

## **A Transgression of Autonomy: Exploring Bioethical Issues in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go***

**Dr. Grace George**, Guest Faculty, Department of English, Pondicherry University,  
Pondicherry (India). [gracetheresageorge@gmail.com](mailto:gracetheresageorge@gmail.com)  
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### *Abstract*

*After the creation of the first cloned mammal, Dolly the sheep, the notion of human cloning has emerged as a sensational subject that has engrossed the intellectual discourse of scientists, philosophers, and policymakers. It became a recurring subject in popular culture, elucidating the collective anxieties about futuristic technologies and analysing the potential ramifications that could result from them. Attempting to replicate human beings utilising existing technology entails inherent risks as it may jeopardise the lives of the subjects. The existing concerns regarding human cloning primarily revolve around procedural inefficacy and an inherent aversion towards artificially creating human beings within the confines of a laboratory. This article on Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is intended to be an extensive bioethical analysis to understand the ethical considerations surrounding human reproductive cloning with a particular emphasis on its transgressions on autonomy.*

**Keywords:** Autonomy; Human Cloning; Kazuo Ishiguro; Biomedical Ethics; Immanuel Kant

### **Introduction**

The ethics of human cloning is extensively explored within the field of bioethics, along with ethically controversial issues like abortion, surrogacy, prenatal diagnosis, euthanasia and organ donation. It also discusses the ethical implications that could arise from research related to advanced biotechnological inventions, like genetic engineering, stem cell research, gene therapy and human cloning. It emerged as an academic discipline in the mid-1900s, driven by the advancement of technology in healthcare procedures, historical instances of human experimentation, and increased awareness of the significance of protecting human rights. Bioethics provides a comprehensive moral framework to regulate healthcare procedures. One of the foundational texts in bioethics, the *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* has four cardinal principles, autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice, which play a crucial role in enabling the integration of technological advancements in the field of medicine while simultaneously ensuring the preservation of human rights and dignity. As the frontiers of genetics expand with the advancement of technology, it is crucial to thoroughly explore the repercussions of technological inventions in the field of medicine to guarantee their equitable and ethical implementation. Bioethical guidelines become a foundation for establishing a legal framework that protects individual rights and communal welfare. The convergence of various technologies, such as biotechnology, neuroethics, genome

editing, and artificial intelligence, has led to new ethical questions that require continuous scrutiny. Bioethical principles are substantially influenced by the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, an 18th-century moral philosopher, who advocated that ethical actions should be based on reason and rationality rather than subjective desires or consequences. His three categorical imperatives act as guiding principles that mandate ethical conduct. The first among three formulations of the categorical imperative, also known as the principle of universalisability, states that individuals should follow ethical guidelines that can be considered appropriate for universal adoption in comparable circumstances. The incorporation of the ethical principle of "justice" in *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* by Childress and Beauchamp is influenced by this principle. The second one states: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (Kant 38), emphasising the importance of protecting human life and dignity. The inclusion of the principle of "autonomy" in biomedical ethics can be attributed to the third formulation of the categorical imperative, which declares that every rational individual possesses the right to engage in autonomous action. This principle guarantees that participants are comprehensively informed of research objectives, hazards, and possible advantages regarding the medical procedures being administered to them. They are entitled to make autonomous decisions to engage or disengage without coercion or influence, accentuating the significance of moral duty, self-governance, and the intrinsic value of rational beings. The ethical axioms espoused by Immanuel Kant influenced the incorporation of autonomy among the ethical guidelines and policies across diverse domains of bioethics.

*Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (1979), a seminal work that has immensely influenced the development of contemporary bioethics discourse, was written by Dr Tom L. Beauchamp and Dr James F. Childress. Beauchamp, an esteemed American bioethicist, professor, and researcher, has garnered enormous recognition for his contributions to the field. His primary research areas involve foundational approaches to bioethics, animal ethics, and informed consent. Beauchamp has made immense contributions to the composition of The Belmont Report and the *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, which has become a foundational text in the field of bioethics. The first principle in the *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, autonomy, recognises and supports an individual's entitlement to exercise informed and independent decision-making in matters regarding their healthcare. Patients have the right to receive comprehensive information regarding the potential outcomes and advantages of their treatment, and they are entitled to provide consent to the procedure without any external coercion or influence. It is crucial for the physician to provide full disclosure regarding the treatment plan, ensuring that all relevant information is revealed to the patient or their immediate family member before obtaining their consent. In order for the patient to fully comprehend the procedure, they must possess a sound mental capacity to make voluntary decisions. The second principle, known as beneficence, places emphasis on prioritising the patient's best interests. The third principle, non-maleficence, emphasises the ethical duty to abstain from inflicting harm and alleviate both physical and mental distress that patients may encounter. The fourth principle, justice, is a fundamental tenet that aims to guarantee the fair allocation of health-related resources and the unbiased treatment of individuals.

*The Principles of Biomedical Ethics* provide healthcare professionals with a comprehensive framework as a moral compass for navigating their medical practice, emphasising the importance of fostering patient-centred care. By applying these foundational principles, professionals within the healthcare industry, as well as researchers and policymakers, can effectively navigate the

intricate ethical dilemmas that arise in the field of medicine. The crux of bioethical principles is preserving human life as it unequivocally proscribes inflicting harm upon another individual, regardless of its benefits in scientific advancements or any other conceivable domain. Moreover, it mandates that patients have the right to have a comprehensive understanding of the medical interventions being administered to them, as any non-consensual medical procedure can be considered as human experimentation, transgressing ethical boundaries of health care. In the existing scenario, the technology involving cloning fails to provide adequate assurance of the safety of the subjects, leading to premature deaths and severe physical debilitations (Williams R210). They are vulnerable to developing disabilities and diseases as human cloning can strain the gene pool, resulting in developmental disorders. Adapting human cloning as a procreative method can have enduring genealogical repercussions as it can restrain genetic diversity. Human cloning will remain a subject of legal, ethical, and moral contention due to its contravention of numerous civil, political, and human rights.

The core idea of autonomy is the agency to govern, regulate and determine one's life and future. Individuals are driven by their desires and ambitions, acting out of their codes outside of any third-party influences while aligning with the moral aspects of governance. The process of cloning complicates the idea of autonomy as the cloned child is born from a medical procedure and is subjected to its subsequent problematic life without having the option to consent. When humans are a product of conscious design, genetic predetermination takes precedence over self-determination. The influence of external factors in determining genetic composition exerts a significant impact on the lives of clones, violating their autonomy and undermining their inherent value as sentient beings. Manipulating the genetic composition of a human being and altering their surroundings to achieve a specific objective violates their rights. A sentient human being is entitled to exercise self-governance over their life and maintain control over their body. When clones are created to resemble a particular individual, they are subjected to intense pressure to exhibit comparable character traits and skills. When scientists select a particular individual for cloning, they opt for a specific genetic code and the associated genetically inherited traits. This decision imposes certain limitations on the child's potential and places pressure on them to meet the expectations related to their genetic identity. When human beings are created to have specific traits that are tailored to serve a desired purpose, they are perceived as possessions rather than persons. In this article, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is analysed using the concepts of Kantian autonomy and the *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* by James F. Childress and Tom L. Beauchamp.

## Discussion

*Never Let Me Go* (2005), written by Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, features a world where clones are created exclusively for organ donation to augment the lifespan of their sexually reproduced counterparts. The narrative unfolds from the perspective of thirty-one-year-old Kathy, the narrator and one of the central characters of the novel, as she recounts her experiences as a clone within an alternate, hypothetical rendition of late twentieth-century England. The central characters of the novel are raised within the confines of a boarding school named Hailsham under the supervision of parental figures called guardians. The clones in *Never Let Me Go* are designed and nurtured with the purpose of forcing them to contribute organs once they reach adulthood. The novel adopts the narrative structure of a bildungsroman, meticulously tracing the growth of its primary characters, namely Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, spanning their formative years into adulthood,

culminating in their ultimate demise as a consequence of organ donation. The text elucidates the upbringing of clones within the care of guardians, who passively support the exploitation of the clones. In order to improve the effectiveness of organ donation in the future, the cloned children are provided with explicit instructions by the guardians to keep their insides clean and healthy, which the clones mistakenly interpret as compassion and concern the guardians have towards them. The guardians have spread terrorising rumours regarding the world outside the confines of Hailsham, intending to constrain the students to the school premises and prevent them from attempting to escape. The children are denied the right to autonomous thought and action, and they are conditioned to be heteronomous, passive and fearful, as they are meant to be complacent towards a system that exploits them.

The perception of a cloned child as a unique individual is complicated as they are deliberately deprived of their right to have a unique genetic makeup. The concept of a genetic replica of an individual suggests that the life and behaviours of the clone are influenced by the genetic material they possess. This perception is internalised by the clones in the novel, which is elucidated through Kathy's attempts to locate her original within the pages of adult magazines. She believes that her original will exhibit an identical level of intense sexual proclivity, which she perceives as atypical and contemptible at the time. Within the novel, the clones are perceived as individuals lacking the capacity for autonomous thought due to the commonly held belief that individual characteristics and decisions are predetermined by the genetic material they possess. The genetic composition and environment of the clones have been deliberately engineered by a third person, compromising their autonomy. The clones in the novel are generally perceived as an extension or reflection of an already existing individual, carrying the burden of a similar existence. The exploration of the conflict between self-determination and genetic predetermination is a prevalent theme in clone narratives. In fictional works that revolve around the theme of cloning, it is observed that the clones are frequently denied agency, and their very existence is reliant upon their adherence to a predetermined role. In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are artificially created to force them to undergo organ donation upon reaching a specific age and the guardians in the novel perpetuate and affirm the abuse against the children. In Hailsham, the guardians are conspicuously committed to providing the students with an environment that keeps them healthy and obedient. The guardians encourage the students to embrace their inevitable destiny with a profound sense of fulfilment and perceive it as their ultimate purpose. The selective disclosure of facts regarding their fate is masqueraded as an empathetic approach to protect the students from emotional turmoil. In her essay "Identity Humanity and Bioethics: Philosophical Aspects of *Never Let Me Go*," Iris Vidmar highlights the plight of children who are born without biological ties, longing for parental affection, and susceptible to external manipulation and exploitation: "Their teachers are mostly cold and distant, dedicated to their role as teachers but emotionally completely detached from children who grow up without having experienced the most basic human need of all: that of being loved by one's parents" (Vidmar 7). In the absence of biological ties, children tend to form attachments and exhibit loyalty towards their guardians, which is exploited for breeding fealty towards authority. They experience deprivation of their capacity for independent thought as they are conditioned to be heteronomous since childhood, undermining their status as sentient, autonomous beings. They have internalised the contempt and animosity that the guardians and society have towards them, and they perceive themselves as being inferior to sexually reproduced individuals.

In the novel, the reproductive autonomy of the cloned children is denied, as the clones are deliberately engineered without the ability to have children, and they have already absorbed their predicament even before Miss Emily, one of the guardians, explicitly explains it to them. The portrayal of Kathy's grief in relation to her infertility is depicted in the novel through the elucidation of a particular incident. In this scene, Kathy empathises with a mother who endures a lengthy wait before becoming pregnant. Kathy gently clutches a pillow against her chest as if attempting to soothe a child, imitating a mother who tenderly cradles an infant, all while sentimentally moving to the rhythm of the music. In the novel, the deliberate design of clones as infertile by scientists is a denial of their reproductive rights and autonomy, contravening the *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. An individual's ability to procreate accentuates their status as a human being, and their incapacity to reproduce further alienates them from being perceived as human. The physicians in the text intentionally harm the clones by subjecting them to non-consensual medical procedures that ultimately result in their demise, violating the principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice.

In the novel, initially, Kathy appears to internalise this sense of purpose imparted to her, showing pride in her abilities as a carer for organ donors and as a former Hailsham student. As an individual lacking the opportunity to exercise autonomous decision-making, Kathy derives immense satisfaction from the privilege of choosing her patients, perceiving it as a justifiable reward for being exceptional in her profession. Societal norms shape Kathy's thoughts as a child, but as she grows older and challenges the oppressive system, evolving into an independent person with a strong sense of self. Although the environmental factors are designed to mould her to internalise her purpose, Kathy refuses to be reduced to a mere hoard of organs waiting to be harvested. Her self-perception is deeply intertwined with her interpersonal relationships with Tommy and Ruth and her designated responsibilities as a carer. She is ultimately unable to effectively challenge the prevailing system and rescue Tommy and herself from the donation program. The clones in the novel are powerless to resist the medical procedures administered to them by the powerful, oppressive government. Kathy, Ruth and Tommy are forced to donate their organs, which ultimately results in their demise. The donation program goes against the *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* as it non-consensually harvests the internal organs of clones, violating their bodily autonomy and denying their right to live.

The students of Hailsham are considered fortunate and consistently reminded of their privilege to be a part of this educational institution. They are raised in a relatively more humane condition than the other clones, and the guardians expect the children to be grateful for their situation. The clones in the novel are created without biological ties and subjected to continuous manipulation and conditioning. The prevailing societal perception of clones as subhuman beings serves to alleviate the consciousness of the ones aiding and facilitating the donation program. "So, for a long time, you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter" (Ishiguro 258). The state asserts its ownership over the clones by virtue of its involvement in their creation, utilising their unconventional origin as a pretext to negate their humanity and agency. From a Kantian standpoint, it is posited that humans ought to be regarded as an end in themselves rather than a mere instrument for attaining an end. As humans are intrinsically self-serving, they are unconcerned about the harm they cause others, and the marginalised sections of society are exploited to serve the needs of the affluent and

privileged. Here, the healthcare sector functions to save "humans" by harming clones, violating the principles of non-maleficence and justice. Ishiguro paints a grim future where fundamental human rights are denied to a section of society, and they are brutally murdered to appease the majority through his novel *Never Let Me Go*.

The primary focus of medical ethics lies in safeguarding human life and minimising any potential harm inflicted upon the subjects. The *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* direct medical practitioners to ensure that the participants are fully informed regarding the details of the treatments administered to them, as non-consensual medical procedures border on human experimentation. The existing technology related to cloning is currently in its early developmental phase and has the potential to cause considerable harm to the subjects involved, including the egg donor, surrogate, and the resulting child. The reason behind the widespread prohibition of human cloning research in democratic nations primarily stems from the established health hazards associated with the existing procedure. In his thought-provoking essay "The Wisdom of Repugnance," Leon R. Kass states that the primary reason behind the outrage directed at the prospect of human cloning arises from a deep-seated repugnance towards the idea of replicating human beings. Moreover, Kass posits that the act of human cloning can cause identity confusion among cloned children, and the adoption of cloning as a means of reproduction may introduce intricacies within familial dynamics. The prevailing societal stigma associated with human cloning will eventually diminish when the technology evolves enough to ensure the safety of the subjects involved. However, in a hypothetical future where the technology involving cloning is perfected, the legal, ethical, and moral implications of human cloning will persist.

The utilisation of artificial reproductive technologies (ART), such as in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), enables the cultivation of embryos within controlled laboratory environments. In the event that one of the couples, experiences difficulty in generating viable sperm or eggs, they have the alternative of procuring them from a donor. IVF technology is extensively used worldwide as a treatment for infertility. This process facilitates an individual to choose an optimal donor who possesses the desired characteristic features, thereby granting them the ability to exercise a certain level of influence over the genetic makeup of the resulting children (Harris 356). The potentiality of human cloning poses a significant challenge to the autonomy of the subject, as it facilitates the deliberate manipulation of an individual's genetic identity and subsequent life. In addition, the practice of animal cloning has been found to have adverse effects, resulting in developmental disorders and a higher mortality rate among the resulting offspring (Burgstaller and Brem 418). In addition to the potential physiological complications associated with the utilisation of human cloning as a means of reproduction, this practice undermines the inherent individuality and distinct identity of the cloned child. *Never Let Me Go* portrays a scenario where clones are created to perform a particular societal function, where their genetic composition is engineered, and they are subsequently subjected to a process of systematic conditioning to mould their personality traits.

## Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* depicts a posthuman society where the clones are created with the explicit intention of organ harvesting. They are denied parental guardianship and biological ties, rendering them susceptible to exploitation. They are manipulated and conditioned

by their parental figures to internalise their designated purpose as donors and perceive it as their destiny. They are raised to be passive and complacent towards the system that utilises and abuses them, which eventually diminishes their capacity to resist or question authority. In the novel, the four cardinal *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* are violated as the clones are subjected to non-consensual procedures, including forced sterilisation and organ donation, that deny their autonomy and significantly affect their health. They are perceived as a marginalised section in the dystopian society portrayed by Ishiguro, where they are denied primary health care and fair allocation of healthcare resources. Furthermore, the process of cloning involves determining the genetic composition of the resulting child, complicating their status as autonomous beings and compromising their right to have an open future. As the technology involving cloning is an experimental procedure that can risk the lives of the subjects involved, it violates the *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. The clones in the novel become experimental subjects, denied of fundamental human rights as they are deliberately engineered with a distinct objective, compromising their inherent autonomy and subjecting them to dehumanisation and exploitation.

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