

# Robot Sex: Ethics and Morality

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## Overview

There are certain types of spiritual confession, in which past sexual conduct is a major aspect. Some crude advice often given to those about to confess is along the lines of, "Don't worry – I've heard it all before. In the end, there are only five things you can really have sex with: a man, a woman, a child, an animal and a milk bottle." So, in the AI simulated world of the future, does that taxonomy still work? Is an android sex-machine still a milk bottle or something more?

## Introduction

The abstract for a recent conference paper [1] asks:

*"Just because we can, does it mean we should?"* and expands ...

*"Technology continues to advance at an exponential pace. We are living in an ever-changing environment; one where machine intelligence is constantly evolving and taking a more active role in society.*

*This paper attempts to examine and raise awareness of the issues and problems in the development and operation of intelligent machines and the current failure to address ethical and social factors. It raises issues concerning the future of human-machine relationships and raises questions for an exploratory discussion of the social implications and considerations that they present. In particular, these questions should be asked in preparation for the many scenarios and impacts involved with future cyber-love, sex and relationships. We need to be aware and have consideration of the social involvement and the psychological well-being of people as a result of using them."*

So, what are these 'issues'?

We can start with two reasonably well-established socio-technological principles:

- Technology – existing and emerging – is generally used and abused in about equal measure, and will probably continue to be, although it is often a matter of personal opinion as to what is actually good or bad. Just as one man's terrorist is another's freedom-fighter, one (wo) man's pleasure may be another's sin [2].
- Appropriate legislation always lags some way behind the changes brought about by emerging technology and there is really no credible history of short-term social, moral or ethical objections being effective in restricting long-term technological advance and deployment [3].

The additional premise behind this particular paper is that – at some point in the future – largely *anything* by way of entertainment will be possible; at least in simulation and without much difficulty if we are prepared to accept limited quality/realism in the early stages. The Star Trek Holodeck may be many years off yet but the individual components are appearing and most of what we are going to discuss here does not require anything like that level of sophistication.

*These three principles are, in a strictly propositional sense, the axioms for this piece.*

## Sex Robots Now

2010 saw the release of *Roxxy*, the 'love robot' [4] or 'True

Companion' to give it its company description. There should be no real surprise in this. The period of time between the invention of plastic and the arrival of the blow-up sex doll market was also quite short. And, in fact – visually at least, *Roxxy* does not look that much different to an inflatable sex toy. Now that we are in the AI age, the claims made for *Roxxy* are that *"She knows your name, your likes and dislikes, can carry on a discussion & express her love to you & be your loving friend. She can talk to you, listen to you & feel your touch. She can even have an orgasm! She is also anatomically consistent with a human so you can have a talk or have sex. She is always turned on and ready to talk or play! Have a conversation or have sex – it is up to you!"* [5] (Although none of this has been verified – empirically or otherwise – in the research for this paper). *Roxxy* is also configurable (by the manufacturers) in the basic features of eye, hair & skin colour and breast size to reflect personal 'taste'.

What is being offered here is fairly crude in both senses of the word so there may or may not be academic AI interest – technological or social – at this stage of *Roxxy's* development. However, if there is not yet, there certainly will be soon, particularly as the robot's configurability improves, both in terms of hardware (appearance) and software (behaviour) but, to continue this discussion, we are going to have to consider sex robots in general – not just this specific one.

It does not take much imagination to project the 'love robot' into a future where much more convincing configuration is possible. There is no suggestion in this paper that the current makers of *Roxxy* will get involved in any of the activity this paper is about to consider but others could easily take commercial advantage. Generally, where there is money to be made, a market appears. If there is something (or someone) to be exploited, someone (or something) will do just that. (A fairly self-explanatory product called 'Auto Blow' reached its crowd-funding target in a very short time indeed recently [6].

## Sex robots in the future

In fact, and in time, what manufacturers are prepared to ship by way of factory configuration may not matter much. Making a sex robot's skin, hair and eyes in a range of colours and breasts in different sizes is hardly the future of robotic sex. All that is needed instead is to supply a configurable system to the customer; then they can customise it themselves. It is not hard to conceive a future combination of:

- A body with the necessary mechatronics to change shape; larger and smaller overall and fine-tuned individual detail wherever

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required (even if there are still a few 'base models' initially to facilitate this), and

- Smart-material for skin, which can take on any appearance, or any image (configured through a variety of means), wherever required across the body's surface.

Combining these two hardware concepts, and adding the necessary software to convincingly drive it, would deliver the complete package. One way or another (very unscrupulous suppliers or full customer configuration), we have to consider a future in which a sex robot can be bought, which can be *absolutely anything the customer wants it to be*.

*So exactly what sort of 'configuration' might be possible?*

Well, we have to recognise that, laying morality and legality aside – at least for now, a sex robot:

1. *Does not have to be a woman*
2. *Does not have to be adult*
3. *Does not have to be human*
4. *Does not have to have any counterpart in the real world at all*

Now, what is interesting to observe is that, whilst this list might be in the natural order of constraint relaxation from the conventional female sex doll, the levels of outrage caused by each in turn will not be. Remember we are not implicitly condoning or condemning any of these but it is likely that the first could be taken as a simple matter of equality (if that is what is wanted) and the last probably seen as just strange. However, the third will make most people feel uncomfortable and the second will cause outrage.

Or will it in fact? Is it actually wrong? Or does it being a robot we are talking about make it in any way acceptable? *This is probably the central question*. However, even then, it may not be as simple as this.

### Some Potentially Disturbing Scenarios

The problem is that this really is not a straightforward ethical decision to be made in moral isolation. It has some hard-edged practicality to it. Consider the following questions and scenarios:

- Is a sex robot fundamentally (legally, morally, ethically, whatever) any different to simple masturbation? Where does the physical stimulation overlap with the mental image and how much is this affected by the other senses being played on? And does it actually matter or is a sex robot – even a sophisticated one – really just an expensive milk bottle?

- There is often an implicit assumption that this will be a male-oriented market. Should it be? Will it be? The world is a big place and sexual standards and preferences are very non-homogeneous. Can we always assume that equality is equivalence and both are to be encouraged?

- Would an appropriate use of a robot 'true companion' be to, say, recreate a departed partner for emotional continuity? Perhaps an ex-partner... against their wishes? What about someone whose essential data has just been captured – completely without their knowledge – in the street on (say) Google Glass? How about a neighbour's twelve-year-old daughter? Could celebrities 'sell' themselves?

- If the idea of a child sex robot is utterly abhorrent, what about the alternative proposal that precisely this technology could be

used to treat paedophiles? [7] Is it just possible that there might be a positive side to such an idea?

- To what extent would it be acceptable to use a sex robot to 'experiment'? Obviously the technology would allow individuals to engage in activity they probably could not easily in the real world but would there then be more of a tendency to push boundaries, try things they probably would not 'in the flesh', test personal sexualities, etc.? Is this acceptable, or even to be welcomed?

- Is it acceptable to *abuse* a sex robot? (Of course, 'abuse' is a somewhat subjective term in relation to sex: some people pay for 'abuse'.) Is it acceptable to rape or 'kill' a sex robot? Does its simulated appearance have any bearing on this? In fact, should robots have 'rights'? [8] After all, we seem to be discussing sex slaves here.

- If much or most of this makes people feel uncomfortable, then, apart from general and ineffectual complaining, what, if anything, can really be done to *stop* it?

- The final point (4) in the list above – animals and extra-terrestrials – is outside the scope of this paper but clearly brings its own moral considerations.

Morally, there may be a difference here between, say, child pornography and a child sex robot. Child pornography clearly abuses children in its creation; on the surface, a child robot does not. But would it encourage it? Or would it actually decrease it? It is likely that we should not be asking the technologists these sorts of questions but unfortunately, we often do [9]. (A comparable issue divides vegetarians: if 'real' meat could be constructed from a molecular process, with no actual animals involved, would that make it acceptable? Similarly, why do many vegetarians like to eat soya protein shaped like a pork chop? Is that 'dirty' vegetarianism or simply helping them remain vegetarian?) Is convincing sex robot simulation something shameful or to be considered better than its alternative? Are all people ever likely to agree on this? Frankly, 'no'. Are those groups that see themselves as our spiritual or moral guides ever likely to agree on this? An even franker 'no'. This may seem like a localised affair at the moment but it truly has the potential to further split the scientific and religious communities.

### Conclusions

Whatever we decide, or try to decide, effective legislation may be difficult anyway. Emergent technology as a service often pulls together a number of individual threads, which are innocuous in their own right but devastating in combination [3]. The hardware and software necessary for a realistic sex robot would have numerous benefits elsewhere in society and would be actively encouraged as research. On the other hand, in practice, there would be little to prevent a sex robot being supplied in diminutive appearance to reflect a particular model or ethnicity, say – to not do so could be seen as discriminatory; the 'home configuration' required from that to a child would then be minimal. Outrage may have its place but how effective is it likely to be? Many are still outraged by pornography and sex toys; have they been eliminated? No; there is little effective legislation, *even for the pornography industry, which is known to be sometimes exploitative*. Ultimately, we simply keep it out of the public view and individually choose whether or not to partake.

So where does all this leave us? Well, probably nowhere, really. Even if there was to be some great legal and ethical consensus on this, which then became enshrined in law or moral code, it could still be

ignored – and it would be. The problem is that people just do not all think the same and sexual morality and conduct may divide them more than anything else. Ultimately, this may – yet again – be something that we have to get to grips with ourselves - *individually*; and this is not a legal – certainly not a *technological* – process.

Jack De Gioia, of Georgetown University, once warned [10] in a talk on the impact of social media, “*I wish to signal my concern that our new technologies, together with the underlying values such as moral relativism and consumerism, are shaping the interior worlds of so many, especially the young people we are educating, limiting the fullness of their flourishing as human persons and limiting their responses to a world in need of healing intellectually, morally, and spiritually.*”

However, he then suggested the need for, “*deepening self-understanding, self-awareness and self-knowledge – resources that support the interior work of seeking inner freedom. If we establish as a goal for each of our lives, Herder’s idea “that each of us has an original way of being human” – that the goal of our lives is to identify what Charles Taylor identifies as our most “authentic” self, such a goal can only be attained through demanding interior work. An authentic self is one living in accord with one’s most deeply held values.*” [11]

He was not talking about robot sex, of course, but the ‘*we each find our own way of being human*’ principle may well apply to this and too many other areas where we wrestle with the moral implications of emerging technology. It is likely that individually we are the only one on our street that thinks about sex the way we do; it is likely that we are the only one *in the world* that thinks about *everything* the way

we do. On that basis, what chance do we have of fitting someone else’s morality? Ultimately, the best way of answering to an unknown higher code is probably to (*genuinely and truly*) answer to ourselves. *But – with the possibility of unrestrained temptation always on hand in the future – how good are we going to be at that?*

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