

Why sex robots should fear us

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Outline

- I argue for caution about the development of sex robots out of concern for the harms that may be inflicted on future morally considerable sentient robots.
- We should view sex robots, among all social robots, as especially susceptible to abusive treatment.

- Philosophical uncertainty about machine sentience
- Sentient vs non-sentient robots
- Possibly sentient vs certainly non-sentient robots

A Sexbot in the first decades of the 21st century



Sex bots today

- Harmony, a sex robot created by Realbotix – “a project dedicated to integrating cutting edge emerging technologies with silicone doll artistry to provide a bridge between technology and humankind on emotional, mental, and physical levels.”
- Samantha, a sexbot built by Spanish roboticist Sergi Santos. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/19/style/sex-robots.html>).

A distinction and a category of potentially morally problematic treatment

- Possibly-sentient robots include those that many experts on artificial intelligence and sentience accept as sentient.
- Certainly non-sentient robots include those that no (or very few) experts on artificial intelligence and sentience accept as sentient.
- Rough treatment would cause suffering, were its object sentient.
- Niska in Channel 4 *Humans*

The moral relevance of philosophical disagreement

- Peter Singer - “if a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration ... if a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. This is why the limit of sentience ... is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others.”
- Jerry Fodor (1991) separation of rationality and the capacity to represent the world from consciousness.
- The moral implications of reasonable disagreement about robot sentience
- Data’s self-sacrificing behaviour on the *Enterprise*.
- Joanna Bryson (2010)’s advice

The dangerous ambiguity of sex robot suffering

- Social robots
- The privacy of sex
- Niska's predicament
- Robert Nozick on spillover
- A failure to distinguish entities that can be wronged from those that cannot be wronged. Robert Nozick (1974: 35-38)
- Racism as an example of a lag in updating moral attitudes
- The ambiguity of robot sentience as an invitation to sadists

Conclusions

- We lack a philosophically straightforward test for sentience.
- This exacerbates the problem of spillover.
- Sex robots are especially susceptible to ill treatment.
- Don't make sex bots that fall into the category of possible sentience