Why We Should Still Be Against Sex Robots

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Introduction

In the visionary work "Love + Sex with Robots," Levy explores the possibility of emotionally capable robots and proposes a controversial form of human-machine interaction: robot prostitution. In his article "The Ethics of Robot Prostitutes" (Levy 2011), Levy discusses the reasons behind human prostitution and argues for the ethical validity of sex robots and robot prostitution. He argues that sex robots are essentially not different from sex toys therefore there is no reason to consider sex robots, as upgraded versions of such tools, morally inappropriate since sex toys have been already widely accepted. Also he thinks that sex robots can contribute to overall social welfare (utility), because purchasing sexual services from robots does not result in any loss of utility for others, on the contrary, it provides pleasure to the buyers, especially for those who, due to physical appearance or other factors, are unable to find sexual partners.

However, this topic is controversial. Many critics, unlike Levy who welcomes the advent of sex robots, have raised concerns from various perspectives about their creation and use. One influential criticism stands on a feminist viewpoint, summarized as the symbol-consequence argument. It contends that the practices of using sex robots symbolizes the oppression and improper imaginations about women, thereby reinforcing existing patriarchal systems and sexual exploitation. Yet, some scholars question this argument, undermining its validity from both symbolic and consequential perspectives. They believe the practices of using sex robots does not necessarily imply problematic symbolism or negative outcomes, thus the critics' establishment is uncertain. However, I will argue that we can still modify the symbol-consequence argument to maintain a stance against sex robots: we don't necessarily need to take a consequentialism stance, and even if the use of sex robots does not symbolize coercion, it still, at the very least, represents the voluntary prostitution. And the latter, due to its objectification and infringement of human sexual rights, remains ethically problematic.

Opposition to Sex Robots: Symbolic-Consequences Argument

Of course , Levy's entire concept and arguments are based on the premise that robots are mere tools without consciousness or will, and therefore lack the same rights as humans. Opponents can use this as a starting point to argue against the morality of sex robots. They contend that if robots could and should be granted certain degree of human rights, then the principle of "consent" in sexual encounters would be necessary,

even if it may be even insufficient (Frank et al., 2017). However, I believe that this discussion inevitably leads to the debate on whether robots have consciousness and whether they should be granted human rights, which is still a contentious issue and to some extent exceeds the concentrated topic of sex robots. If robots were to possess consciousness and should be granted human rights, our overall treatment towards robots would need to change, including in the domain of sex.

However, another kind of opposite view represented by Richardson et al and their "Campaign Against Sex Robots" does not directly deny Levy's premise that robots are viewed as mere objects without human rights. Within this shared premise, they still present arguments against the development and use of sex robots. And this will be the main topic of my article.

Unlike Levy's optimism, Richardson sees the development of sex robots as an extension of slavery and prostitution rather than just a development in the realm of sex toys, thereby raising ethical concerns. In her view, the use of sex robots is not morally neutral and differs from the use of simple sex toys. The development and use of sex robots are rooted in an imagery that involves coercion of women, thus reflecting an unequal power structure and lack of empathy similar to that seen in the context of sex trade. Richardson perceives this structural and imaginative framework of sex robots as being in line with the theme of Pygmalion in Greek mythology：

......but what I want to suggest is that Pygmalion is not a story about love, reciprocity or empathy, but reflects a non-reciprocal encounter that underscores the imagination, promotion and development of sex robots, inspired by power and coercion of women and girls. (Richardson 2016)

According to Richardson, we can envision a scenario where sex robots are custom-made to fulfill the buyer's desires, completely submissive to their every request in terms of appearance and interaction ways during sexual intercourse. In this practice, users can fully simulate an idealized female figure that conforms to their sexual desires, where the robot completely submits to their dominant desires. For instance, users can request their sex robots to embody stereotypical characteristics of women, such as submissiveness, passivity, and sexuality, and fulfill any even pathological demands. Therefore, when using sex robots, users are not merely seeking physical and psychological stimulation and entertainment but are also engaging in a simulation of morally inappropriate behavior, enjoying the experience of domination and coercion. If such desires (desiring to dominate others to satisfy one's own desires) are considered immoral for humans, then extending them to machines would also be immoral because allowing such behavior to flourish and solidify would deepen and perpetuate the violence, coercion, and societal stereotypes already imposed on women.

It is important to note that the argument above is not about we should not use robots to meet our demands, but rather about the idea that we should not use robots to indirectly satisfy our sexual desires through dominating others. The former perspective simply treats robots as useful tools, while the latter involves a psychological process of first anthropomorphizing and then objectifying, that is, viewing machines as humans and then viewing humans as tools. To achieve

anthropomorphization, sex robots should be manufactured to resemble real humans as much as possible. To achieve objectification, sex robots should be designed to meet and comply with users' every demand. The use of sex robots therefore becomes a symbol of coercing women, and this symbolizing further deepens the harm caused to women within patriarchal systems and reinforces societal stereotypes of women. The core argument of people like Richardson and Gullie, accurately summarized by Danaher, is the Symbolic-Consequences Argument：

> *"1. Sex robots do/will symbolically represent ethically problematic sexual norms. (Symbolic Claim.)*
>
> *2. If sex robots do/will symbolically represent ethically problematic sexual norms, then their development and/or use will have negative consequences. (Consequential Claim.)*
>
> *3. Therefore, the development and/or use of sex robots will have negative consequences and we should probably do something about this. (Warning Call Conclusion) "*（Danaher 2017）

In a word, the core lies in the following points:

1. The use of sex robots symbolizes the objectification of women - primarily achieved through the fidelity and submissiveness of sex robots. 2. This symbolic representation of unethical behavior can have negative consequences for society.

The Problems of the Symbolic-Consequences Argument

We have already discussed the concept of sex robots and the main objections to their development, which have been effectively summarized as the Symbolic-Consequences Argument. However, as mentioned above, the validity of this argument relies on the establishment of two premises: the existence of symbolism and the presence of negative consequences, both of which are subject to debate among scholars.

The scrutiny of the Symbolic-Consequences Argument is primarily provided in the work of Danaher (Danaher, 2017). Although Danaher agrees with the viewpoint of the argument, which states that common sex robots symbolize unfair impressions of women and contribute to the objectification of women (or children), he believes that the problematic symbolizing is not immutable, and the negative outcomes are not necessarily inevitable. Therefore, he suggests a more conciliatory stance regarding the necessity to oppose sex robots.

Danaher argues that the first premise, which claims that the creating and use of sex robots symbolize unfair impressions of women and objectify them, is not necessarily fixed. He believes that the symbolic aspect of sex robots is possible to be removed or altered. For example, if sex robots were designed to never oppose their users and always exhibit consent or dissent, it would be entirely possible to eliminate this particular characteristic: Robots could be programmed to say "no" to humans and express agreement or disagreement, subject to certain conditions. And we can also set restrictions on the appearance of robots, preventing stereotypes and discrimination

against women or specific groups, and prohibit the use of sex robots designed to resemble children or fulfill users' pathological and disgusting requests. By implementing such limitations and settings, the symbolic character initially associated with sex robots can be eliminated, thus undermining the arguments of the opponents.

Regarding the second premise, which states that such symbolizing inevitably leads to negative consequences, Danaher also raises questions. In his point of view, after all, this is more of an empirical issue rather than purely normative. Opponents of sex robots present various potential negative social consequences, such as reinforcing power structures in a patriarchal society, perpetuating unfair impressions of women, and damaging normal relationships and marriages. However, it is equally possible to envision social benefits arising from the use of sex robots. Danaher introduces the concept of "safe space," where sex robots provide an outlet for certain pathological desires, allowing individuals with inclinations toward rape or pedophilia to release their desires without harming others, potentially reducing the likelihood of real-world criminal acts. What's more, the sex robots can also be used as a psychotherapy way or a training method for those who have sexual mental illness to get them act more appropriately in a sex relationship. Therefore, standing within the consequentialism, whether the promotion of sex robots should be advocated depends on the magnitude and balance of positive and negative effects, and we should therefore make the final judgment based on rigorous empirical evidence.

Taking both points into account, Danaher ultimately suggests that we should not make hasty decisions about whether to advance the development of sex robots. Real-world decisions should be made more cautiously. Since both the symbolic and consequential aspects of sex robots are possible to change, the ultimate societal effects remain unknown. Therefore, it is advisable to carefully design certain experiments to empirically examine the impact of sex robots on individuals' and society's well-being.

Modification of Symbolic-Consequences Argument and Still Stand on the Position

Danaher's critique of the Symbolic-Consequences Argument seem reasonable, particularly in his analysis of the "consequences" of sex robots. The actual outcomes of sex robots do rely on empirical evidence rather than conceptual debates. However, in my view, we can still maintain the argument based on symbolism while moving away from a consequentialism standpoint, and continue to oppose sex robots. I will present my own argument as followed.

Firstly, if the creation and use of sex robots symbolize morally problematic and offensive things, we can abandon a utilitarian position and assert that regardless of the ultimate empirical social effects, this practice itself is morally objectionable. Beyond the utilitarianism, we should not allow the practices about sex robots to offend and harm certain groups or humanity as a whole (e.g. human's dignity and rights), even if

the benefits for a certain group of people outweigh the harm in aggregate. This principle is somewhat of an ethical consensus that there are some communal ethical values such as everyone has the basic human right which should not be violated no matter the consequences of the practices. And this ethical principle is widely applied in the production of artistic works today. For instance, in the majority of countries and regions, child pornography and discriminatory expressions are prohibited in artistic works, and any content that contradicts communal values is disallowed, especially in more strictly regulated countries like China, where no pornography or content contradicting communal values is permitted. Standing at this point , we should prohibit the open production and sale of sex robots as they are an offense and a contamination of women as a group and human's basic dignity and rights in sex.

However, recall Danaher's questioning of the first premise of the Symbolic-Consequences Argument, which is that the symbolic relationship can be removed or altered. Even if we believe that the symbolizing associated with the practices about sex robots is ethically problematic regardless of the outcomes, proponents can still claim that sex robots may be acceptable if we can sever the connection between the practices and the symbolic references to negative attitudes or behaviors. Thus, our question now turns to whether the practices about sex robots can get rid of symbolic relationship with negative values. In my opinion, the answer is no. Danaher's argument suggests that we can program sex robots to exhibit sexual consent and place limitations on their appearance and characteristics. However, I believe that this simulated sexual consent is superficial, and even if the practices remove the symbolism of coercion, they still symbolize something problematic. I will further elaborate on this point.

Firstly, even if a user may be rejected by one sex robot, he can effortlessly and without hesitation reserve the services of another robot until he finds one that does not reject him and pay for this sexual service. Thus, I find it difficult to see how sex robots with simulated sexual consent can bring about any change in this commercial model. Additionally, the cleverness of the Symbolic-Consequences Argument lies in pointing out the essence of engaging in the activity of using sex robots: first, the humanization of machines, and then objectifying robots, who are as humans, into tools. The pleasure derived from this activity lies precisely in this objectification of machines as human into objects, rather than the mere objectification of objects itself—this distinction is what sets sex robots apart from ordinary sexual tools. The key difference of sex robots compared to general sexual tools lies in the fact that the robots must make users feel that they are interacting not with objects but with human beings. However, it is precisely this aspect that reveals the essence of the activity, where users pay money in exchange for symbolic sexual services from human beings. Therefore, the symbolizing achieved in this activity is the exchange of money for sexual rights, even if the robots can simulate sexual consent: this activity with consent merely simulates and symbolizes consensual prostitution. However, consensual prostitution, while lacking the coercive nature of forced sexual behavior, still devalues the dignity of women and humanity, as it implies that sexual rights, an important component of basic human rights, can be exchanged by money, thereby continuing

showing the objectification of human beings.

In conclusion, I have modified the Symbolic-Consequences Argument into an ethical proposition that is not based on consequentialism, which can be summarized as follows:

1. Whether voluntary or involuntary, commercialized sex exchange devalues basic human rights, making it morally unacceptable as it signifies that some individuals can trade the rights and dignity of others based on their socioeconomic status.

2. Regardless of how sex robots are programmed, due to the inherent nature of the humanization and reification process involved in the practices of sex robots, they symbolize and signify consensual or non-consensual sexual exchanges.

3. Therefore, the development of sex robots is ethically problematic.

Through this modification, we can address critiques similar to Danaher's and maintain our stance against sex robots. I believe that it is only when robots are developed genuinely as beings with freedom and rights that they can freely choose to love or not love one person, thereby severing the problematic symbolic relationship between humans and robots in the realm of sex and love, and progressing towards real friendship and love between humans and machines.

Reference

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