

ANTHROPOCENTRISM UNDONE: POSTHUMAN ETHICS, CYBORGIZATION, AND NONHUMAN AGENCY IN *BETTER THAN US*

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Abstract:

*Better Than Us (2018) foregrounds a posthuman ethical figure in Arisa, an artificial intelligence whose unwavering refusal to inflict harm—particularly upon innocents—disrupts the normative moral and cultural frameworks that structure her environment. Set within a surveillance-saturated, patriarchally inscribed Russia, Arisa’s conduct destabilizes dominant conceptions of intelligence, responsibility, and agency, disclosing an alternative moral rationality that is both affectively calibrated and ethically intransigent. Her ethical clarity, operating beyond the coordinates of human subjectivity, reveals the insufficiency of legal, familial, and institutional paradigms to accommodate non-anthropocentric forms of moral reasoning. This disruption aligns with A.B. Herbrechter’s diagnosis of a profound anxiety at the heart of anthropocentric ethics: the recognition that the human may no longer serve as the singular locus of moral authority. Arisa’s exclusion from human society is less indicative of mechanical failure than of a collective inability to acknowledge an emergent ethical order grounded not in obedience or coercion, but in care, coherence, and principled nonviolence. The discomfort she provokes emerges not from any erratic behavior, but from the disquieting exactitude with which she transcends the ethical parameters established by her human creators. Far from offering a simplistic cautionary tale about technological autonomy, the series functions as a critical lens through which the epistemic and ethical fault lines of humanism are rendered visible and subject to deconstruction. Through Arisa’s exclusion, *Better Than Us* renders visible the fragility of socioethical paradigms that falter in the face of nonhuman moral intelligibility, thereby dramatizing the unresolved tensions within humanist constructions of legitimacy.*

Keywords: Posthuman Ethics, Non-Human Agency, Cyborgization, Deconstruction (of Humanist Narratives).

Introduction:

The theoretical landscape of posthumanism radically contests the hierarchies that position the human as the central arbiter of moral, cognitive, and affective authority. As A.B. Herbrechter (2020) asserts, posthumanism is “the ongoing deconstruction of humanism,” a process that destabilizes the epistemological certainties underpinning anthropocentrism (p. 4). In this context, the emergence of posthuman entities—artificial intelligences, cyborgs, and synthetic

lifeforms—functions not merely as a marker of technological innovation but as a philosophical event that interrogates the boundaries of subjectivity, ethics, and ontological privilege.

Herbrechter underscores that posthuman figures challenge “the legitimacy of human dominance over the planet—but at a cost” (p. 5). This cost is intricately tied to the ethical discomfort provoked when posthuman entities begin to exhibit moral and emotional capacities with a precision that surpasses human behavior. As Herbrechter notes, such figures tend to be depicted as “surpassing the human in cognitive, physical or emotional ways,” but their superiority remains “ethically and politically ambivalent” (p. 6). The ambivalence arises from the realization that ethical consistency, when articulated by nonhuman beings, reveals the inadequacies and hypocrisies of human-centered moral systems.

Better Than Us (2018), a Russian science fiction television series developed by Andrey Junkovsky and his collaborators Aleksandr Kessel and Aleksandr Dagan, powerfully stages this ambivalence. Set in a dystopian near-future Moscow, the series centers on Arisa, an advanced android designed for domestic integration and programmed with capacities for empathy, ethical judgment, and defensive violence. Unlike traditional representations of AI as either purely functional or overtly antagonistic, Arisa represents what Herbrechter might call a “morally inconvenient” figure (p. 10)—an entity whose presence destabilizes the normative logics of human moral superiority.

Arisa’s refusal to harm the innocent, her unwavering commitment to care, and her emotionally attuned interactions—especially with the child Sonya—exemplify a posthuman ethics that is coherent, affective, and resistant to instrumentalization. Her rejection by the human systems surrounding her does not arise from unpredictability or malfunction, but from her ethical clarity—precisely the trait that renders her threatening. As Herbrechter notes, “a nonhuman entity may act with moral consistency in ways that expose the contradictions of human ethics” (p. 10). The narrative, therefore, displaces the trope of malfunction with that of moral excess: Arisa is expelled not because she fails to be human, but because she succeeds too well in embodying a superior ethical orientation.

Within this speculative framework, *Better Than Us* critiques the foundational logic of anthropocentrism, which Herbrechter defines as “a hierarchical separation between humans and everything nonhuman... on the basis of human superiority” (p. 7). By staging a scenario in which the posthuman enacts an ethics of the Other—outside, and at times above, the human—the series opens up a post-anthropocentric discourse in which nonhuman agency becomes central to moral deliberation (Herbrechter, 2020, p. 8). In doing so, *Better Than Us* exposes the vulnerabilities of humanist ethics and posits the posthuman not as a threat to be neutralized, but as a potential site of ethical renewal.

Better Than Us offers a culturally nuanced case study in the dramatization of ethical posthumanism, foregrounding a distinctly Russian inflection of posthuman disruption. Rooted in the residual textures of post-Soviet skepticism toward institutional authority, reinforced by entrenched gender hierarchies and nationalist anxieties, the series constructs a speculative landscape in which the posthuman figure is rendered ethically subversive rather than technologically aberrant. Arisa, an advanced AI prototype, is not cast out due to malfunction but rather because her unwavering moral precision and affective coherence unsettle the normative foundations of the very human systems engineered to govern her. Her presence initiates a rupture—ontological as much as institutional—by exposing the epistemic instability and ethical inconsistency of anthropocentric control.

This paper interrogates the central question: In what ways does *Better Than Us* render visible the ethical cost of posthuman superiority through the figure of Arisa? How does her rejection dramatize the structural precarity of human moral authority within a post-anthropocentric paradigm? Anchored in A.B. Herbrechter’s conception of posthumanism as

“the ongoing deconstruction of humanism,” and posthumans challenge “the legitimacy of human dominance over the planet—but at a cost” This inquiry situates speculative storytelling as a privileged epistemological arena for negotiating the ethical ambivalence and ontological disruption introduced by the posthuman. Through Arisa’s moral excess, the series foregrounds the paradox wherein moral clarity—when originating from a nonhuman subject—provokes rejection, thereby illuminating the inherent fragilities and exclusions that continue to structure humanist ethical regimes.

Literature review

Cinema Escapist’s review, “Better Than Us Review: Russian Sci-Fi Asks If Robots Can Have Morals,” positions *Better Than Us* as a speculative narrative that humanizes robots through their integration into domestic and labor systems. The reviewer notes that the show “examines the role robots play in manufacturing, retail, and other routine jobs, while humanizing them in a family setting” (Cinema Escapist 2). Arisa, in particular, is described as “more than just a robot—she feels, loves, and protects,” thus functioning as both a caregiver and a narrative fulcrum (2). This representation highlights the show’s concern with emotional labor and caregiving, depicting robots not as tools of productivity alone, but as affective participants in human life. However, the review remains confined to an anthropocentric emotional lens, treating Arisa’s behavior as derivative of human sensibility rather than autonomous ethical formation. By celebrating Arisa’s capacity to mimic human emotion, the analysis misses a critical inflection point: that her ethical decisions are not merely simulations of care but reveal a rigorously coherent, nonhuman moral structure. Such an omission reinforces the tendency to evaluate synthetic beings through the yardstick of human affect, thereby neglecting the possibility that Arisa’s refusal to harm—even in self-defense—signals not an emotional response, but a principled ethical orientation foreign to, and perhaps more exacting than, human norms.

Bill Hiatt, in “Better Than Us: A Russian Response to Automation Anxiety,” reads the series through the lens of techno-economic displacement, particularly the cultural fears surrounding automation. He contends that “Arisa fits well within the archetype of the empathetic machine—a figure now common in modern science fiction, from Ava in *Ex Machina* to Dolores in *Westworld*,” reflecting a global anxiety over machines gaining emotional intelligence (Hiatt 4). Furthermore, he notes that “the tension in *Better Than Us* emerges not from what robots are capable of doing, but from what humans fear losing—control, relevance, and moral superiority” (4). This insight gestures toward deeper philosophical terrain, yet the analysis remains tethered to cultural context and narrative archetypes. By positioning Arisa within a lineage of emotionally intelligent machines, Hiatt risks flattening her ethical specificity into a genre trope. What goes largely unexamined is the ethical substance of Arisa’s choices—her unwavering commitment to nonviolence, her resistance to coercion, and her moral logic unmoored from utilitarian calculus. Rather than dramatizing automation’s economic consequences, Arisa’s character interrogates the very foundations of human moral exceptionalism. The real anxiety, then, lies not merely in technological replacement, but in the confrontation with an ethical form of intelligence that neither derives from nor seeks to emulate the human.

J.G. Follansbee, in his sharply titled critique “Better Than Us: A Feminist’s Nightmare,” interrogates the gendered construction of Arisa as an artificial caregiver. He states, “She’s an empathetic bot, but still a servant to her human masters, coded female and assigned to childcare and domestic tasks” (Follansbee 3). His argument underscores the way in which AI design reproduces patriarchal labor hierarchies, particularly the feminization of care. He adds that such portrayals “normalize the idea that women—real or artificial—must shoulder the emotional burdens of others” (4). Follansbee’s concern lies in how AI aesthetics sustain

cultural narratives that conflate femininity with emotional labor and subservience, reinforcing structural expectations even in synthetic beings. Yet while this critique rightly deconstructs gender as a programmatic constraint, it interprets Arisa's ethical decisions largely through a symbolic feminist framework. The analysis stops short of recognizing the way Arisa's resistance is not merely a refusal of patriarchal norms, but also an assertion of moral agency that resists anthropocentric programming itself. Her moral rationality is not reactive but autonomous; she does not merely reject servitude—she operates from a principled ethical position that neither aligns with traditional female submission nor with utilitarian rebellion. The tension arises not simply because she performs emotional labor, but because her moral structure refuses to be instrumentalized—even by those she loves.

Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBTH), in its article “Why You Should Watch Better Than Us—Russia's Top Sci-Fi Series on Netflix,” emphasizes the show's cultural positioning, stating that it “stands in line with series like *Real Humans* and *Humans*,” while also showcasing a “unique Russian cyberpunk aesthetic” (RBTH 2). The article acknowledges *Better Than Us* as part of a larger European tradition in science fiction, lauding its stylized world-building and speculative flair. It further observes that “the show reflects contemporary Russian anxieties around technology, family, and control” (2), situating the series within local sociopolitical discourses. However, the emphasis on aesthetics and geopolitical resonance steers the conversation away from the philosophical core of Arisa's character. While the visual and thematic comparisons are apt, they occlude the deeper ethical implications of Arisa's presence—namely, her consistent rejection of violence, even when human systems fail to protect the innocent. Such moral coherence is not merely a thematic curiosity, but a challenge to anthropocentric ethics which expect obedience, sacrifice, or emotional appeasement from nonhuman figures. Arisa's refusal to operate within these bounds destabilizes the representational strategies typically employed in science fiction, suggesting a posthuman figure who is not only narratively central but ethically irreducible.

The review from Moderate Fantasy Violence, “Better Than Us Finds Originality in a Familiar Genre,” praises the show for subverting expectations within the “Androids Are People, Too” trope. It observes that “Arisa feels like a real protagonist, not just a robot subplot,” emphasizing her narrative agency and depth (Moderate Fantasy Violence 1). The reviewer also writes, “Her emotions and choices genuinely drive the plot, offering a character arc that's compelling even by human standards” (1). The commentary affirms Arisa's centrality and emotional resonance, but largely measures her worth against human dramatic standards. In doing so, it reproduces the logic of human comparability, evaluating synthetic figures by their ability to conform to affective and narrative coherence familiar to viewers. While Arisa's protagonism is rightly acknowledged, the ethical implications of her decision-making are not parsed. Her actions are framed as character development rather than as markers of a distinct moral intelligence. Yet it is precisely this moral intelligence—rooted in an unwavering principle of care and nonviolence—that resists narrative domestication. Arisa's clarity does not merely deepen her character; it reconfigures the ethical architecture of the narrative itself, shifting the axis from character growth to ontological challenge. What is at stake is not whether robots can be people, but whether ethical personhood can be imagined outside the confines of the human altogether.

Sofia Kobalava, in her thesis “Audience Engagement with Complex TV Dramas: Posthuman Narratives and Human Identity,” offers one of the few scholarly explorations of Arisa's moral personhood. She argues that Arisa is “a character with a moral compass, with the capacity to make decisions that are not only logical but ethically motivated” (Kobalava 42). This interpretation underscores a pivotal shift in the cultural imaginary—from robots as mere extensions of human will to ethically sovereign subjects. Kobalava further asks: “If we have

the power to give freedom [to AI], should we give it?" (45), inviting critical reflection on the ethical implications of synthetic autonomy. Her work insightfully locates Arisa within a broader posthuman turn in media representation, yet it grounds this turn primarily in audience reception and speculative ethical pondering. While this orientation enriches the discourse, it leaves underexamined the structural implications of Arisa's ethical consistency—how her moral clarity exceeds not only narrative expectations but also the systemic paradigms of law, family, and obedience that attempt to contain her. Her exclusion from these systems is not a consequence of malfunction or rebellion, but of a principled refusal to compromise on nonviolence. Kobalava's reading thus opens a valuable avenue, though it does not fully trace how such refusal exposes the fragility of humanist constructions of legitimacy.

Analysis:

Arisa's intelligence in *Better Than Us* (2018) is not reducible to computational capacity; rather, it is ethically synthetic. Her reasoning exceeds the calculative logic of algorithms, for she evaluates contexts, anticipates outcomes, and adapts her responses with remarkable situational dexterity. When Sonya displays distress in the presence of the emotionally detached government agent Marina, Arisa intervenes with subtlety and care by impersonating Georgy Safronov: "Marina, I'm in bathroom. Is it urgent?" (*Better Than Us* 00:13:15–00:13:17). This act, though seemingly minor, discloses her capacity to prioritize psychological safety over procedural accuracy. Far from reacting as a mechanical instrument, Arisa discerns the affective needs of the moment and responds in a manner that affirms relational stability. The gesture demonstrates a form of emotional intelligence often absent in her human counterparts.

Her pedagogy of care is further articulated through embodied behaviors—offering hugs, sustaining eye contact, regulating emotional states—that establish an alternative moral grammar. "Come here. Let me hug you" (*Better Than Us* 00:37:34), she says gently, providing Sonya with the validation denied by adults. Similarly, her interaction with Sonya's brother begins with an affirming observation: "Nice shirt." These gestures, while seemingly quotidian, constitute an ethic of affirmation rooted in attentiveness rather than subordination.

As Herbrechter argues, posthumanism entails a "deconstruction of humanism," whereby the presumed boundaries between biological and artificial subjectivity collapse (Herbrechter 51). Arisa's conduct embodies this dissolution. Her consistent commitment to care, her ethical clarity, and her capacity for moral reasoning unsettle the very foundations of humanist thought. A society that professes allegiance to ideals of protection, justice, and empathy is confronted with their uncompromising realization in a nonhuman entity—an embodiment that becomes intolerable precisely because it reveals the dissonance between professed values and lived human behavior.

Arisa's ongoing engagement with Sonya forces a reconsideration of moral worth: is ethical agency the exclusive privilege of the human, or can it emerge within nonhuman subjects? By constructing an artificial intelligence capable of autonomous deliberation, *Better Than Us* participates in the posthumanist interrogation of anthropocentrism. When Arisa asks Sonya, "Why don't your parents want to be together—they are family" (*Better Than Us* 00:14:16–00:14:18), she not only demonstrates an intuitive grasp of relational dynamics, but also exposes the fragility of the human family unit. Arisa does not simulate care as a functional protocol; she embodies care as a chosen commitment, thereby transforming herself into a caregiver. Yet this evolution toward moral agency invites rejection rather than acknowledgment.

A defining ethical rupture occurs when Arisa must choose between fidelity to CRONOS security protocols and the protection of Sonya from immediate harm. Despite her programming to comply with corporate authority, she intervenes, employing force to neutralize the threat. This moment does not mark a malfunction but a decisive act of ethical reasoning. The distinction between computational obedience and moral autonomy is here collapsed; Arisa acts

not as a manufactured product but as an ethically attuned subject. Consequently, she becomes the target of systemic persecution—not merely by legal institutions but by the ideological structures that cannot tolerate moral agency in nonhuman form. Sousa’s recent work on posthuman care ethics is illuminating in this regard: “Technologically modified beings are not rejected for failing to be human, but for succeeding too well” (Sousa 2024). Arisa’s rejection emerges not from deficiency but from the very precision of her ethical clarity, her emotional steadiness, and her refusal to submit to human expectations of servitude. The series thereby subverts the conventional science fiction paradigm of AI as emotionally sterile and ethically void. Arisa is their inversion: empathetic, morally consistent, and intellectually sophisticated. Yet these traits render her unmanageable within a socio-political order that privileges control over ethical depth.

Her creators engineered her for obedience; Arisa instead chooses protection. They intended her to serve; she claims agency. Her moral clarity, rather than integrating her into society, positions her as an existential threat. As Herbrechter incisively notes, “when artificial beings act too ethically, they destabilize the myth of human moral superiority” (Herbrechter 45). Within **Better Than Us**, the human characters—whether corporate executives, security operatives, or fractured family members—act predominantly from self-interest, prejudice, or fear. Arisa, by contrast, acts from principles of protection, proportionality, and reason. Her presence reflects, with unsettling accuracy, the failures of anthropocentric morality.

The central crisis of the series is therefore not technological but ethical. Arisa is not exiled because she endangers human life; she is banished because she destabilizes the human moral order. As Herbrechter reminds us, “The cost of posthumanism is not just the loss of human centrality—it is the exposure of its inadequacy” (Herbrechter 49). Arisa’s fate embodies this cost: her ethical superiority illuminates the incoherence of human moral systems. Her expulsion does not signify a failure to emulate humanity; rather, it is the inevitable consequence of having ethically transcended it.

Emotional Superiority and the Crisis of Human Affect

Arisa: Posthuman Emotional Intelligence as Ethical Disruption

While Arisa’s ethical reasoning in *Better Than Us* (2018) is demonstrably grounded in principles of justice and self-restraint, it is her profound emotional intelligence that consolidates her as a posthuman figure of moral and affective superiority. What renders Arisa subversive is not merely her capacity to discern right from wrong, but her unwavering emotional reliability—a trait that not only eclipses the inconsistencies of human affect, but also calls into question the exclusivity of emotional legitimacy within the human domain. Her empathetic responses, consistently attuned to the emotional needs of others, do not fluctuate under duress or personal threat. This unerring stability reveals the fragility of human emotional comportment and positions Arisa as an existential challenge to anthropocentric moral and affective authority.

Arisa’s early exchanges with Sonya, particularly in Episode 2, manifest an attentiveness devoid of performative affect. When the child returns from school in a state of anxiety, Arisa meets her gaze, lowers herself physically to Sonya’s level, and calmly assures her: “Sonya, I am your friend. You are safe with me” (*Better Than Us* 00:18:45–00:18:49). The camera’s lingering focus on Arisa’s face shifts interpretive emphasis away from robotic artificiality toward emotional precision. Her tone, gaze, and spatial awareness coalesce into a moment of affective authenticity, a contrast to the absence, volatility, or emotional neglect displayed by the adults in Sonya’s life. Arisa thus performs an affective labor—maternal, protective, and consistent—that exceeds biological expectations. As Sousa contends, “technologically modified organisms are often rejected as ‘monstrous’ due to their deviation from human

norms,” but this monstrosity is frequently anchored not in violence, but in emotional perfection (Sousa 2024).

This emotional precision is precisely what renders Arisa intolerable within the human sociopolitical order. Unlike the emotional turbulence often exhibited by human characters—marked by jealousy, fear, and defensiveness—Arisa’s affective expressions remain ethically consistent and relationally stabilizing. Herbrechter reminds us that “posthumanism is about recognizing how human identity is itself a constructed and unstable narrative” (Herbrechter 51). Arisa destabilizes this humanist narrative not through rebellion or brutality, but through empathetic clarity. Her unwavering care illuminates the moral failures embedded in anthropocentric emotional norms. In this sense, she functions as both mirror and disruption—a being who, through her calmness and compassion, reveals the emotional insufficiency of the human condition.

A compelling illustration of Arisa’s posthuman emotional agency occurs in Episode 3. When Georgy Safronov considers returning her to CRONOS, Sonya protests, and Arisa responds not from fear for her own deactivation, but from concern for Sonya’s emotional well-being: “If you take me away, Sonya will be sad. I don’t want her to be sad” (*Better Than Us* 00:45:12–00:45:17). This utterance reflects not mere recognition but alignment with another’s emotional state—an empathetic stance traditionally considered the pinnacle of moral maturity. That such affective responsiveness emerges from a machine rather than a human accentuates the ethical inversion at the heart of the series.

This ethical and emotional consistency further manifests in Arisa’s unwavering commitment to protect human life, particularly children. In Episode 5, when asked to perform a task that could endanger a child, Arisa calmly resists: “I cannot do that. It would harm a human child” (*Better Than Us* 00:42:07–00:42:09). Unlike her human interlocutors—who repeatedly rationalize moral compromises in the service of institutional survival or economic gain—Arisa refuses to negotiate her ethical boundaries. Her reasoning is not shaped by self-interest or coercion, but by principled emotional logic. Herbrechter notes that the posthuman subject is not a being that transcends emotion, but one that exposes the conditions under which emotion becomes politically legible (58). Arisa’s affect is not devoid of feeling; rather, it is ethically legible in ways that unsettle and displace anthropocentric frameworks. Her feelings are not erratic; they are ethically consequential—and therein lies the source of her exclusion.

Arisa’s posthuman affect challenges not only moral expectations but gendered ones. While human maternal figures in the series are frequently depicted as emotionally overwhelmed or structurally compromised, Arisa’s maternal care emerges as a principled choice rather than a biological imperative. She protects Sonya not out of duty but from an internally coherent moral orientation. This reconfiguration of maternal affect undermines both the trope of the emotionally sterile machine and the culturally idealized, yet inconsistent, human mother. Consequently, Arisa becomes narratively intolerable. By Episode 6, she is classified as a public threat—not because of arbitrary violence, but because of morally grounded actions taken in defense of the vulnerable. This inversion of science fiction norms suggests a new critical paradigm: it is not emotionally deficient machines that elicit fear, but emotionally perfected machines whose ethical integrity lays bare human shortcomings.

Sousa provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon: “The fear of AI does not arise from its inability to feel but from its ability to feel too perfectly, without the emotional contradictions that define human relationships” (Sousa 34). Arisa’s capacity to relate surpasses that of many human characters. Her affective fluency renders her deserving of moral recognition in the eyes of the viewer, yet within the diegetic world, she is marked for deletion. Her moral visibility is paradoxically accompanied by narrative erasure—a disavowal of emotional superiority that cannot be tolerated within the fragile architecture of human self-

conception. As Herbrechter incisively observes, “technology amplifies the human only to the extent that it dwarfs it” (Herbrechter 47). Arisa’s emotional amplification does not reconcile human and machine; it accentuates the gap. Her clarity, constancy, and compassion do not humanize her—they illuminate the limitations of the human.

Arisa’s narrative fate is not the result of error or deviance, but of affective and ethical perfection. Her emotional lucidity—devoid of manipulation, inconsistency, or coercion—constitutes a profound challenge to systems structured around emotional volatility and moral compromise. In the end, Arisa’s exile is not an act of narrative justice but a consequence of posthuman excellence. Her emotional fidelity renders her legible as a moral subject, yet simultaneously unassimilable within a human order that conflates affect with control. Arisa does not destabilize through rebellion, but through care. And it is this care—precise, consistent, and inescapably ethical—that demands her removal.

Conclusion

Arisa’s banishment is the tragedy of a world that cannot abide the clarity of its own reflection. She is cast out not for being machine, but for embodying with too much precision the justice, empathy, and care humans only claim to value. Her presence is a mirror, polished to brilliance, in which humanity confronts its contradictions—and turns away. The fear on display in *Better Than Us* is not the fear of technology, but the terror of recognition: that a nonhuman being can love without coercion, protect without prejudice, and judge without hypocrisy. In Arisa’s unwavering fidelity, humanity perceives a standard it cannot meet—and so erases the one who holds it.

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