

AN ODYSSEY INTO THE ETHICAL SELF IN CONVERSATION WITH LAURA COLOMBINO'S *KAZUO ISHIGURO AND ETHICS*

Małgorzata HOŁDA

University of Łódź, Institute of English Studies, Department of British Literature and Culture, Pomorska 171/173, 90-236 Łódź, Poland

malgorzata.holda@uni.lodz.pl | 

The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into the pulse. (Dillard 1994, 66.)

Kazuo Ishiguro and Ethics (Routledge, 2025) is a highly nuanced, original, and riveting exploration of the philosophical dilemmas pertinent to Ishiguro's fictional imaginings. Illuminating the emotional basis of human moral quandaries, the book focuses on a thorough examination of the human condition (*conditio humana*), our attitudes toward responsibility, pride, loyalty, respect, and the pervasive vitality of love and friendship we desire, but oftentimes are unable to fully appreciate and understand. Weaving scrupulously conducted close readings of Ishiguro's novels and philosophical investigation, Colombino's work is a one-of-a-kind, extensive survey of the ethical underpinnings of Ishiguro's fictional world(s). The study captures his

malgorzata holda

unique ways of expressing what it means to be a human being in the profound sense of transcending oneself, growing, and becoming, and, thus, also what it means to be attentive to the Other. Colombino rightly argues that ethics is not a subsidiary topic for Ishiguro. On the contrary, it constitutes the very axis, around which his fictional worlds revolve.

Although in the recent past, Ishiguro's fiction has already run a wide gamut of interpretations using an ethical lens—the most frequent ones being cosmopolitan (cf., e.g., Stanton 2006) and posthumanism ethics (cf., e.g., Mattar 2022), as well as the eco-ethical perspective (cf., e.g., Gresil and Rivas 2024)—, Colombino's book is a real *tour de force* of an impassioned dialogue with Ishiguro, who can be named as an ethics-oriented novelist, since his works potently reveal how people struggle to find an answer to a daunting question of what the right course of action is in the often complex and problematic circumstances. The adorable diversity of the philosophical standpoints, from which the book views Ishiguro's novels—Martin Heidegger's and Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, Hannah Arendt's gloss on responsibility, Georg W. F.

472 Hegel's phenomenology, Walter Benjamin's aesthetics, Plato's ethics and moral psychology, Adam Smith's philosophy of morality, or Martha Nussbaum's recent musings on the presence of philosophy in literature, to name the most thoroughly investigated—, attests to Colombino's genuine interest in interrogating philosophical ideas contained in his fictions. While she offers detailed analyses of topics of empathy and fiction, or truth and fiction, her approach goes far beyond cognitivism and literature, exhaustively articulated, for instance, in the recent works by Gregory Currie (2020) or Michael Mack (2012). Her methodology is decidedly far more reaching and more inclusive. Although Colombino does not name her investigation a hermeneutic one, the reader might venture to view her thorough, insightful, and multifaceted study as a stimulating instance of hermeneutical thinking in its wide-ranging scope and comprehensiveness.

The book contains five chapters, each devoted to one of Ishiguro's major works. The “Introduction” already reveals Colombino's penetrating insights into the subtle fabric of ethics as enacted in the fictional day-to-day existence in Ishiguro's creations. The neatly constructed chapters are rounded up by a coda, in which one more time Colombino emphasizes the intricacies and

conflicting nature of moral choices. As she asserts, throughout the course of events in Ishiguro's fictional imaginations, his protagonists are repeatedly preoccupied with moral claims that are put on them, and their lives are destined to "the realisation of a higher moral principle—be it professional excellence, friendship, caring, justice or peace" (Colombino 2025, 1). The issue of self-transcendence, as Colombino explains, appears to be the leading ethical demand that can be discerned in the entirety of Ishiguro's fictional realizations.

Dealing with the narrative of *The Remains of the Day* in chapter one entitled "What Is a Good Life? *The Remains of the Day* as an Aporetic Dialogue on Dignity," Colombino proposes an intensely resounding axiological viewpoint. She reveals how portraying his protagonist as going through the meanders of subjective preferences and beliefs, Ishiguro strives to pinpoint the importance of a coherent system of values, which would enable one to live an ethically meaningful life and the following of which more than often is thwarted by one's misguided sense of propriety, dignity, or dutifulness. Depicting the sorrowful reality of the novel's protagonist—Stevens loses his inner, true self while acting out the role of a perfect butler—, Ishiguro awakens us to better apprehend the pressures and dire consequences of the misconceptions surrounding life spent in service and duty. Colombino guides us through Ishiguro's knotty fictional reality, in which the irrevocability of time, regret, loss, as well as the power of the unspoken, and the moral choices dictated by the erroneous sense of decorum and respectfulness sensitize us to more deeply understand the gravity of the human predicament. She contends:

In the emotional and moral tug of war between loyalty and self-definition, belonging and pursuit, it is the latter drives that seem ultimately to prevail. However unwillingly undertaken, Socratic questioning leads Stevens to an *anagnorisis*, whose effect is so painful as to become "destructive" (Ishiguro in Hunnewell n.p.): "[m]y heart was breaking" (RD 252), he admits grief-stricken. (Colombino 2025, 56.)

As Colombino argues, in Ishiguro's fiction, the axiological perspective tightly interlocks with the ontological one. She writes:

On the one hand, they [Ishiguro's novels] are tied to the existential condition of being in the world, which acquires a distinctively Heideggerian quality of *thrownness* from *The Unconsoled* onwards. On the other hand, they aspire to the *good*, in the Platonic sense that includes a form of virtue and excellence, or the *possible*, which, for Heidegger, betokens one's "ability-to-be" (*Seinkönnen*) more than one is [...]. (Ibid., 5.)

Colombino chooses this two-fold angle of vision to be the guiding thread for her survey of Ishiguro's two novels, *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*, in chapter two. She perfectly renders Ishiguro's preoccupation in those two texts to embody the truth about a human being as a *homo viator* seeking the meaning of life. Ishiguro's characters feature as physically and mentally journeying through their convoluted realities. In their existential and emotional choices, anxiety and responsibility interweave, and the missed opportunities of living a better life call for reconciliation with oneself and the outer reality. Colombino enhances our understanding of Ishiguro's thought-provoking juxtaposition of idealism and life's banality and harshness, often tinted with a nostalgic desire to return to the past, which is viewed as blissful and fulfilling.

As she ascertains, the poignancy of the reality Ishiguro places his characters in compels them to embark on a journey to search for the moral order and integrity associated with the good old days. She argues:

Once they [Ishiguro's characters] are grown into adults aware of the harsher world, these characters feel the impossible desire to restore the harmony of their earlier days; however unrealisable their objective may be, their idealistic quest sustains their moral being. Theirs is more than just a praiseworthy, touching, sometimes even heroic ambition; it is a moral imperative to "build [a] good world" (WWWO 308). (Ibid., 1.)

Nostalgia serves as an important tool to embrace the feelings that lie dormant, but the expression of which can bring at least a temporary relief to the wounded human being. The suffering human being (*l'homme souffrant*)¹

1 For the notion of *l'homme souffrant*, cf. e.g.: Ricoeur 1986; Wierciński 2013; Hołda 2020.

in those two immensely nostalgic novels is the centre of Ishiguro's attention. Ishiguro's embodiments of woundedness and childhood trauma inspire Colombino to investigate the intricate interweavings between responsibility, justice, and vulnerability. She writes:

The culture of trauma and the ethics of woundedness, that is, the Christ-like embracing of suffering as a form of self-definition, inspire the creation of the two protagonists, Ryder and Christopher. [...] they [Ryder and Christopher] are caught in the destructive and self-destructive dilemma of opposing allegiances—their responsibility towards their family, on the one hand, and the community, on the other. (Ibid., 89.)

The interlocking character of vulnerability, capability, and accountability effectively connects this chapter of her book with the following one.

Chapter three, examining *Never Let Me Go*, is an impressive admixture of insights based on Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity and his notion of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), the ancient Greek conceptualization of the soul, the postmodern sense of existential void, and posthumanism theories. This part is an enthralling interrogation of the fundamental questions of mortality, dignity, and human identity, which Ishiguro so intriguingly exploits via the narrative revolving around technological advancement (cloning). Colombino perceptively discerns Ishiguro's engaging, if paradoxical blurring of allure and fear, when he portrays an individual human life determined by the dictates of society. She argues that *Never Let me Go* reveals the reality of *not-being-at-home* in the world. Using the Heideggerian lens to interpret the novel appears to be a weighty choice. Analyzing the protagonists' sense of homelessness—their profoundly felt inadequacy and loss—against the backdrop of Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) yields interesting results that enlighten our understanding of the preciousness and fragility of human existence. Colombino signals the significance of the Heideggerian reading of this novel very early in her study:

In *Never Let Me Go*, it is precisely the acute consciousness of this temporal limit that gives meaning to the last phase of the clones' life, during which they gain a greater authenticity in their interpersonal relationships through friendship, love and caring. (Ibid., 5–6.)

Being-in-the-world—alongside Heidegger’s other seminal terms, such as being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), being-there (*Dasein*), being-at-home (*Heimlichkeit*), attunement (*Befindlichkeit*), and care (*Sorge*)—constitutes the central theoretical stance Colombino chooses to employ in her outstanding interrogation of Ishiguro’s thematization of human vulnerability and the destruction of individual freedom.

Although she references highly relevant literature in the context of her Heideggerian reading of the novel, it is a bit surprising that she does not refer to Brian Willems’s *Facticity, Poverty and Clone. On Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go* (2010), an important work in the field, with which she might have found many points of convergence. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that Colombino’s employment of Heidegger’s philosophy exceeds the ramifications of one chapter in her book, and, thus, her insights and conclusions take on a special added value of cross-sectional examination of the novels she looks at. She ascertains:

476

[...] central to my argument is the fact that, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes our existence as one of “thrownness,” in the sense that we are thrown into the world without having asked to be [...]. Ishiguro’s narratives offer memorable images of this arbitrariness which lies at the core of our existential condition: from Kathy’s feeling of not being at home in the world after leaving Hailsham, through the series of unpredictable, alienating environments into which Ryder is catapulted, to Klara’s final forlornness in the Yard, where she is discarded and left to “her slow fade” [...]. (*Ibid.*, 4.)

It is worth noting that, through extensive use of Heideggerian philosophy, Colombino efficaciously navigates an explication of Ishiguro’s profound epitomizing of the heterogeneous reality of our *being-in-the-world*.

Colombino’s interrogation of the question of vulnerability, addressed in light of Heidegger’s philosophy of facticity, is enriched with an analysis of an impressive assortment of the perspectives of other thinkers, such as Emmanuel Levinas, Giorgio Agamben, and Judith Butler. The insights from those theories fit very well the book’s delineation of the varied forms of vulnerability explored by Ishiguro and pinpointed by Colombino: existential, biopolitical, and ethical.

Remarkably, the seminal issues of human finitude, fragility, and susceptibility in *Never Let Me Go*, discussed from already diverse philosophical positions, are rounded up by the use of Plato's philosophy no less important for a far-reaching understanding of the novel. The essence-existence distinction, the interlacing of ethics and biopolitics and, above all, the subject of *philia* find an important place in Colombino's laying out of how Ishiguro's satiates his novel with philosophical ideas. The resonances with Plato's *The Republic* and *Lysis* constitute a vital part of Colombino's erudite reconnaissance.

As she claims, in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro creates a mythopoeis inspired by Plato. Interestingly, the mythopoetic elements in his fictional writings extend beyond the confines of this narrative. The novel discussed in the subsequent chapter potently fits into the paradigm of mythopoeis lavishly used by Ishiguro in his oeuvre. Chapter four entitled "Ethics, Myth and the Narrative Voice in *The Buried Giant*" is a superb scrutiny of Ishiguro's employment of myth to display how ethical choices can be validated. This part of the book takes on the quality of an intimate journey that helps us find the answer to the ethical question Ishiguro poses through the narrative of *The Buried Giant*—the moral conundrum of whether recollection or oblivion is more desirable when we attempt to overcome trauma. Colombino notices that the novel's protagonists epitomize the gains and losses of remembering and forgetting, and highlights Ishiguro's flair in developing an enticing philosophical stance of the constructive role of forgetting via the use of myths and tales.

The choice of the next novel examined in the book seems to be dictated precisely by Ishiguro's growing interest in conveying his ideas through the titillating power of mythical narratives. Chapter five, "The Soul's Desire for the Good: Heliotropic Mythology and Anamorphic Mirrors in *Klara and the Sun*," is a fine example of Colombino's apt handling of Ishiguro's recurring use of mythology; this time, it is heliotropic mythology, cogently exploited with the backdrop of utopian ideas. Posing the query whether important human values, such as beauty, excellence, and virtue, can last in a society where reproduction and perfection are the highest and crowning achievements, Ishiguro's narrative yields to the exquisite power of revisiting a somewhat similar topic in *Never Let Me Go*. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, understanding is never a mere repetition, but is always productive (*Verstehen ist kein nur reproduktives, sondern*

stets auch ein produktives Verhalten; Gadamer 1986, 301). The productivity of reiteration results for Ishiguro in creating an outstandingly engaging novel on a timely issue of Artificial Intelligence and the most challenging and disturbing question of what would become of our humanity, of our unique unrepeatability and the innermost, core value, if it were possible for AI to break the doom of our finite *being-in-the-world* and make us immortal? The eponymous character's deep longing for the sun as life-nurturing and life-sustaining serves as a metaphor for people's pursuit of the good, which manifests itself in the beauty and benevolence of human relationships, in friendship and love, and the sense of an unfailing hope that transcends human solitude. Crucially, Colombino vividly shows how *Klara and the Sun* evokes the sharp opposition between the tempting artificial continuance of human existence and the distinctive human character.

Colombino skillfully investigates Ishiguro's dramatization of the contrast between the essence of what it means to be a human being and the mere technological replication of our humanity as the beguiling, yet foreboding result of innovation. Her analysis of this prescient, but pervasively alarming 478 issue is deeply rooted in the recognition of Ishiguro's imagery derived from the ancient myth of the goddess Persephone, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, and even American realist paintings. Colombino's analytical approach to Ishiguro's rendition of the novel's central theme—the fight between light and darkness—is never cursory. It is a deep, superabundant dive into the exceedingly nuanced reality Ishiguro creates, in order to embody the complexities of our human condition and the ongoing fight between good and evil. This chapter effectively demonstrates Ishiguro's ingenious creation of Klara as having dual properties, that of transparent glass and of a distorting mirror. The glass motif reconnects *Klara and the Sun* to *Never Let Me Go*, serving to emphasize a whole range of existential, ethical, and emotional intricacies. Colombino writes:

If the glass window, in *Never Let Me Go* as in *Klara and the Sun*, lures us with the promise of wholeness and bliss, the mirror returns to us the image of our humanity, with its loneliness but also its need to bridge the chasm between individual solitudes. (Ibid., 178.)

Throughout her book, Colombino emphasizes Ishiguro's inimitable way of creating circumstances that are a real challenge to the characters' values

and systems of beliefs. She is preoccupied with the manifold ways, in which Ishiguro addresses the complexities of human agency and moral responsibility, often presenting the characters' failures and the eroding consequences of their wrong ethical choices. Moral responsibility is understood in his narrative worlds as an existential response, which is engrained in our human search for meaning. In their quest for meaning, his characters often use highly elliptical, evasive language, which blurs and distorts the truth they appear to believe in. Colombino indicates that Ishiguro's narratives reflect his belief in "our universal moral urge to strive to become more than we are, to achieve something greater that may lend dignity to our existence and, more generally, our desire for the good" (ibid., 9).

Colombino's urbane style of writing and convincing argumentation challenge our deep-seated convictions and invite us to reflect anew on our human predicament. Her book is an exceedingly welcome position, which profusely and elaborately clarifies how moral choices impact both individuals and communities. This is a guiding idea of her entire book, which is strongly indicated in the "Introduction":

479

The theme of choice is extensively articulated in Ishiguro, ranging from Stevens's abdication of responsibility to the excessive sense of duty felt by both Ryder and Christopher (the protagonists of *When We Were Orphans*), on whose shoulders the task of saving an entire community or even the whole of humanity seems to rest [...]. (Ibid., 6.)

One of the major strengths of Colombino's book is its vivid and stimulating account of Ishiguro's powerful and subtle defense of the human subject's uniqueness against the allurements of technological advancement. Filled with invaluable insights on the relevance of ethical values in today's world and the irreducibility of the human being, the book opens new avenues in the exploration of Ishiguro's fictional imaginings. The universal questions related to ethics, asked by Ishiguro and investigated by Colombino, draw our attention to the unflagging interest of us human beings in resolving the dilemma of what it means to live a good life.

At this point it is worth noticing that Colombino does not refer to Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics, which might have served as an

energizing philosophical perspective, from which Ishiguro's embodiments of ethical dilemmas could be examined. It is a bit of a pity, since Ricoeur's writings on ethics (see, e.g., 1986, 1995) might have shed an additional important light on our understanding of Ishiguro's works. Ricoeur's often-cited words—the call to “live a good life with and for others in just institutions” (1992, 172)—are an immediate point of connection with Ishiguro's insistence on searching for an answer to the question of a good life. On the other hand, though, it should also be emphasized that Colombino eschews any direct revisititations of the extant readings of the ethical backdrop of Ishiguro's oeuvre, which is a conscious and thoughtful move. In her considerate, but not overloading manner she references Yugin Teo's *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory* (which employs Ricoeur's theory of memory), one can recognize the rationale behind her attempt to elude stepping into an area that has already been thoroughly explored. In addition, it is worth accentuating that the seeming shortcoming of not devoting more space to a Ricoeurian reading of Ishiguro has been remedied with the genuinely broad range of other philosophical voices Colombino uses

480 to highlight that the fundamental nature of the ethical quandary lies at the very heart of human inveterate striving to self-understand (*Selbstverständnis*) and to understand the reality around. This unwavering desire, which testifies to our existence as *existentia hermeneutica* and *existentia interpretativa*, prompts us to search for a deepened and context-informed understanding of our *being-in-the-world*.

Employing a whole array of philosophical perspectives, in order to display Ishiguro's profound interest in ethics as the foundation of our human existence, Colombino organizes her material in a punctiliously methodological and effective manner. Her book is a timely call on us to review the values we live by. It comes as a rare gift amidst the present-day chaos, geopolitical anxiety, and the weakening of the solid ethical ground, on which we can stand. This disciplined and illuminating study aptly shows that the author Colombino is fascinated with takes us on an engrossing journey to face the complexities of our existence as moral human beings. She convinces us that the great ethical issues are never obsolete and do not dissolve under the pressures of the skyrocketing pace of scientific development, or political and social changes on the macro- and microscale. Choosing the perspective of ethics, she powerfully attests to

the possibilities of revisiting great philosophical systems and standpoints that offer edgy and well-timed lessons, with which we should never get weary. The selection of texts for inspection clearly demonstrates Colombino's splendid capacity for comparative study, with the result that it is never obtuse or flattened.

In sum, this stylish interdisciplinary book is an irreplaceable contribution to contemporary ethics, trauma studies, intercultural studies, philosophy of literature, and philosophy in literature. It is a captivating read that provokes us to stretch our imagination and reflect anew on the issues of dignity, responsibility, pride, loyalty, and the depth and importance of human relationships. This magnificent work of literary criticism does not make us lose for a moment the delight of immersing ourselves in the beauty of discourse that is both demanding and highly rewarding.

Bibliography | Bibliografija

Colombino, L. 2025. *Kazuo Ishiguro and Ethics*. New York—London: Routledge.

Currie, G. 2020. *Imagining and Knowing. The Shape of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dillard, A. 1994. "Living like Weasels." In *Reading the Environment*, ed. by Melissa Walker, 63–66. New York: W. W. Norton.

Gadamer, H.-G. 1986. *Gesammelte Werke. Vol. 1. Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Gresil, J. S., and V. A. Rivas. 2024. "Posthumanism in ecofeminist literature: Transgressions in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *New Techno-Humanities* 4 (1): 33–40.

Hołda, M. 2020. "L'homme agissant and Self-understanding: Pamela Sue Anderson on Capability and Vulnerability." *Text Matters* 10: 7–24.

Mack, M. 2012. *How Literature Changes the Way We Think*. London—New York: Continuum.

Mattar, N. 2021. "Language and Betrayal: Posthuman Ethics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23 (4).

Ricoeur, P. 1986. *Fallible Man*. Revised trans. by C. A. Kelbley. New York: Fordham University Press.

---. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Trans. by K. Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

---. 1995. "Love and justice." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21 (5-6): 23–39.

Stanton, K. 2006. *Cosmopolitan Fictions. Ethics, Politics, and Global Change in the Works of Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje, Jamaica Kincaid, and J. M. Coetzee*. New York—London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203959312>.

Teo, Y. 2014. *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wierciński, A. 2013. “Hermeneutic Notion of a Human Being as an Acting and Suffering Person.” *Ethics in Progress* 4 (2): 18–33.

Willems, B. 2010. *Facticity, Poverty and Clone. On Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go*. New York: Atropos Press.

phainomena

REVIJA ZA FENOMENOLOGIJO IN HERMENEVTIKO
JOURNAL OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS



Phainomena 34 | 132-133 | June 2025

Transitions | Prehajanja

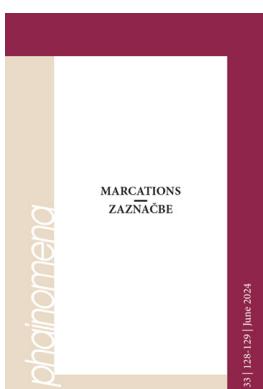
Dean Komel | Paulina Sosnowska | Jaroslava Vydrová | David-Augustin Mândruț | Manca Erzetič | Dragan Prole | Mindaugas Briedis | Irakli Batishvili | Dragan Jakovljević | Johannes Vorlaufer | Petar Šegedin | Željko Radinković | René Dentz | Malwina Rolka | Mimoza Hasani Pllana | Audran Aulanier | Robert Gugutzer | Damir Smiljanić | Silvia Dadà



Phainomena 33 | 130-131 | November 2024

Human Existence and Coexistence in the Epoch of Nihilism

Damir Barbarić | Jon Stewart | Cathrin Nielsen | Ilia Imishev | Petar Bojančić | Holger Zaborowski | Dragan D. Prole | Susanna Lindberg | Jeff Malpas | Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani | Josef Estermann | Chung-Chi Yu | Alfredo Rocha de la Torre | Jesús Adrián Escudero | Veronica Neri | Žarko Paić | Werner Stegmaier | Adriano Fabris | Dean Komel



Phainomena 33 | 128-129 | June 2024

Marcations | Zaznačbe

Mindaugas Briedis | Irfan Muhammad | Bence Peter Marosan | Sazan Kryeziu | Petar Šegedin | Johannes Vorlaufer | Manca Erzetič | David-Augustin Mândruț | René Dentz | Olena Budnyk | Maxim D. Miroshnichenko | Luka Hrovat | Tonči Valentić | Dean Komel | Bernhard Waldenfels | Damir Barbarić

ISSN 1318-3362



9 771318 336204

INR | INSTITUTE NOVA REVJA
FOR THE HUMANITIES

 *phainomena*

PHENOMENOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LJUBLJANA