The Use and Abuse of Sex Robots: Where the Ethics Debate Goes Wrong

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***Abstract*—The area of robotics is saturated with controversy due to the rapidly increasing coverage of questionable applications. Chief among these applications is the use of robots for sexual purposes. In this paper, we first provide a broad overview of the current discourse surrounding the ethics of propagating sex robots throughout our society at large. More specifically, we review sex robots through: (1) a feminist lens; (2) a medicinal lens; (3) a free speech lens; (4) an abuse protection lens; and (5) a reproductive lens. This list, while non-exhaustive, covers the predominant areas of discussion in the conversation of sex robotic ethics. The purpose of this survey is to emphasize that there are several, equally important ethical considerations to answer before we, as a society, can ascertain the consequences of the normalization of sex robot production, ownership, and use.**

Following this initial survey, we argue that the current debate format that widely employs speculative argument is unproductive. After we describe several reasons that the speculative argument format is unproductive, we propose for a complete rework of the debate structure, calling for a more rigorous scientific process when arguments are presented. We conclude our paper with the argument that sex robots are not inherently immoral in order to draw attention to the flaws in current arguments against sex robots.

I. Introduction

The age of automation has brought several advances in robotics technology, from self-driving cars to factory lines entirely staffed by computers. Ultimately, this ubiquitous nature of robots has lead to the entry of sex robots, which are tools that serve to automate the process of human sexual gratification. These sex robots encompasses both robots that are simply electronic objects that automate sexual pleasure (*e.g.*, vibrators), and robots that hold humanoid characteristics. While the former are widespread in the United States [1], the latter are a more recent development. Amongst these developments are the sex robots Roxxxy from True Companion [2] — the first sex robot with a humanoid personality — and Harmony from Realbotix [3] — the first humanoid sex robot that makes use of artificial intelligence.

Due to the presence of sexually conservative factions, it is unsurprising that sex robots are an increasingly controversial technology. While sex robots have been a popular topic of discussion in popular culture, such as in *Westworld* or *Ex Machina*, the growing interest in making them a reality has raised new pressure on the questions of how ethical they are to use and develop. Some argue that given some contexts of their use, a sex robot may be ethically sound to gratify sexual needs. However, others argue that sex robots will propagate ideals that are harmful — or worse, dangerous — to the existence of humanity. Unfortunately, there is not much agreement about the best ways to approach the use of sex robots without much room for compromise.

In this paper, we first provide a thorough survey of the current literature with respect to the ethics of the use and development of sex robots. The survey includes a wide range of debates that occur in the sex robot ethics literature, including through: (1) a feminist lens; (2) a medicinal lens; (3) a free speech lens; (4) an abuse protection lens; and (5) a reproductive lens. For each separate topic, we describe where the majors points of contention lie, and which questions still need answered to come to a mutual consensus. Furthermore, following each individual survey, we provide additional high level questions pertaining to the use of sex robots that still remain to be answered.

Following this thorough discussion of the current literature of sex robots ethics, this paper argues that the current debate is wildly unproductive and needs a complete rework. More specifically, this paper argues that because of the common use of speculative arguments within the literature, the debate is unable to reach a proper conclusion. This paper further proposes a new approach for tackling these tough ethical questions pertaining to sex robots. Finally, this paper concludes with the argument that sex robots are not inherently immoral, and that their perceivable bad-making properties are a symptom of larger societal issues.

II. Sex Robots Reinforce the Patriarchy

From a feminist lens, sex robots are seen as a way for the patriarchy to assert dominance over a submissive sex object. The more realist the sex robot's physical appearance is and the more human-like its motions are, the line between robot and human becomes more muddled. Richardson, founder of the *Campaign Against Sex Robots*, advocates for their abolition due to this fear that they will further oppress women [4]. In her argument, she discusses that sex robots reinforce the worldview that the service they provide, sex, is a *thing* that can be bought. On the other hand, sex workers only recently won a battle to become more humanized when the terminology in the common lexicon has begun to shift away from *prostitution*, a term that implies a position of servitude, toward *sex work*, a term that implies an occupation of choice. However, Richardson asserts that sex robots would undo all of