philosopher who examines the influence of narrative imagination on moral reasoning against the backdrop of a dialogue between literature and ethics. She perceives narrative imagination as an essential part of broader ethical reflection. According to the author, the interpretation of moral conflicts depicted in literary texts and the ways in which they are resolved stimulate moral imagination, which is a preparation for moral action. With these reflections, Nussbaum provided strong inspiration for later development of the narrative approach in narrative bio/ethics and narrative medicine. In this chapter, we will examine the method of reflective equilibrium, which can be used to incorporate moral intuitions and beliefs gained through narrative-ethical analysis into moral judgement. In the last part, we will present some forms of narrative representations in bioethics and evaluate the importance of the narrative approach and narrative abilities for moral reasoning.

Why is it important to develop narrative competence?

The work of American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum has had an exceptionally productive impact on the promotion of the narrative approach in bioethics, even though it does not directly reflect on bioethical topics, but focuses mainly on ethical issues. However, her extensive research has significantly supported the implementation of the narrative method in the field of bioethics, where it helps to shed light on problems and strengthen moral competence in solving them.

Since the mid-1980s, Nussbaum has been engaged in an intensive dialogue between literature and ethics, focusing in particular on uncovering the significance of literature for ethics. She notes that many ethical issues have already achieved interdiscursive overlap, meaning that they are discussed simultaneously in several scientific disciplines; for example, topics such as moral relativism or the role of emotions in human decision-making are the subject of reflection not only in the field of ethics, but also in psychology, cultural anthropology and art. Therefore, Nussbaum attempts to establish a similar deeper dialogue between literature and ethics (see Tomašovičová 2024). She addresses this topic in several works, of which we will mention the following in particular: *The Fragility*

of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy ([1986] 2001), *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* ([1997] 2003), *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (2011), *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010).

In the aforementioned works, Nussbaum tests the significance and contribution of literary treatment of moral conflicts to ethics itself by posing a fundamental question which, following Aristotle, she considers to be crucial: How should a person live in order to have a good, valuable life? ([1986] 2001, 1). Although this question already motivated ethical considerations among ancient authors, Nussbaum deepens it by taking into account an important initial assumption, namely the circumstances in a person's life that happen to them without their own contribution. These are circumstances that simply affect them, over which they have no power, but which significantly influence their actions, such as long-term illness, pain and suffering. Taking these circumstances into account is particularly important for ethics and, later, for bioethical issues, because it reminds us of the vulnerability and fragility of human beings, which normative ethics does not sufficiently reflect. Vulnerability may refer to a person's inability to act autonomously, but according to Nussbaum, a person capable of self-determination is also vulnerable if, as a result of certain circumstances, they are exposed to pressure, loss, grief or deprivation (Nussbaum [1986] 2001, 2; Rogers et al. 2021, 190–191). Concepts that seek to use reason to eliminate vulnerability from human life run the risk of also eliminating genuine human goods. For example, anyone who loves their child becomes vulnerable, and love for a child is a real good (Nussbaum [1986] 2001, xxix). This means that certain goods, such as love, friendship or solidarity, require taking the risk of vulnerability. This is the key thesis on the basis of which Nussbaum then clarifies and substantially deepens the original question: How to have a good, valuable life if we are vulnerable? How does vulnerability shape our ideas about a good life?

In order to maximise relevant alternative answers to the question asked, the author created an experimental space, broadening both the perspective of consideration and the field of research itself. She seeks answers not only from prominent philosophers who directly examine human efforts to have a good life, but also in selected literary works, whether in Greek tragedies or works by many renowned authors (e.g., Charles Dickens, Henry James, Marcel Proust, Samuel Beckett, and others). Based on an analysis of her work, we have generated key reasons that demonstrate the importance of mutual cooperation between literature and ethics,

and thus also the importance of the narrative method, while at the same time providing the author's answer to the key ethical question of having a good life.

Martha C. Nussbaum's interest in literature is cognitive. This means that she looks to literature for models of how to live (in order to have a good life), noting the interactions between circumstances and choices/decisions that occur with some regularity in human lives (1990, 171). She maps diverse moral situations, conflicts of action and ways of resolving them in order to record alternative patterns of moral reasoning that can enrich what necessarily remains abstract in ethical theory. Thanks to its thorough characterisation of characters and their actions, literature is able to provide such a plurality of possible moral positions. According to Nussbaum, all this stimulates and cultivates our *moral imagination* (1990, 161–164; [1997] 2003, 93–99). Although some researchers occasionally criticise her for not paying sufficient attention to the distinction between the literary and real worlds (Eagleton 1997, 42), in reality she perceives the literary world as a broad ethical laboratory in which she examines the prevailing forms of moral action and decision-making.

An important feature of literature is that it usually depicts complex moral situations, presenting them to us in a broad context, revealing the origins and assumptions of actions, as well as their possible consequences, so that we can adequately understand the situation. Philosophical works often lose sight of this connection with complex experience. Nussbaum even notes that interpreting a literary work, such as a Greek tragedy, is much more difficult than interpreting a philosophical example or thought experiment, which is often taken out of its broader context ([1986] 2001, 14). She does not want to extract any specific teaching from literature, but to lead us to moral reasoning that will always perceive and take into account the context of the situation that has arisen (Lesch 2003, 189).

According to Nussbaum, literary narratives are characterised by a higher concentration of life experience (1990, 171) than, for example, biographical narratives of patients, and they also have a higher degree of reflection. Literature not only reflects events and human experience, but also offers critical reflection and evaluation of the experience presented, thus becoming a medium of reflection. This proves to be particularly important where we currently lack ethical interpretative patterns (Düwell 2008, 53).

In several works, Nussbaum highlights the ability of literature to stimulate the narrative imagination ([1997] 2003, 85–112; 2010, 95–120). It teaches us to imagine what it is like to be in another person's shoes, thereby awakening our emotions, empathy, compassion and solidarity, which are invaluable guides in

moral reasoning. In doing so, she opens up the important topic of the confrontation between rational logical argumentation in ethical reasoning on the one hand and emotional, empathetic, participatory understanding on the other. In several works, she emphasises that intellectual reasoning and logical argumentation alone are not sufficient for complex ethical evaluation. Emotions also play a role in ethical thinking ([1986] 2001, xxvii). Similarly, in *Cultivating Humanity*, she states that narrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral action ([1997] 2003, 86). It stimulates our compassionate sensitivity to the needs of others who are often wounded, excluded or oppressed. Compassion requires awareness of our own vulnerability. “Our Anglo-American philosophical tradition has tended to assume that the ethical text should, in the process of inquiry, converse with the intellect alone; it should not make its appeal to the emotions, feelings, and sensory responses” (Nussbaum [1986] 2001, 15). The author disagrees with this position. She repeatedly notes that participants in moral reasoning should possess a high degree of moral integrity, a moral character that, in addition to rational logical abilities, is also characterised by emotional and narrative sensitivity.

We consider these Nussbaum’s reflections to be particularly stimulating, as they support the arguments of Steinkamp, Gordijn and Have on the importance of developed moral competence in decision-making in serious moral cases. According to Nussbaum, moral competence can also be developed through art and literature, by strengthening narrative abilities. In line with these considerations, it is understandable why the American author Rita Charon, along with other prominent authors, considers the practice and training of narrative skills for use in medicine to be an important supporting competence for every good healthcare professional (Charon and Montello 2002; Wohlmann et al. 2022). In her narrative medicine programme, Charon emphasises the practice of narrative skills and their use in a clinical setting. Like Nussbaum, she sees literature as an ethical laboratory where we learn to listen, interpret, critically reflect and discuss before making moral judgements (Charon 2005, 261–270). These skills, which we acquire through diligent work with the text, help us to deepen our understanding of ourselves and others, which is particularly valuable and necessary in situations where difficult decisions must be made in clinical medicine or bioethics (Vogel and Michl 2022, 419–425).

Similarly, the prominent American author Martha Montello (2021, 163) sees the greatest potential of the narrative approach in the clinical setting, where it enables patients to find a way out of critical situations in which they face serious decisions through narrative-ethical analysis. Drawing on ideas from literary

theory, Montello developed a method for determining what is truly important to patients and what has the greatest significance in their thinking based on their stories. She creates this map of what matters (called a “mattering map”) using four elements of the narrative: voice, figure, plot and resolution (2021, 166–169). Voice refers to the narrator; it is the voice of the person telling the story. Figure clarifies whose story it is, who is at the centre of the story, so that, for example, the doctor’s story does not replace the patient’s story. The plot identifies the turning point that interrupted the unfolding of the life story. Montello describes it with the metaphor of a ticking clock, when the “tick” phase is not followed by the expected “tock” phase (2021, 168). And this is precisely the moment where, with the help of narrative-ethical analysis, it is possible to find a way forward. The resolution is therefore not the resolution of the case, but the understanding and mapping of what matters most to the patient and understanding how to take the next step. The narrative-ethical analysis procedure, which Montello uses in practice in a clinical setting (1997, 186), shares several features with the hermeneutic approach which seeks to arrive at understanding through the hermeneutic spiral (Ricoeur 1996, 173–206). This involves understanding not only texts, but also, in a broader, Heideggerian sense, understanding human existence. Several parallels with philosophical hermeneutics can already be found in the intention itself: to read/interpret human action as text (Ibid.; Vydrová 2019).

The method of reflective equilibrium

Returning to Nussbaum’s analysis of the interdiscursive relationships between literature and ethics, its most significant outcome is a discussion of a methodology that would adequately reflect specific life experience and also take into account the results of literary-ethical analyses. Following John Rawls, she considers the method of reflective equilibrium (Rawls [1971] 1999; Nussbaum 1990, 173–174), which can integrate several components into the process of moral reasoning. Moral judgement arises here from mutual reflective correction between moral intuitions and beliefs acquired through life experience on the one hand, and general ethical principles on the other. This process of mutual dynamic balancing also incorporates prevailing moral opinions and attitudes that come from the analysis of human behaviour and decision-making depicted in literary stories and which, as possible alternative positions, are a useful extension of the overall assessment. Nussbaum seeks a middle ground between general principles and consideration of individual cases. She does not abandon normative considerations, but changes the way in which she arrives at a normative conclusion. This is an extremely

important point in the current debate on moral reasoning. Moral judgements do not have to be derived from an abstract principle (top-down) or from empirical moral beliefs by way of induction (bottom-up), but are reached through a complex process of mutual criticism and correction of all relevant beliefs and general principles (Badura [2002] 2006, 200–201; Sumner 2024, 166–179). This means that it is necessary to test and balance the individual parts until a coherent connection is created, the components of which can then be considered justified (Daniels 1979, 258). Moral intuitions and normative principles must be reflectively filtered (similar to what Rawls proposed in his search for principles of justice “behind the veil of ignorance”; Rawls [1971] 1999, 63) a certain “balance”, i.e. moral goods that we can assume deserve general approval and that could be the answer to the question of how to have a good, valuable life. In this way, Nussbaum formulated basic capabilities for ethics, i.e., basic goods that are essential conditions for a dignified life and which, in her words, society should guarantee to all its members at least at a minimum threshold level (2011, 33–34).

From the perspective of our reasoning, it is essential that moral intuitions gained through narrative-ethical analysis of literary works are also part of the reflective equilibrium method. The narrative approach helped Nussbaum identify the prevailing moral beliefs about the good life in literary narratives, which she obtained by analysing and examining the moral conflicts depicted and the ways in which they were resolved, and which she then incorporated into reflective balancing together with normative ethical principles. She considers this approach to be internally coherent, holistic and plausible (1990, 174).

If we are to evaluate the significance of the mutual cooperation between literature and ethics on the basis of the author’s analyses, we can say that literature contributes to the self-understanding of ethical theory, confronts it with alternative concepts of moral action, creates images of life that stimulate discussion of ethical issues, and represents experiences without which theoretical ethics would be significantly impoverished. Ethics, in turn, helps to uncover moral views and positions in literary works that prevail in a given culture and tradition or transcend it, while ethics comments on and critically reflects on these ethical dimensions of literary text.

Narrative representations in contemporary bioethics

The potential of the narrative approach, which Martha C. Nussbaum demonstrated on the basis of a long-term dialogue between literature and ethics, has significantly encouraged initiatives seeking to incorporate it into bioethics. In bioethics,

the narrative approach focuses mainly on human life experience as depicted in stories about new biotechnologies applied to humans. Over the past thirty years, several forms of narrative representations of human experience have emerged within the bioethical discourse.

According to Hille Haker, the most extensive part consists of patients' narratives about diseases (2007, 264). They are mostly biographical in nature, recounting experiences with their own illness, its course, or problems associated with the treatment. They confront us with the uncertainty that almost every illness brings. Patients' stories describe authentic problems and conflicts in decision-making and action. Several types of stories can be distinguished among them.

One of them is patients' stories about illness recorded in a published, mostly essayistic form. In his study, Haker states that the narrative approach seeks to give patients back their voice, which is heard in the form of storytelling, something we realise more clearly in published stories than in other forms (2007, 258). This is often a form of self-expression that is part of the treatment process and, in particular, of gradually coming to terms with the illness as a new part of one's identity. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy offers a very thought-provoking philosophical reflection on his experience with heart transplantation and the serious health complications associated with it in his book *L'Intrus* (2000). Particularly noteworthy are his reflections on what is still "one's own" and what is "alien", and especially how illness enters into the reformatting of one's own identity. Another form of life experience with deep brain stimulation is described in the book *Tief im Hirn* (2006) by the German sociologist Helmut Dubiel, one of the prominent supporters of the narrative approach in bioethics. In order to suppress the motor problems associated with Parkinson's disease, doctors implanted an electrode in his brain to stimulate the relevant parts of the brain with electrical impulses. He was able to fine-tune the stimulation parameters more precisely using an external controller. This treatment is reversible, with the possibility of stopping the stimulation in the event of significant side effects (Stieglitz 2009, 23; Tomašovičová 2023, 145–148). Dubiel narratively captures the situation before and after the operation, describing in detail his experience of the close connection between his own brain and the technical device, feelings of self-alienation, the instrumentalization of his body, as well as what was probably the most serious effect of deep brain stimulation, which was damage to the language centre in his brain and the associated loss of the ability to articulate his own thoughts (Dubiel 2006, 125). After a year of existence in a "tunnel of uncertainty" (Ibid.) and after further expert consultations at another clinic, his ability to speak was restored after the stimulation was inter-

rupted, and his cognitive abilities also improved. On the other hand, however, his motor difficulties intensified and he developed depression which accompanied his illness and also had a negative impact on his loved ones. He therefore had to learn to control the stimulator in order to find a middle ground between excessive limb tremors and symptoms of depression on the one hand, and speech and cognitive impairments on the other.

Dubiel's and Nancy's stories, like other such very personal, authentic patient stories, are significant for several reasons. They often fulfil a therapeutic function for the patient themselves, play a hermeneutic role in the effort to understand oneself, and, above all, are an important ethical statement about the various layers of consideration and decision-making in fundamental moral questions. In addition, they show that only the depiction of authentic subjective experience helps us to form an objective picture of the functioning of biotechnologies applied to humans (Müller 2009, 496–499).

Another form of storytelling in a clinical setting is case studies, i.e. stories that are multi-perspective in nature because they are described from the perspective of all those involved. Only such an expansion to include the views of the patient, doctor, nursing staff and family allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the extent of the moral conflict (Lindemann Nelson 1997, xi). These narratives are similar to case studies, where the effort to thoroughly describe the moral dimensions of the case dominates so that it can be analogously compared with related paradigmatic cases and an adequate moral judgement can be proposed (Düwell 2008, 52). This is yet another situation where the importance of a narrative approach that takes into account the broader context of the story, the interrelationships, reasons and consequences, becomes apparent in order to avoid quick and, above all, narrow-minded solutions. Such a multi-perspective view of the case is a good prerequisite for credible moral decisions.

A separate specific form of narrative representation is constituted by artistic literary narratives and film adaptations with rich bioethical themes (e.g. Kazuo Ishiguro and others). They are an important medium for reflecting on past experience and anticipating future possibilities in connection with the use of modern technology. Their contribution is considered irreplaceable in bioethical discourse. Finally, it can be said that even in the case of the relationship between literature and bioethics, the effectiveness of mutual cooperation in a similar sense to that described by Martha C. Nussbaum in relation to literature and ethics has been proven. The narrative approach in bioethics fulfils several tasks: it can strengthen our ability to listen carefully to others, interpret their attitudes in the context of a

broader life story, reflect on and discuss the possible negative and positive consequences of a decision, and subsequently formulate a moral judgement. In this sense, narrative ability is an important prerequisite for correct moral action. It is not a substitute for rational ethical argumentation and normative reasoning, but an important complementary part of it.

Conclusion

So, what is the significance of the narrative approach in bioethics and what position has it gained in comparison with normative concepts? It can be said that the narrative-ethical method does not aspire to be an alternative method that would replace normative ethical approaches. Nussbaum shows that the narrative approach can serve as a complementary addition to normative methods. However, not only in a weak version, where moral judgement would be applied within the framework of general sensitivity or perceptiveness, also taking into account the narrative form of the case under consideration. In the context of the author's analyses, we lean towards the proposal to incorporate moral convictions obtained through narrative-ethical analysis of a specific human case, together with normative ethical principles, into the process of reflective consideration and mutual correction. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that moral judgement is formed in sufficient proximity to human experience, for which the narrative approach creates suitable conditions.

Of course, we cannot ignore the potential risk of moral relativism, as the multitude of voices and perspectives, especially when they are incomparable, increases the demands for finding a reflective balance (Flynn 2020). However, we should take this risk of pluralism, because if we lost sight of specific life experience, ethics would lose touch with real life and moral practice in a hermetically sealed idealisation.

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The accelerated development and application of new biotechnologies confront us with new life situations and moral dilemmas, for the solution of which we often lack adequate interpretational models. In many cases, the principles of traditional normative ethics are insufficient to address new, emerging problems, which prompts the exploration of other suitable methodological approaches. The authors of this book focus on exploring the relationships between literature and bioethics and reveal their extraordinary potential to foster critical thinking, moral action, and the formation of visions for the development of society. They not only examine how literature reflects and addresses bioethical dilemmas, but also analyze how the literary treatment of these dilemmas and the anticipation of their possible solutions can help shape, refine, and deepen the bioethical discourse. The individual studies in this volume confirm that the development of narrative skills is becoming an important part of a broader bioethical reflection which can strengthen the moral competencies needed to solve complex moral issues.

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