

# The Asymmetrical 'Relationship': Parallels Between Prostitution and the Development of Sex Robots

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine the model of asymmetrical 'relationship' that is imported from prostitution-client sex work to human-robot sex. Specifically, I address the arguments proposed by David Levy who identifies prostitution/sex work as a model that can be imported into human-robot sex relations. I draw on literature in anthropology that deals with the anthropomorphism of nonhuman things and the way that *things* reflect back to us gendered notions of sexuality. In the final part of the paper I propose that prostitution is no ordinary activity and relies on the ability to use a person as a thing and this is why parallels between sex robots and prostitution are so frequently found by their advocates.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.1 [Computers and Society]: Ethics

## General Terms

Human Factors.

## Keywords

Robot Ethics, Sex Robots, Prostitution, Subjectivity, Gender

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A number of initiatives are now in place to incorporate the development of sex robots into mainstream robotic activity. For example, in November 2015, roboticists interested in developing the area of sex robots can participate in the Second International Conference on Love and Sex with Robots to be held in Malaysia. The conference will explore topics such robot emotions, humanoid robots, teledildonics, and intelligent electronic sex hardware.

In his book, *Sex, Love and Robots* [1] David Levy proposes a future of human-robot relations based on the kinds of exchanges that take place in the prostitution industry. Levy explicitly creates 'parallels between paying human prostitutes and purchasing sex robots' [1 p.194]. I want to argue that Levy's proposal shows a number of problems, firstly his understanding of what prostitution is and secondly, by drawing on prostitution as the model for human-robot sexual relations, Levy shows that the sellers of sex are seen by the buyers of sex as *things* and not recognised as

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human subjects. This legitimates a dangerous mode of existence where humans can move about in relations with other humans but not recognise them as human subjects in their own right.

What are the ethics of extending robots into new fields such as sex and what model of sexual relationship is invoked in the transference to robots? Ethically, there is a strong reaction to the use of robots in the military, and as such a well established organisation The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots (<http://www.stopkillerrobots.org/>) is devoted to preventing automated and robotic warfare developments that further take humans out of the loop. Should we as a robotic community also reflect on implementing a similar response to the development of sex robots? Could the development of sex robots also mark a disturbing trend in robotics? I will propose at the end of this article the urgent need to establish a Campaign Against Sex Robots.

## 2. CONSUMPTION OF INTIMATE BODIES AS 'GOODS'

Prostitution is the practice of selling a sex for monetary payment. In recent years those who work in the prostitution industry (particularly in Europe and North America) have promoted the term 'sex-work' over prostitution as a way to show how it is similar to other kinds of service labour. A term like prostitution implies that the provider is in a subservient position. *Third Wave Feminism* proposes that women are not subservient but are making conscious choices to choose work that is influenced by their sex [2]. By contrast, the term 'sex-worker' extends the framework of labour to include sexual work. This redefinition of prostitution to sex-work (and therefore framed as a service) has been challenged by a number of campaigners and scholars [3, 4, 5]. While those in favour of the sex industry describe it as an extension of free sexual relations, campaigners against prostitution point to the fact that in the absence of consent, prostitution cannot be reframed as positive. The facts of prostitution are disturbing where violence and human trafficking are frequently interconnected [3, 4]. Moreover the industry is extensive and a recent European Union Survey found:

-prostitution revenue can be estimated at around \$186.00 billion per year worldwide.

-prostitution has a global dimension, involving around 40-42 million people worldwide, of

-which 90% are dependent on a procurer. 75% of them are between 13 and 25 years old.

[4 p. 6]

When robots are introduced as possible alternatives to women (or children), some, like Levy ask ‘what’s the harm? It’s only a machine?’ The same views are also proposed by some towards those who sell sex.

Levy also proposes that sex robots could help to reduce prostitution. However, studies have found that the introduction of new technology supports and contributes to the expansion of the sex industry. There are more women employed by the sex industry than any other time in history [5]. Prostitution and pornography production also rises with the growth of the internet. In 1990, 5.6 per cent of men reported paying for sex in their lifetime, by 2000, this had increased to 8.8 per cent. These figures are likely to be even higher due to the reluctance of people admitting to paying for sex [6]. As the buying of sex relies on only acknowledging the needs of the buyer, it is no surprise that children also suffer as a consequence. The National Crime Agency in the UK has identified the web as a new source of threat to children including the proliferation of indecent images of children and online child sexual exploitation [7].

The arguments that sex robots will provide artificial sexual substitutes and reduce the purchase of sex by buyers is not borne out by evidence. There are numerous sexual artificial substitutes already available, RealDolls, vibrators, blow-up dolls etc., If an artificial substitute reduced the need to buy sex, there would be a reduction in prostitution but no such correlation is found. To understand why males buy sex it is important to understand what happens in an exchange and how males describe what is happening. The following are statements from males who buy sex:

‘Prostitution is like masturbating without having to use your hand’,

‘It’s like renting a girlfriend or wife. You get to choose like a catalogue’,

‘I feel sorry for these girls but this is what I want’ [3 p.8].

While males are the chief buyer of human sex, females are more likely to purchase artificial nonhuman substitutes such as vibrators [1] that stimulate a discrete part of the body rather than purchase an adult or child for sex. Take a look again at the above– ‘renting a girlfriend’ or ‘feeling sorry for the girls’ these and many more indicate that the buyer of sex is putting his needs over and above the other person. In the prostitution/client exchange both enter the encounter in specific ways. A study by Coy [3 p. 18] found the asymmetrical form of encounter between buyers and sellers of sex. As modern subjects, male and females have equal rights under the law, and these rights recognise them as human agents. In prostitution, only the buyer of sex is attributed subjectivity, the seller of sex is reduced to a *thing*. This is played out in multiple ways where...

...a denial of subjectivity occurs when the experiences and feelings of the “object” are not recognised. This denial of women’s subjectivity can also be understood as sexual objectification. Both were evident in these men’s lack of empathy with the feelings of women in prostitution. They constructed her in their own minds, according to their own masturbatory fantasies, as opposed to recognising the reality of the woman’s

feelings. It is also telling that often the men switched from understanding the woman’s situation and feelings to attributing to her what they wanted her to feel during or after sex [3 p. 18].

In the sex exchange in prostitution, the subjectivity of the seller of sex is diminished and the subjectivity of the buyer is the only privileged perspective and viewpoint. As robots are programmable entities with no autonomous (or very limited) capabilities, it seems logical then that prostitution becomes the model for Levy’s human-robot sex relations.

A key factor that is missing is the inability of the buyer of sex to have empathy with the seller of sex. Expert of autism, Simon Baron-Cohen [8] in his book *Zero Degrees of Empathy* proposes a gendered basis to empathy as a normative category. Baron-Cohen has this to say about empathy:

Empathy is without question an important ability. It allows us to tune into how someone else is feeling, or what they might be thinking. Empathy allows us to understand the intentions of others, predict their behavior, and experience an emotion triggered by their emotion. In short, empathy allows us to interact effectively in the social world. It is also the “glue” of the social world, drawing us to help others and stopping us from hurting others [9 p.163].

Baron-Cohen suggests that the higher prevalence in crime, sexual abuse, the use of prostitutes and murder are disproportionately committed by men and show that men lack empathy in comparison to females [8]. By proposing that empathy is an ability to recognise, take into account and respond to another person’s genuine thoughts and feelings is something that is absent in the buying of sex. The buyer of sex is at liberty to ignore the state of the other person as a human subject who is turned into a thing.

### 3. ‘DOWNLOADING’ HUMAN LIFEWORLDS INTO THINGS

The use of robots for sex (adults and children) are justified on the basis that robots are not real entities, they are things. This narrative is also replayed in the production of video nasties, sexual abuse images of children in virtual reality settings [11] and the sexual and racial violence seen in some video games such as Grand Theft Auto where gamers are rewarded for killing prostitutes [12]. The transference of humanlike qualities to things has provoked extensive discussion in the robotics community. Is it possible to transfer human constructs of gender, class, race or sexuality to a robot or nonhuman? Anthropologically speaking the answer is yes. This theme has been replaced in a discussion of robots as slaves. Bryson [10] has railed against arguments associating robots with slaves because, she argues, they are nothing more than mechanical appliances –do to robots what you wish. But is it only possible to have an either or position? Is it possible then to propose that sex robots are harmful, knowing they are not human? While Bryson has important arguments, the way that human attribute meanings to robots, nature and animals reflect back to us what is of value.

But where do the fantasy images and products come from? Is fantasy just a neutral domain that is a sphere separated off from the 'real' and therefore unproblematic? I propose that fantasy, and the ways that robots are seen show human relations at work. The question is not do humans extend their lifeworlds into robots but what is being transferred to the robot? Anthropologists have developed an extensive literature on the anthropomorphism of things, framing it within the context of 'animism' as the attribution of a spirit to nonhuman animals [13, 14]. Moreover, the anthropology of technology explores how gender, class, sexuality and race is inflected in the cultural production of technological artefacts [15, 16, 17]. In a forthcoming paper I propose that technological-animism is at work in the sphere of robotics, but rather than come from spirit or religion as in classical studies, technological-animism comes from a lack of awareness and attention given to how cultural models of race, class and gender are inflected in the design of robots [18]. The issue then becomes not a why question (that is still open for debate), but a how question. In what ways are robots made and what uses are they put to and what can these practices tell us about gender, power, inequalities, race and class? Campaigns to extend rights to robots without due attention paid to human are problematic. Robertson [19] notes that campaigns to extend rights to robots are done in contexts where the campaigners do not simultaneously campaign for the extension of rights to all human beings. When this happens it is important to explore the ethics of the human that is reproduced in robotics. In some cases, such as sex-robots it will rest on a disturbing vision of a seller of sex as a thing.

In a recent article on gender and robots, Watercutter [20] highlighted the recurring imagery in fictions and robotic labs which overly presented female robots as young, attractive and focused on performing roles in the service industry as receptionists or waitresses. When it comes to the explicit design of sex robots, Roxxy designed by New Jersey-based company TrueCompanion shows a male view of a sexually attractive adult female complete with three points of entry in the body, the mouth, the anus and the vagina. But the development of sex robots is not confined to adult females, adult males are also a potential market for homosexual males. But the potential for a market in sex robots will be extended to child sex robots. Some researchers such as Ronald Arkin, professor of mobile robotics at Georgia Institute of Technology proposed that child robots could also be used in the treatment of paedophilia [21].

#### 4. CAMPAIGNS AND ROBOTS

In this paper I have tried to show the explicit connections between prostitution and the development and imagination of human-sex robot relations. I propose that extending relations of prostitution into machines is neither ethical, nor is it safe. If anything the development of sex robots will further reinforce relations of power that do not recognise both parties as human subjects. Only the buyer of sex is recognised as a subject, the seller of sex (and by virtue the sex-robot) is merely *a thing* to have sex with. As Baron-Cohen shows, empathy is an important human quality. The structure of prostitution encourages empathy to be effectively 'turned-off'. Following in the footsteps of ethical robot campaigns, I propose to launch a campaign against sex robots, so that issues in prostitution can be discussed more widely in the field of robotics. I have tried to show how human lifeworlds of gender and sexuality are inflected in making of sex robots, and that these robots will contribute to gendered inequalities found in the sex industry. I did not create these parallels between

prostitution and the making of sex robots, these have been cultivated and explicitly promoted by Levy [1]. By campaigning against sex robots, we will also promote a discussion about the ethics of gender and sex in robotics and help to draw attention to the serious issues faced by those in prostitution.

#### 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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