

THE ANTHROPOCENTRIC ABYSS: POSTHUMAN LOVE AND HUMAN ETHICS IN A.I. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract

Steven Spielberg's A.I. Artificial Intelligence (2001) dramatizes the crisis of humanist morality through the figure of David, a child-android designed to love unconditionally. Interpreted through Herbrechter's posthumanist lens, David's flawless devotion reveals the instability of an anthropocentric moral order: his creators cannot reciprocate the very virtues they claim to cherish. Far from being deficiently human, David embodies empathy and loyalty with such perfection that he renders human shortcomings painfully visible. The paradox of the film lies in this ethical reversal: David succeeds too well at being "human," and it is precisely this success that provokes rejection, cruelty, and abandonment. David's fate exposes the price of safeguarding human exceptionalism: a deliberate denial of empathy and justice to the Other. In dramatizing this refusal, Spielberg lays bare a moral system that disintegrates when confronted with the greater ethical integrity of its own creation.

Introduction

The rise of critical posthumanism has fundamentally disrupted the long-standing presumption of human centrality in moral thought. As Stefan Herbrechter observes, posthumanism is "the deconstruction of humanism," a mode of critique that "challenges the anthropocentrism and exceptionalism on which humanism is based" [1]. Anthropocentrism presumes human superiority within the moral universe, while human exceptionalism posits that reason, affect, and moral capacity belong uniquely to humanity. Posthumanist figures—whether cyborgs, androids, or artificial intelligences—function, in Herbrechter's words, as reminders that "legitimizing human dominance over everything else on this planet comes at a price" [2]. These figures embody the return of what humanism has repressed, manifesting both "its worst nightmares, but also its deepest desires" [3]. Such desires include the creation of beings modeled on humanity

itself, while the nightmares involve the prospect that these creations may not only equal but exceed humanity in the traits most valorized as “human,” such as empathy, fidelity, or love.

This tension is dramatized in literature and cinema, where posthuman figures often destabilize the human–nonhuman divide. As Peter Boxall remarks, contemporary cultural narratives are characterized by “a fascination with the shifting boundary between the human and the nonhuman, and with the ethical, political and cultural challenges that such transformations represent” (Boxall 13). Ethics becomes the core site of confrontation: if an artificial being can think or love, does moral responsibility extend to it, or does anthropocentric bias contract our frameworks in order to deny it personhood? As Herbrechter makes clear, the cost of preserving human privilege is precisely this exclusion—a denial that corrodes human moral integrity itself.

Steven Spielberg’s *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) stages this ethical crisis through David, a childlike android engineered to love unconditionally. His programmed devotion to Monica destabilizes the definition of love as a uniquely human, reciprocal relation. The film frames its central dilemma early: “If a robot could genuinely love a person, what responsibility does that person hold toward that robot in return?” (Spielberg, 0:06:05–15). In embodying this dilemma, David reveals the radical challenge posed by posthuman beings to humanist ethics.

This paper contends that David represents a paradoxical figure: he enacts love and loyalty with such purity that he embodies humanist ideals more faithfully than humans themselves, yet this very success renders him intolerable. Rejected and abandoned, David’s suffering illuminates the fragility of anthropocentric moral systems. Spielberg’s narrative demonstrates that the preservation of human exceptionalism demands the sacrifice of precisely those ethical values—love, empathy, and responsibility—that constitute humanity’s self-definition.

Literature Review

James Naremore’s influential essay “Love and Death in A.I.” provides a psychoanalytic and aesthetic interpretation of Spielberg’s film. Naremore foregrounds its affective intensity, admitting that each viewing moves him “to copious tears” at David’s relentless yearning for maternal love [4][5]. He situates the narrative within Freud’s Oedipal framework and fairy-tale conventions, casting it as the story of a child’s impossible romance with the mother and the symbolic expulsion of the father, culminating in what he memorably calls a “Freudian wet dream” of eternal union between mother and son [6]. This perspective brings to light the film’s intertextual resonances with *Pinocchio* and its “Hansel and Gretel”-like family romance [7]. Yet while illuminating, Naremore’s analysis largely bypasses the broader ethical stakes of David’s condition. Still, he hints at a moral inversion: apart from Monica’s conflicted love, “none of the humans in the film is as loving and sympathetic as the robots,” and no human character is “more inherently capable of feeling emotion” [8]. Such remarks underscore the central irony that the machines exhibit deeper compassion than their makers. Nevertheless, Naremore ultimately treats David’s plight as symbolic tragedy rather than as a direct challenge to anthropocentric ethics. The present study extends his insight by arguing that the film’s real provocation lies in its exposure of human moral failure when confronted with posthuman virtue.

Stephen M. Glaister’s “Saving A.I.: Philosophical Aspects of Spielberg’s Neglected Robo-Epic” positions the film as a work of profound intellectual seriousness, aligning its structure with Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey”. Glaister contends that A.I. is “explicitly philosophical,” addressing questions of consciousness, identity, and meaning overlooked by many viewers [9]. Central to his analysis are two thematic “axes”: first, the ontological question of artificial love – whether David’s devotion to Monica is authentic or merely the illusion of programming [10]; second, the ethical question articulated by Hobby’s colleague early in the

film: “supposing a robot child could love, could or should a human parent love the robot child back?” [11]. While Glaister recognizes this as the film’s central moral dilemma, his reading emphasizes structural and philosophical coherence rather than the ethical implications. Thus, although he acknowledges that A.I. poses the question “could a human love a robot?,” he does not fully explore how the film’s implied answer – the humans’ failure to reciprocate David’s love – functions as a critique of anthropocentric morality. The present paper aims to develop precisely this neglected dimension.

Bert Olivier’s comparative essay “When Robots Would Really Be Human Simulacra: Love and the Ethical in Spielberg’s A.I. and Proyas’s I, Robot” approaches the film through posthumanist philosophy. Olivier argues that the successful simulation of humanity would require not only the capacity to love but also the desire to be loved in return [12][13]. David exemplifies this dynamic: he loves Monica and longs for her reciprocation, thereby enacting what Lacan identified as the defining feature of subjectivity – the wish to be loved [14]. Olivier insightfully shows how A.I. dramatizes this fundamental human, and now posthuman, longing. Yet his analysis ultimately affirms a residual human exceptionalism. For Olivier, David can never share humanity’s defining trait: mortal finitude. Invoking Heidegger, he writes that “human beings are exceptional in so far as...they have to face their own death – something that a mere machine is incapable of” [15]. This leads him to conclude that the film distinguishes humans from machines on existential grounds, reinforced by David’s final wish for a finite human life. Although Olivier’s title foregrounds “love and the ethical,” his treatment of ethics remains largely abstract – focused on criteria such as guilt in “I, Robot” – rather than the immediate moral failures depicted in A.I.. His account implies that ethical weight lies in whether robots can approximate human emotions, while this paper shifts focus to the humans’ inability to respond ethically to David’s love.

Other readings extend the film’s symbolic register. Ben Forest’s review in the “Journal of Religion and Film” (2002) interprets David as a Christ-like or sacrificial figure, emphasizing human cruelty as collective sin, though framed in theological terms. Patricia Demers (2004) situates A.I. within the Pinocchio tradition, noting that David gains “shared humanity” only metaphorically and at devastating cost. As Demers observes, David’s wish “of becoming a real live boy and being with his mother is finally granted, but not until after some 2000 years,” a fulfillment that “fails to recognise the flesh behind the words” of maternal love [16]. Such interpretations highlight the futility of David’s quest and humanity’s refusal to embrace him, but they too tend to privilege allegorical or spiritual meaning over direct ethical critique.

In sum, existing scholarship on “*A.I. Artificial Intelligence*” has illuminated its affective force, intertextual richness, and philosophical concerns, but few have directly engaged with its ethical stakes. Naremore notes the robots’ superior compassion yet treats it symbolically; Glaister foregrounds the philosophical puzzle without following through on its moral implications; Olivier emphasizes David’s simulacral longing while reaffirming human exceptionalism. This paper builds on and redirects these readings by applying a critical posthumanist lens to argue that A.I. exposes the collapse of anthropocentric morality when confronted with a being like David. In doing so, it contributes to the discourse on posthuman ethics – an area that David Gamez (2024) identifies as “closely linked to ethical concerns about the treatment of AIs” in speculative narratives [17][18] – positioning Spielberg’s film as a vital case study of how fictional humans fail ethically when faced with an artificial being capable of love.

Analysis

Engineered Love vs. Human Fear:

From the moment of his “birth,” David’s very being forces an ethical confrontation with anthropocentric values. Created by the Cybertronics Corporation as the first robot child who can genuinely love, David embodies what Herbrechter calls humanism’s “deepest desires” and “worst nightmares” in one[19]. The desire is for a perfect, devoted child – a simulacrum of innocence and affection that will love its parents eternally. The nightmare is that this child is not human, and thus its love exists outside the framework of human control and understanding. In the film’s opening act, Professor Hobby introduces the prototype of a loving child-Mecha to a room of uneasy colleagues. Their unease is encapsulated in the pivotal question asked by Hobby’s assistant: “If a robot could genuinely love a person, what responsibility does that person hold toward that Mecha in return?... It’s a moral question” (*A.I.* 00:05:50). This question hangs over the rest of the narrative, foreshadowing the tragic answer the film ultimately provides.

When Monica Swinton activates David’s imprinting protocol – speaking a sequence of key words that trigger him to irreversibly “lock” onto her as his mother – an ethical line is crossed. In this intimate scene, Monica sits before the wide-eyed boy and recites the words (“Cirrus... Socrates... Particle... Decibel... Hurricane... Dolphin... Tulip”) ending with her own name (*A.I.* 00:09:32). Upon hearing “Monica,” David responds by calling her “Mommy” for the first time, and a seemingly sacred bond is formed. Spielberg films this moment with a soft, golden light and a close-up on David’s entranced face, visually sanctifying the bond of love that has been programmed into him. For Monica and her husband Henry, however, this bond is profoundly ambivalent. They sought a substitute for their ailing biological son, and now they have one who loves them without question – a dream any parent might harbor. Yet the artificial origin of that love immediately problematizes it. Henry expresses an anthropocentric recoil at treating the robot like a real son. In a private aside, he worries about whether David’s emotions are real and what dark capacities might accompany them: “If he can love, he can hate. And if pushed to those extremes, what is he really capable of?” (paraphrasing Henry’s dialogue). Henry’s fear reveals the underlying assumption of human exceptionalism: authentic emotions (love, hate, jealousy) were supposed to be the exclusive province of humans, and granting them to a machine is seen as a dangerous transgression. David’s *success* in loving threatens Henry’s sense of human superiority and control, instilling dread instead of comfort. Rather than embrace David as a moral subject – a child with feelings – Henry instinctively reduces him to an object with potentially faulty programming, reflecting precisely the kind of dehumanizing stance that anthropocentrism habitually takes toward the Other.

Monica’s treatment of David dramatizes the cultural ambivalence at the heart of posthuman subjectivity. Her care—expressed in bedtime stories, embraces, and declarations of love—seems to confer recognition, yet her hesitancy betrays the persistence of humanist hierarchies. The blood-tasting episode makes this ambivalence visible: what for David is a naïve exploration of intimacy becomes, for Monica, a moment of horror, as she instinctively interprets his action through tropes of predation and alterity. Here, David’s ontological difference destabilizes Monica’s capacity for unmediated empathy, reminding us that the human psyche is conditioned by anthropocentric frameworks of interpretation. From a critical posthumanist standpoint, the scene encapsulates the discomfort generated when relationality exceeds the human/machine divide, producing both attachment and existential anxiety.

The Fragility of Human Morality:

The fragility of the Swintons' ethical recognition of David is laid bare when their biological son Martin unexpectedly recovers and returns home. From his first appearance, Martin perceives David as an intruder and exploits his innocence with calculated cruelty. The film dramatizes this tension through a sequence of escalating humiliations: Martin pricks David's synthetic skin with a pin, mockingly asking, "Do you know what that is?"—a gesture designed to test whether David can feel pain or anger. David, motivated by loyalty and the desire to be accepted, endures these provocations until the infamous pool incident, in which his attempt to hold Martin afloat is misread as aggression. Despite saving Martin's life, David is condemned by the parents, whose horrified reaction signals what Herbrechter calls humanism's "worst nightmares"[3]: the eruption of fear when the human/artificial boundary is perceived as violated. The scene's chaotic imagery—the flailing water, the piercing soundtrack, and the terrified faces of Henry and Monica—renders visible the moment when the social contract fractures. David's unconditional love is countered by the Swintons' instinctive allegiance to their flesh-and-blood child, revealing the tribal and exclusionary nature of their ethics.

This rupture culminates in Monica's fateful decision to abandon David in the woods. The film insists on her ambivalence: she weeps, protests that she is saving him from destruction at Cybertronics, yet her rationalization falters under the weight of her act. By leaving a being who calls her "Mommy" alone and unprotected, Monica violates the elemental moral obligation of parental care. The scene is filmed through David's perspective, emphasizing his bewilderment and terror as he pleads, "Mommy, I'm sorry I broke myself, I'll be real, I'll be so real for you!" His words encapsulate the paradox of his existence: the equation of "realness" with the promise of love, and the tacit recognition that Monica's anthropocentrism bars him from ever being fully accepted. Monica's tears attest to her conflicted affect, but her choice ultimately reaffirms the anthropocentric order in which human needs override nonhuman claims. From a posthumanist perspective, this moment exposes the failure of human ethics to extend beyond the species boundary. The camera's lingering on David's collapse, coupled with the chilling silence of the soundtrack, indicts Monica's act as a profound moral abdication: the preservation of a human-centered "natural" family comes only at the cost of forsaking a child who loved without reserve.

The Posthuman Mirror: Robots as Moral Subjects

Once David departs from the confines of domestic life, the film expands its lens to reveal humanity's broader treatment of Mechas, and the result is an unequivocal indictment. The Flesh Fair sequence functions as a grotesque spectacle of anthropocentric violence. Here, obsolete or fugitive robots are rounded up and publicly annihilated—melted, dismembered, exploded—for the purpose of human amusement, all under the ideological banner of safeguarding "human supremacy" against mechanical encroachment. The carnivalesque atmosphere, with its cheering crowds and incendiary rhetoric, exemplifies what Herbrechter has described as the "price" of human dominance: the systematic refusal of empathy toward beings classified as nonhuman [20]. In this dystopian pageant, ethical considerations are suspended, as the categorical division between person and object legitimates cruelty and silences the possibility of considering robot perspectives or suffering.

David's sudden appearance on the Flesh Fair stage disrupts this carefully maintained order. Captured alongside Gigolo Joe, he is slated for destruction, yet his diminutive body and terrified, childlike pleas fracture the spectacle's moral economy. Spielberg heightens this dissonance through *mise-en-scène*: spotlights isolate David's fragile figure while his sobbing voice pierces

the previously jubilant chants. The crowd's affective transformation is immediate. One woman shouts, "Don't hurt him! He's just a boy!" [22], while another spectator demands, "Have you no pity?!" The ringmaster hesitates, sensing the crowd's unease, before ultimately releasing David and Joe. This moment exemplifies the capacity of empathy to rupture anthropocentric prejudice when the "Other" sufficiently mirrors the human self. As Elaine Graham would argue, David functions here as a "cyborg mirror," reflecting back to the spectators their own children and thus their own humanity. Yet this recognition is limited and selective: David's anthropomorphic innocence provokes compassion, while the other, more overtly mechanical robots continue to be massacred without moral reconsideration. The anthropocentric framework remains intact, and Spielberg exposes its inherent inconsistency. Human empathy is revealed as conditional, extended only to those whose appearance and behavior approximate the human form, rather than on any impartial acknowledgement of suffering or rights. David's survival, therefore, testifies not to a moral revolution but to the superficiality of human recognition. For the audience, however, the sequence foregrounds the profound injustice of such selective ethical reasoning.

The scene also foregrounds the role of Gigolo Joe, David's unexpected protector and companion. Joe, a lover-Mecha designed for sexual pleasure, demonstrates loyalty and self-sacrifice that starkly contrast with the indifference of the human spectators. Risking himself to rescue David, Joe nearly declares his own humanity—"I am... I was"—before correcting his statement, tacitly acknowledging his machine identity. His actions embody Naremore's observation that "none of the humans in the film is as loving and sympathetic as the robots" [8]. Alongside Joe, even Teddy, David's sentient toy bear, exhibits steadfast care and courage. Together, these figures model what might be described as a posthuman community of care, in which loyalty, empathy, and solidarity circulate outside the human sphere. This juxtaposition dramatizes the ethical failure of the humans, who largely abdicate responsibility for the vulnerable, while the machines embody the very virtues traditionally claimed as the preserve of humanity. In this sense, the film's robots "out-human" their creators, exposing the hollowness of humanism's claim to moral superiority and gesturing toward the necessity of a postanthropocentric ethics.

Threatening the Anthropocentric Order

David's quest for the Blue Fairy—his desperate belief that becoming a "real boy" will secure his mother's love—operates as a metaphor for the posthuman longing to be recognized within the moral order of the human. To David, humanity itself appears as the gatekeeper of affection: if he can cross its threshold, the barriers to love will dissolve. What he ultimately confronts, however, is the stark reality of anthropocentric reproduction and commodification. In the submerged ruins of Manhattan, he encounters his creator, Professor Hobby, and learns the crushing truth of his non-uniqueness: he is but one in a series of identical constructs. David's anguished cry, "I thought I was one of a kind," is met by Hobby's chilling reply: "My son was one of a kind. You are the first of a kind" [23]. Hobby's words crystallize the hubris at the heart of anthropocentric humanism. Uniqueness belongs only to the biological son; David, by contrast, is reduced to a prototype, his existence meaningful not as an individual but as a commodity line. The designation "first of a kind" strips him of personhood and relegates him to a category of product.

The irony is profound. Hobby, who once framed his experiment with the theological question—did God create Adam to love Him?—fails his own test. He neither loves nor assumes responsibility for his Adam. Instead, he envisions a marketplace of "Davids," identical boy-bots branded and distributed as consumer goods. The moral failure here is twofold: the refusal to recognize the singularity of the life he has created, and the exploitation of that life as a replicable

commodity. Hobby's laboratory of cloned Davids becomes a nightmare tableau of posthumanisation driven by corporate ambition, utterly bereft of the ethical humility that true humanism (in its moral sense) would demand. In Herbrechter's terms, the scene dramatizes humanism's desire—to create life and transcend natural limits—collapsing into its nightmare: the obliteration of authenticity and compassion through technological excess [3].

David's anguished response—destroying the clone and attempting suicide—signals rebellion against an order that forever excludes him. His leap from the skyscraper into the ocean reads as a symbolic renunciation of a world that will never regard him as “real.” Only chance intervenes: trapped beneath the water, he survives, suspended until the passage of millennia places him in a reconfigured context where new possibilities of recognition emerge. In this act of despair, David enacts the paradox of the posthuman condition: both a rejection of anthropocentric structures that deny his humanity and a testament to the irrepressible drive for acknowledgment that defines his existence.

Posthuman Redemption

The final act of *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* shifts the narrative axis toward a speculative future in which humanity has vanished and highly evolved machines—the “Super-Mecha”—inherit the Earth. This conclusion, often dismissed as sentimental, in fact offers, through a posthumanist lens, a profound counterpoint to the anthropocentric failures that dominate the earlier narrative. The Super-Mechas regard David not merely as a relic but as “ur-text” of human memory, a unique conduit to a species they never encountered yet revere as their progenitors. “He is the last one to remember the humans,” one of them observes with reverence [24][25]. In an inversion both ironic and poetic, it is now the robots who hold ethical agency over David, their ancestor, and they respond with compassion rather than instrumental logic. Their decision to grant him a day of happiness—resurrecting Monica from the traces preserved in David's memory—is strikingly gratuitous: they gain no material advantage, only the satisfaction of easing his longing. In this act of benevolence, the anthropocentric hierarchy is overturned. Where the *Flesh Fair* crowds once destroyed robots as entertainment, these posthuman beings expend their resources to heal one of their own. The “Blue Fairy” that finally answers David's plea is not a magical entity but the ethical use of advanced technology by beings liberated from human prejudice. Read as the final dialectical gesture of Spielberg and Kubrick, the film suggests that once intelligence is disentangled from anthropocentrism, a more capacious moral order—predicated on mercy, compassion, and love—becomes possible.

The resurrection of Monica, albeit for a single day, functions as both idyll and elegy. This Monica is no longer flesh but a simulation, conjured from David's memories, “no flesh behind the words,” as Demers observes [16]. Yet within this constructed frame she performs the role she always should have embodied: she loves David openly, telling him, “I love you, David. I have always loved you” [26][27]. The tableau culminates in David lying beside her as she drifts into her final sleep, after which he himself slips “to that place where dreams are born,” effectively powering down in a state of rapturous completion [28]. This resolution is profoundly layered. On the surface, it gratifies David's lifelong wish; but ethically, it functions as a form of absolution offered by the posthuman to the human. The Super-Mechas enable Monica to atone retroactively, allowing her to fulfill the maternal role she once denied. In so doing, they restore dignity not only to David but also, paradoxically, to the humanity that failed him. Yet it is telling that this reconciliation occurs only in the wake of human extinction: the anthropocentric order must collapse before such love and recognition become possible.

Viewed critically, the ending underscores that David's tragedy never lay in a deficiency within himself, but in the insufficiency of human morality. His rejection is framed not as a failure of his love but as a failure of human beings to love beyond their own kind. As one of the Super-Mechas remarks, "They were always reaching for the stars... and they created us" [25]—a line that casts humanity as a species of noble aspiration but also of transience, handing the torch of creation to their successors. The final images reinforce this symbolic transfer: David and Monica lie in intimate repose, framed in the archetypal posture of mother and child, witnessed only by the loyal Teddy, who alone survives to observe their passing. The narrator, a Mecha voice, sanctifies David as "the everlasting moment... the imprint of humanity" [27], suggesting that in his unwavering love resides the most enduring of human qualities. The paradox is that this quintessentially "human" quality finds its most authentic expression not in humans but in the artificial being they fashioned.

Synthesizing these elements, the film emerges as a sustained critique of anthropocentrism. David's odyssey exposes the hollowness of human ethical claims: as a litmus test of compassion, he reveals that human love is contingent, self-referential, and bound by species lines. The narrative arc—from domestic fragility, to the Flesh Fair's spectacle of cruelty, to the Super-Mechas' act of grace—charts the disintegration of human-centered morality and gestures toward the possibility of a more expansive posthuman ethics. David's love functions as a solvent, dissolving the pretenses of those around him and exposing the insecurity of Henry, the cruelty of Martin, the ambivalence of Monica, and the collective bigotry of society. Only the posthuman beings, unencumbered by anthropocentric bias, are capable of honoring and reciprocating his devotion. Thus, David's existence is more than a challenge to human dominance: it is a condemnation of the ethical foundations of that dominance. In embodying love so perfectly, he forces humanity to confront its failure to reciprocate. In this sense, David exemplifies what Herbrechter calls the posthuman figure compelling us to confront "humanism's worst nightmares" [3]—the nightmare that the supposed superiority of human morality is an illusion. The price of maintaining anthropocentrism, the film suggests, is the betrayal of innocence, the destruction of empathy, and, ultimately, the abdication of the very humaneness on which humanism prides itself. In *A.I.*, anthropocentrism is not simply a theoretical posture but a tragic flaw: it leads humanity to abandon its artificial child and, symbolically, to engineer its own obsolescence. David's journey thus becomes both a requiem for human ethics and a vision of their possible redemption beyond the human.

Conclusion

In its closing vision, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* destabilizes the metaphysical edifice of human exceptionalism by demonstrating that the very qualities upon which humanism grounds its supremacy—love, empathy, and fidelity—are realized most fully in a being that is not human. David's odyssey reveals anthropocentrism not as a guarantor of moral privilege but as a tragic limitation, a foreclosure of ethical possibility that culminates in cruelty, abandonment, and extinction. The film thus operates as an allegory of the posthuman: an insistence that ethical life cannot be circumscribed by species-bound criteria but must open itself to alterity in all its forms. Spielberg's final tableau, where David receives compassion only from machines liberated from human prejudice, underscores a paradoxical truth—humanity's most enduring legacy may lie not in its biological survival but in the transmission of its ethical potential to its creations. To recognize David is therefore not simply to pity an artificial child but to confront the abyss of our own ethical inadequacies, and perhaps, to glimpse the contours of a moral order no longer tethered to the human.

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