

Slavery, the Prostituted, and the Rights of Machines

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SEX ROBOT Matters

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Slavery is the coercive and controlled use of another human. Contrary to the belief that the practice ended in the 1800s, slavery still persists today. There are many different terms used to describe slavery including, debt bondage (a person's pledge of labor for a debt or obligation), sale and exploitation of children, and human trafficking (forced labor or commercial sexual exploitation). Sexual exploitation is the most commonly identified form of human trafficking (79%) followed by forced labor (18%) [52]. To be held in slavery is to be held in miserable conditions and have a form of power

over you that denies you a life of freedom. For most people in Europe and North America slavery is not a *visible* problem, and one could think slavery is somehow less important, and less violent today than in the past. This is not the case. The United Nations estimates that almost 21 million people are currently victims of slavery [25]. A staggering \$150 billion in profits is generated from forced labor and 168 million girls and boys are in child labor [25]. Central to our understanding of slavery and its related forms is that a person is recast, often without bodily integrity, as property that can be bought, sold, and accessed by others with more power, status, and money.

Why begin an article on Sex Robots, and the rights of machines, with an introduction to human slavery? Because these themes are more interlinked than one

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might imagine, but perhaps not for the reasons you would think. Today philosophers of technology, technologists, and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are proposing that anthropomorphic robots should have rights. These elements posit that we are on the threshold of a new dawn of human-machine equivalence (13), (32), (46), (55). Moreover, some suggest that protecting anthropomorphic robots is a pathway to promoting human empathy, further confusing the issue of what is a machine (13). Gunkel (55) furthers these perspectives by claiming that the exclusionary nature of human beings (for example women or people of color) demonstrates that the moral status of others is varied across time and space. He writes,

The vindication of the rights of machines, therefore, is not simply a matter of extending moral consideration to one more historically excluded other. The question concerning the "rights of machines" makes a fundamental claim on ethics, requiring us to rethink the system of moral considerability all the way down (55, p. 53).

There are even others in the field of robotics who claim that intimate attachments can be established between humans and machines in the form of robots (30). There are others who are adamant that robots/machines are just things, and that they should be our "slaves" (7).

In this article I ask how a discussion about artificial intelligence (AI) and robots became fused with a discussion of slavery, rights, and objects (animate and inanimate), with these objects taking on the role of persons. These themes are brought together through a discussion of sex robots.

Pygmalion and Buying Sex

Anthropology, as the study of human cultures, explores how humans relate to each other, and how humans produce artefacts and engage with their material environments. The field of anthropology, along with co-connected disciplines of folklore, myth, and religion, has a well-developed literature on the topics of anthropomorphism and animism (19), (22).

Anthropomorphism is attributing humanlike characteristics to nonhuman animals and things, while animism is attributing life to the inanimate. While anthropomorphism and animism are topics associated with non-scientific and indigenous cultures, these anthropological themes, recurring through different cultures across space and time, are given new forms of expression in relation to artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics (43). "Technological" animists are differentiated from indigenous animists in that technological

animists believe (through technology) that they can make the fantasy "come true," i.e., that the inanimate object can become real, even alive.

The desire to animate the inanimate, or attribute anthropomorphic qualities to nonhumans, is well documented, but technology has replaced magic as the philosopher's stone to create life from the inanimate and lifeless. This is further echoed in texts that provide context for making the inanimate, animate. Take the recent publication of Capurro ((9); See also *The Quest for Robotics. A Survey*) that cites many creation myths, including the medieval Jewish story of the golem by Jada Lowe, the Japanese Bunrakau tradition of puppetry, Genesis, automata, and Rossum's Universal Robots (RUR). Capurro draws on Aristotle's famous text *Politics* (2) and refers to the passage (2, 1253b23), where Aristotle describes slaves as "a living tool," as well as to the desire animate the inanimate. Capurro concludes that if the inanimate were animate, there would be no need for slaves.

The desire to animate the inanimate, or attribute anthropomorphic qualities to nonhumans, is well documented.

Let me introduce and emphasize the female as creator. Through the act of producing children, a woman is creating actual life, a point that is often absent from these genealogical surveys of creation through time. I will pick up the mantle of these writers by introducing the myth of Pygmalion to discuss sex robots. Pygmalion was popularized by the Roman poet Ovid in his epic poem, *Metamorphoses* (39). Pygmalion grew tired of local prostitutes and decided to sculpt in "snow-white ivory" a woman entirely of his own creation (27). The statue comes to life. In readings of this story, Pygmalion represents another tale in this long lineage of stories about male animation of the inanimate. But what I want to suggest is that Pygmalion is not a story about love, reciprocity, or empathy, but reflects a non-reciprocal encounter that underscores the imagination, promotion, and development of sex robots, inspired by power and coercion over women and girls. The sex robot is inspired by a non-empathetic form of encounter that is manifest in the sex trade, a gendered practice of power where males (80% of the buyers of sex are male), buy sex from women and girls (16). Men and male children are also prostituted, females make up a small proportion of the buyers of sex, and fortunately

Technology has replaced magic as the philosopher's stone to create life from the inanimate and lifeless.

not all men buy sex or consume pornography. There is a strong movement now with males turning away from prostitution and pornography as they recognize the detrimental effects on their intimate relationships, an issue I believe will gain more ground over the next decade (3), (18), (35).

Sex Robots and Prostitution

What is a sex robot? It is a doll with programs and motors that is primarily imagined and/or produced in the form of a woman or girl. The artistic representation of the appearance of the human in objects is an historical accomplishment, with Renaissance artists able to produce realistic portraits of humans in two dimensions (5). Since then, developments in the manufacturing of artificial materials, such as silicon, have allowed dolls to look more lifelike than their predecessors. Making objects appear lifelike provokes what Mashiro Mori (37) called "the uncanny valley." This is where appearance and behavior are not congruent, causing discomfort and distress. Mori does not cite Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny*, written in 1919 (20), as a reference in his uncanny valley paper, but Freud's book addressed concerns about the making of anthropomorphic objects.¹

In Freud's writing, the uncanny is a strange and uncomfortable eerie feeling that is triggered when a person is uncertain of ontological categories about what is living or dead, animate or inanimate, real or artificial. The robot had not made a public cultural appearance in 1919 (not until 1920/1921 in the now Czech Republic), so Freud examines objects such as automata, dolls, and statues to explore fears conjured by anthropomorphic figures. In light of our subject matter – sex robots – Freud's essay opens up some important considerations. He wrote (20, p 141),

...if intellectual uncertainty is aroused as to whether something is animate or inanimate, and whether the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to

the living. With dolls, of course, we recall that children, in their early games, make no sharp distinction between the animate and the inanimate and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls as if they were alive.

At present there is no working definition of a sex robot, and in reality there are really no sex robots. The introduction of a robotic or AI programs into a doll is enough to claim it as a "sex-robot," but these mechanistic dolls more closely resemble automata. A concern about sex robots is not driven by the technology, but by ideas and practices that are drawn on to make and promote these mechanical objects. These robotic sex dolls mimic human appearance, may run voice activated programs, and have motors embedded in various parts of the robot body. Sex robots are building on doll-like platforms popularized by the work of Matt McMullen, an artist and maker of RealDoll (www.realdolls.com). RealDolls are life sized dolls made with PVC skeletons with steel joints and silicone skin, but McMullen is also introducing technologies into these dolls such as voice activated programs. Also in the U.S., AI engineer Douglas Hine is developing a robotic platform, Roxxy, produced by the company TrueCompanion (www.truecompanion.com). The making of these dolls does not stop at adults. In Japan, child sex dolls resembling five year old girls are produced by company Trottla (www.Trottla.com).

The dolls are modeled primarily on pornographic representations of women (27). The speech programs in these robots are primarily focused on the buyer/owner of the model. While the pornography industry shapes the way the robots are designed in appearance (their ethnicity and age are also important), the type of relationship that is used as the model for the buyer/owner of the sex robot and the robot is inspired, not by an empathetic human encounter, but a non-empathetic form of encounter characterized by the buying and selling of sex (44). As I argued elsewhere (44), I did not make these easy comparisons between a sex robot and a prostituted person, this was done by sex robot advocates (30), (31), (53). One obvious example is Levy and Loebner's jointly authored paper "Robot prostitutes as alternatives to human sex workers" (31). In my analysis, I problematized these assumptions by showing how arguments for sex robots reveal a coercive attitude towards women's bodies as commodities, and promote a non-empathetic form of encounter.

Do not take my word for it. Let us look at what the buyers of sex say about their activities:

"It's like renting a girlfriend or wife. You get to choose like a catalogue."

¹Mori's original article "Bukimi No Tani" did not translate into "The Uncanny Valley," but is still close to Freud's view of the uncanny as including that which is "eerie." According to an article published in *Live Science*, "The first English use of the 'uncanny valley' phrase came from a popular robotics book by Jasja Reichardt" and was used as the translation by Karl MacDorman and his fellow translators (24).

"You pay for the convenience, a bit like going to a public loo" (16, p. 8).

Hugh Loebner endows the \$100 000 Loebner Prize. The Prize is a text-based challenge between an artificial chatbot and a human. The prize is awarded if judges cannot tell the difference between a human and machine responses in text-based conversational dialogue, according to the criteria set by Alan Turing in his original 1950 paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (51). In Turing's paper, the Turing Test is about fooling a person into believing something is human when it is not. Loebner has explained his views on the buying of sex, making comparisons between the buying of sex from a human body and the other commodities he buys:

I pay for sex because that is the only way I can get sex. I am not ashamed of paying for sex. I pay for food. I pay for clothing. I pay for shelter. Why should I not also pay for sex? Paying for sex does not diminish the pleasure I derive from it (Hugh Loebner cited in (29, p. 223).

Levy (30) also draws on the human propensity to anthropomorphize machines, and to attribute humanlike characteristics to machines, while he simultaneously describes a practice where access to a women's body is treated as a legitimate tradeable commodity. At first sight it seems that sex robots (objects) are a preferable alternative to the violence regularly experienced by living prostituted women (17).

A frequent question I receive as Director of the Campaign Against Sex Robots, is "why do you care about sex robots, they are only things? What does it matter if inanimate objects perform roles than humans once did?" I agree that machines, robots, and AI are not human, even if they are created by humans and even as they mimic some human functions. Levy (30) suggests that robots could help address "the myth of mutuality" that is present in the buying and selling of sex (30, p. 207), a myth created in the minds of the buyers. Here is another parallel between humans and robots:

The enjoyment and benefits derived by their owners or renters from the sex they experience with robots can reasonably be expected to bring as much overall satisfaction as those same people enjoy as the clients of "human" prostitutes (30, p. 193).

In my own work I argue that the buying of sex promotes a disruption to empathy, because the buyer of sex is not relating to the person as a subject, but an object (44).^{*} This is further evidence sex robots are inspired by inherently non-empathetic human

practices. If the practices that inspire sex robots are not ethical for humans, they are not ethical for extending into machines. Let us take a comparative look at industrialization and the automation of the workplace. There is no evidence at all that introducing more automation into the workforce reduces human inequalities. In fact, computer scientist Moshe Vardi recently proposed that robots will put over "half of the world's population out of a job in the next 30 years" (54). Jobs including bankers and lawyers are under threat (28). Automation, machines, and robots do not, in of themselves, reduce or end inequalities. In fact, as wealthy elites primarily drive robotics, the purpose of these developments is to generate new forms of capital. There is already ample wealth owned by today's elites. Even paying taxes is avoided at all costs by elites through offshore accounts and creative marketing. According to the international development charity Oxfam, currently the wealth owned by the richest 1% of the world's population is equal to that owned by the other 99% (4).

The Turing Test is about fooling a person into believing something is human when it is not.

Human Rights

What it means to be human is not constant over time and space, and we know from our cultural record that who is given the status of human depends very much on class, race, and gender (2), (49). I take the position articulated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United National General Assembly on 10 December 1948:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood (1).

Human rights codify what it means to be human, and offer political protections. The UN's Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the rights of all humans to live a particular form of existence regardless of their class, race, or gender. It builds on earlier declarations, such as the American Declaration of Independence that promoted "unalienable Rights, that among these are

Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness ... deriving their powers from the consent of the governed" (Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776 (56)). In the passages above I want to emphasize how human rights ideals recognize something *intrinsic* to the person (endowed with spirit and conscience), and that such rights are *relational* and given through relations with others through "consent" or in the "spirit of brotherhood." Terms such as "brotherhood" and "all men are created equal" reveal the double standards of the period, particularly with regards to the treatment of women or people of color. For example, Thomas Jefferson who penned and signed the Declaration of Independence also owned slaves, and women were not immediately emancipated. Despite the problematic context of the U.S. declaration, human rights have served to challenge regimes of power that endorse the privileges of some groups over and above others, establishing that it is not permissible to view a person as property, nor to treat them as such under human rights law.

Aristotle, the father of "virtue" ethics took no issue with slavery. Fortunately resistance to inequality is as old as slavery itself, and Aristotle makes one reference to it in *The Politics* writing "Others say that it is contrary to nature to rule as master over slave, because the distinction between slave and free is one of convention only, and in nature there is no difference, so that this form of rule is based on force and is therefore not just" (2, 1253b14). Aristotle provided the "rationale" for a system of inequality (57, p. 23), while giving little of the accounts of others who resisted slavery (8). We now turn to Aristotle's justification for slavery, and the person as property.

Slavery and Robots: Humans as Property and Property as Persons

Aristotle's reference to the slave as a tool is one that is well known and sourced regularly in reference to AI and robotics (10), (11), (21), (23). To understand this contemporary dilemma, of how people are property and things can take on the qualities of persons, Aristotle's *Politics* holds important answers. Aristotle believed a slave was a living tool and a living piece of property and drew comparisons between an animate tool (slave) and an inanimate tool (thing). It is worth citing at length what he thought about human tools:

Tools may be animate as well as inanimate; for instance, a ship's rudder uses a lifeless rudder, but a living man for watch; for a servant is, from the point of view of his craft, categorized as one of its tools. So any piece of property can be regarded as a tool enabling a man to live, and his property is an assemblage of such tools; a slave is

a sort of living piece of property; and like any other servant is a tool in charge of other tools. For suppose that every tool could perform its task either at our bidding or itself perceiving the need, and if – like the statues made by Daedalus or the tripods of Hephaestus, of which the poet says that "self-moved they enter the assembly of the gods – hustles in a loom could fly to and fro and a plucker play a lyre of their own accord, then master-craftsmen would have no need of servants nor masters of slaves" (2, pp. 64-65, 1253b23).

It is important to understand that slaves are not machines. Bryson (7) has emphasized that machines are appliances, objects, and these are different from humans, but she draws on the language of slavery, and therefore reproduces Aristotle's assumptions. The confusion about slave's nature stems from Aristotle's misunderstanding of a slave as an animate tool, because slaves were never animate tools. How can we be sure that slaves were not animate tools? Part of the answer lies in resistance, the other in coercion. If humans were "animate tools" they would not resist. But slaves did resist their captivity, epitomized in the famous account of Spartacus, the rebel slave who led an uprising against the Roman Republic (58). As described by Aristotle, slavery is a political system based on coercion and power. Slavery is about the politics of power exercised over others with less power. It is this underlying idea of Aristotle's that is reproduced in AI and robotics. Here the human can be a thing, and things can be humanlike. While arguments for the rights of machines (55) and robots (13) appear a progressive step on the road to increasing the rights of others, the argument is based on a fundamentally distorted idea of the human as property, carried over into things. Arguments for sex robots, drawn from and justified by reference to the actual lived experiences of women as property, explicitly reveal these connections.

Even if we examine the history of the word "machine" we find it less linked to the slave than to artificiality. We can move away from the idea of the machine as a mechanical entity and return to its original meaning in Greek which is "contrivance" (see <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=machine>). What is a contrivance? It is something that is derived as an outcome of artificiality. Over time the meaning of the word developed. Only by the mid-1600s did the machine become synonymous with mechanical and power agents, as we understand them, and as more in keeping with our vision today of a "device made of moving parts for applying mechanical power" (1670s).

If we examine the history of the word "robot" we also find that mechanical agents are not the direct inspiration

for robots, rather workers are. The Robot character in the play *R.U.R* was not a machine (44, p. 26). In *R.U.R*, the robot is made up of human biological parts but assembled on a production line. It was other artists in the 1920s who took Karel Čapek's robot and turned it into a machine. The first machines were not slaves, nor are slaves mechanical machines, and robots were not initially machines (44, p. 26).

The Price for a Human of Being an Object

Survivor of prostitution, Brenda Myers-Powell, entered prostitution at the age of 14. She recalls her life in Chicago as one of poverty and deprivation, seeing women as prostitutes in her neighborhood and needing to provide an income for her two children and grandmother. She logically felt this was an option for her to try. She describes her first experience of paid sex. She was 14 and cried through the experience, but the buyer still continued to have sex with her – he still continued to have sexual intercourse despite this. What makes a human being turn away from the suffering of another that is right before their eyes? Does the sex trade make this kind of exchange an exception or a rule?

In many countries of the world there are vigorous debates about decriminalizing prostitution, or criminalizing the buying of sex (sometimes known as the Nordic model). The Nordic model takes into account the power differences between males and females, and targets the law at those with the most power, not the least, and also provides exit strategies for women and those prostituted (48). But what about the arguments for decriminalization of prostitution? Germany in 2002, The Netherlands in 2003, and New Zealand in 2003 all introduced laws that decriminalized prostitution (26), (38). The pro decriminalization lobby argues that paid sexual access to human bodies should be redefined as “sex-work” and part of the “service” industry. It is this “acceptable” side of prostitution that has been the foundation for promoting sex robots as viable sexual partners. But evidence suggests that the buyers of sex are more likely to commit violent crimes against women (17). Decriminalization of prostitution is proving to have the opposite effect, and rather than protecting women, it is making prostitution and its corollary activities such as sex trafficking more prolific. Though prostitution is presented as different from sex trafficking, researchers (12) found increased sex trafficking in countries where prostitution was decriminalized. Moreover, brutal human practices can coexist with periods of change and radical reform, even justified as a necessary part of the path to progress (57, p. 2). With Gonzo porn (a violent depiction of sexual acts against women by one or many men) now commonplace in pornography, it and

prostitution provide legitimate “commercial” outlets to exercise violence against women (14), (59), (60). Pornography is not too far removed from prostitution – they were once both the same: “in ancient Greece was the brothel slut available to all male citizens. (She) was the cheapest (in the literal sense), least regarded, least protected of all women, including slaves” (61, p. 200). Pornography developed as a term in the mid-19th century; from the Greek pornographos “writing about whores” (61, pp. 199-200).

Sex robots are inspired by inherently non-empathetic human practices.

Pornography and prostitution cannot be disentangled from the role that women occupy as sexual objects to (some) males, in much the same way that slavery cannot be disentangled from a vision of a slave (an animate tool) that is connected to a citizen male. Might we also still retain this vision of a citizen male who has power and uses this power coercively, particularly in the area of sexual gratification from women? What makes a human being feel able to ignore the suffering of others and continue anyway? The answer in part is a system that enables people to relate to some as objects. Objects, things, and commodities do not possess full subjectivity; they are in Aristotle's view “animate tools,” or as he explained “the deliberative faculty in the soul is not present at all in a slave” (2, p. 95, 1259b 32). Is the promotion of a robot alternative to a prostituted person inspired by motives that view people as different from things? Or is it underscored by a non-reciprocal, non-empathetic relationship based on power? Let us consider again what Aristotle thought about relations between slave and master, which are characterized as primarily non-relational:

A piece of property is spoken of in the same way as a part is; for a part is not only part of something but belongs to it tout court; and so too does a piece of property. So a slave is not only his master's slave but belongs to him tout court, while the master is his slave's master but does not belong to him. These considerations will have shown what the nature and functions of the slave are; any human being that by nature belongs not to himself but to another is by nature a slave; and

a human being belongs to another whatever in spite of being a man, he is a piece of property, i.e., a tool having a separate existence and meant for action ([2, p. 65, 1254a], my emphasis).

However, rather than see the contemporary development of robots as akin to Aristotle's slaves, I want to suggest that Aristotle's view of persons as property is driving robotics today, enabling researchers in the field to make a case for robot rights and machine ethics. These views are supported by neoliberal capitalists, who want to create new markets, but keep coming up against difficulties called Human Rights. There is a widespread movement today, to have a free market in all areas of life, even if this includes the sexual exploitation of children and organ harvesting [36], (40).

For neoliberal free market proponents, laws restrict the capacity of markets to develop. This is why the language of decriminalizing prostitution is so frequently framed in neoliberal language of "free choice," and "agency," but this agency is detached from any socio-political context of power and inequality [62], with some claiming it is feminist to be a prostitute and/or employed in the pornography industry [63]. As an aside, Aristotle also promoted rules for being a "good slave," and it was not enough that one was subjugated. One also had to embrace that subjugation. Extending rights to machines has the potential to reduce the idea of what it means to be human, and to begin to redefine the human as an object, as Aristotle thought of his slaves.

As David Levy himself has explained (as cited in [44, p. 15]), prostituted humans are not very good at showing their enjoyment in the act, and he has proposed this as a reason for robot prostitutes:

More obvious reasons why the robot experience will be more appealing than visiting a prostitute include the utterly convincing manner in which the robots will express affection and other emotions, simply because their emotions will be programmed into them, to be part of them, instead of being make-believe affections acted out by a prostitute with little genuine enthusiasm for the need to convince [44, p. 15].

If we consider this proposition seriously, even Levy is acknowledging that a non-reciprocal and non-empathetic encounter takes place between the buyer and seller of sex. The seller of sex cannot accurately convince the buyer they are genuine, suggesting instead that the "make-believe" actions of the robots could be "programmed into them." The ethical model underscoring Levy's promotion of sex robots is dangerously

disturbing. What Levy ignores is that prostitution relies on having those with power view those without power as objects of their sexual gratification, which means the real experience of the human Other is not considered in the encounter. In the sex-buying encounter, the seller is expected to become something they are not, to switch off their thoughts, feelings, and body sensations temporarily through the encounter. As the buying and selling of sex involves more than one person, if one gives over their body to another there is no amount of money that can compensate for it. Subjectivity is non-negotiable and present in every human being, which makes us inherently different from things, robots, and AI. According to Levy, a robot prostitute by contrast would show the buyer that they are valued and adored. The robot prostitute will cater to the buyer's every need, which is what a prostituted person is expected to do in the selling of sex. The proposal is that males can be gratified exclusively in the way they desire without any concern for reciprocity and a mutual empathetic relationship. This logic only makes sense if someone believes humans are things, and if they think instrumental relationships between persons are positive with no resulting impact on social relations between persons.

We should contextualize sex robots within the context of a wider attempt to build machines as companions. The robot is imagined to become a direct-object of an interaction, but humans are not machines and cannot engage with their full humanity when confronted with a machine. Only when confronted with another human can we experience our humanity, our identity, and our mutuality as enshrined by the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights.

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