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Reviewed by

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Professor Maurizio Balistreri's book "*Sex Robots: Love in the Age of Machines*" tempers a creative exploration with a critical interrogation of the emergence of sex robots. Drawing from a wide array of relevant literature and examples, Professor Balistreri attends to some of the most pertinent points of sex robot research. By structuring the book into balanced assessments – evaluating arguments for and against each chapter's topic – this publication gives an inquisitive and comprehensive overview of the ethical dilemmas of sex robots.

"What's so Bad About Having Sex with a Robot?" asks Chapter One. Interrogating the ethics and arguments regarding sex with a robot, the first chapter explores why people might consider this a viable and desirable option. Designating a sex robot as an augmented form of sex toy, Balistreri points out that they could be used in solo or partnered sex to provide new surrogate forms of sexual interaction. By conceptualising a sex robot as new sex toy, he highlights their affordances for this as another kind of sexual activity without emotional attachment. As a counterpoint, Balistreri attends to the dilemma of problematic encounters with these devices (such as programming a sex robot to not consent to sex). Interrogating the notion that only morally deficient users would want this kind of interaction, Balistreri points out that other sexual activities and fantasies incorporate violence, such as BDSM and some forms of pornography. Believing sex with robots to be a space for fantasy and play, he concludes by suggesting that engaging in this kind of activity with a sex robot is not explicitly evidence of a morally questionable character.

Building on the previous chapter's exploration of a potential sex robot's user being morally deficient, Balistreri attends to one of the most contentious conversations in sex robot research: could sex robot usage and development further exacerbate violence against women? Significantly, Balistreri's work attends to the fact that, currently, most sex robots are gendered female; an oversight in much work attending to current production and design. In this second chapter, and arguably the most interesting, he explores two premises: one, that sex robots will result in increased violence against women, and two, that they might reduce the demand for human sex work.

Referring to literature on the presence of violence in video games and pornography, Balistreri highlights that the correlation between fictional violence permeating our social world has yet to be empirically proven. Therefore, he suggests, the link between sex robot violence and its impact on human women might not necessarily be causally linked. To further undermine this equivalence, he points out that while most sex robots are gendered-female and designed for heterosexual men, future developments could change this. Turning to the potential for sex robots that are gendered-male for women, the author explores the positive potential of these technologies for women to experience satisfying sexual encounters. Balistreri then turns to the complicated nature of sex work and gives a fair account of its intricacies. He notes that those paying for sexual interactions – as with potential sex robot users – need not be a morally deficient person, but might easily be someone paying for a sexual fantasy. Balistreri invites us to see the positives of future sex robots as robotic sex workers. He argues that for those opposed to sex work it has the potential to reduce the number of human sex workers. Other positive outcomes are covered as it could offer safer opportunities for paid-for sex in terms of sexual health. Further exploring the beneficial possibilities, he notes that these technologies might offer sexual solutions for those with disabilities, turning to the impact of sexual assistance as a service for this demographic. While exploring the key theorists and work on the gendered dynamics of sex robots and sex work, Balistreri offers some important reflection points.

In the final chapter, Balistreri explores the coinciding evolution of sex and technologies, and considers the emotional affordances of sex robots alongside these adjacencies. Recognising that, at these early stages, emotional interactions with robots is unlikely, Balistreri points out that future developments might make them emotional companions, beyond being categorised as sex aids. Balistreri draws from literature which shows that complex affective engagements can be made with digital fictional characters and imagines sex robots as new

instantiations of this phenomenon. With a potential to be technologies that remember, converse and interact, compounded with their human-like appearance, the author sees our reception of robots becoming complicated as they resemble intelligent human-like agents. Tentatively looking to a future where society interacts with human-like robots regularly, he considers the implications of seeing robots as emotionally intelligent beings.

In terms of its contributions to the field of 'robonomics', Balistreri's work provides relevant insight on how sex robots could alter the sex industry. Departing from the premise that robots are already reshaping labour economies in multiple spheres such as service industries, production, the military and medicine, Balistreri explores the scope for sex robots to create brand-new forms of sex industries. While highlighting they are in their nascent stages, he convincingly explores their insertion in this sphere as a probable extension of robot work, particularly in the second chapter.

Some of the ethical dimensions are covered in too cursory a manner such as: reflections on virtual paedophilia; parallels of sex robots and pornography; women paying for sex; and bestiality. While occasionally eliding some complexities, this is primarily because of its wide-reaching scope. Nevertheless, this book does astutely attend to the main sites of contention with sex robots – what are the ethics of having sex with a robot? Could their gendered-female constructions have repercussions on women? Could we develop feelings towards sex robots?

While engaging with relevant and contemporary literature, Balistreri's work is valuable in that it asks us to look to the future of sex robot development. Reflections tend to interrogate existing examples without considering the future trajectories in a wider sense. By approaching the salient points of sex robot ethics and research, Balistreri's work gives an insightful and comprehensive overview of the field and propounds questions that will be relevant for broad and productive future developments.

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