#### **Review Article**

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### The moral case for sexbots

In our world, there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph, and self-abasement. The sex instinct will be eradicated. We shall abolish the orgasm. There will be no loyalty except loyalty to the Party. But always there will be the intoxication of power. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who's helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face, forever. The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: don't let it happen. It depends on you.

George Orwell

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I will try to examine the main objections and moral qualms by some opponents to sexbots. While minor points of their argumentation are not entirely groundless, my aim is to show that overall, most of the claims directed against sexbots are: (1) rarely based on facts or data; (2) driven by unfounded fears; and originate from; (3) implicit to very strong political and ideological beliefs.

The driving moral forces behind the opponents' position are not traditional moral categories such as *good* or *bad* per se, but they are rather subsumed or dissolved under very vague and fashionable concepts such as *gender* and *objectification*. Hence, morality in this case can be seen as highly subservient to a political cause: it views some aspects of technological progress as an offshoot of all-mighty capitalism; and sexbots in particular, as a threat to social order, that will redefine or even wipe out traditional interactions between human beings and ultimately, destroy humanity.

I will argue on the contrary that there is a strong moral case for sexbots, that stems from notions such as sexual liberty, personal freedom and humanism, and extends to novel concepts, like sexual equality or sexual opportunity, sexual justice and compassion.

Moreover, I am fairly convinced that sexbots, widely available and used in a responsible manner, might have a positive impact on society as a whole. The sexual well-being and fulfilment of individuals in want of intimacy and emotional connection, could be seen as a tool for social progress and sexual justice.

As Socrates brilliantly pointed out through Plato, most of human misery, suffering and wars, arise from our unfulfilled bodily desires and frustrations ("Phaedo", 66c). He of course advocated in favour of chastity and resisting sexual temptation, but his basic premise and insight are still valid today.

Finally, the underlying questions I will explore in the following pages are: how come such vast swaths of the progressive camp, adopt a conservative discourse, when it comes to *sexual progress*? Why is there such a staunch opposition to sexbots and the ensuing *right to pleasure*, while at the same time, we are precisely witnessing in the most recent decades, an inflation in all kinds of subjective rights, that we tend to value so much?

**Keywords:** robots, sexual liberty, sexual justice, gender theory, feminism, objectification, prostitution, pornography

### 1 Introduction: A boner of contention

In 1934, the German surrealist painter Hans Bellmer, influenced among other things by the theories of Karl Marx, began producing a series of artworks entitled "Die Puppe" ("The Doll"), in protest against the rise of National-Socialism in his country [1]. He deemed the depiction of hypersexualized pubescent female dolls, displayed in very enticing positions and with dismembered limbs, as a political statement [2]. Needless to say, his subversive pieces were frowned upon by the emerging totalitarian state and were quickly categorized as a *degenerate art* form. Blacklisted, Bellmer had apparently no choice but to flee Germany and seek refuge in France in 1938. It is there, in the charged atmosphere building up to the Second World War, that he pursued various artistic doll projects as a political tool.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see illustrations 1–4 below.

Metaphysically speaking, Bellmer's infatuation with dolls was a way of exploring the "dubious animate/ inanimate status" [3] of these freakish and versatile automatons. On a psychological level, and under the guise of artistic creation, he exhibited the inner yearnings and complexities of his mind, in relation to his somewhat devious2 erotic desires. Finally, the conceptual centerpiece of his work, as I have just suggested above, was intended to symbolize political freedom from state oppression, personal freedom and the liberty to fantasize.

It could easily be argued that today's nascent sexbots<sup>3</sup> bear an aesthetic and erotic lineage with Bellmer's dolls. Nevertheless, some art critics, have recently suggested, in quite harsh terms, that Bellmer's art encapsulates lack of "intersubjectivity" [4] and "a phallocentric vision" [4], wherein females are merely reduced to objects of masculine pleasure. Apparently in some contemporary academic and intellectual circles, the sexualized representation of women is not anymore perceived as a symbol of protest and liberation. It has become, on the contrary, the target and the object of protest against what it allegedly symbolizes: enslavement, oppression, domination and exploitation of women, or in one word, misogyny.

Loving, celebrating or desiring the attractive plump curves of the feminine body as a pure and exclusive object of masculine lust, could be regarded by some feminists as a supreme insult to all women [5], instead of an idolization of their beauty. In the eyes of these critical beholders sexbots fall into the same category as pornography or prostitution. As such, they epitomize the evils of rape [5] and what is often called nowadays toxic masculinity [6]. With all of this in mind, critics believe that sexbots could contribute to strengthening the commodification of sex and transforming the human body into vet another object of capitalist transaction.

The emerging field of sexbot ethics may seem to some as a trifling subject and at times even preposterous. Nevertheless, the versatile, perplexing and uncanny nature of sexbots, which are at the crossroads between technology and intimacy, unrequited love and obscenity, artificiality and humanity, animated matter and inert, unresponsive spirit, constitute an unpredictable and puzzling combination for most of us. As I have already alluded to elsewhere [7], I believe that these fascinating machines, crystalize some

very deep-seated ideological, political and moral antagonisms. In other words, we humans tend to assign or to project on robots in general and sexbots in particular, our values, passions, as well as our philosophical vision of the world.

Hence, in my analysis, sexbots (as well as humanoid or android robots) are clearly anthropomorphized machines: they can be physically or positively anthropomorphized, and on the other hand, negatively or morally, politically, and ideologically anthropomorphized. Physically, because we can see them as mere pleasure machines or substitutes for emotional loneliness. Negatively, because under the guise of engineering marvel, these human simulacrums are perceived as the ultimate embodiment of the inhuman, dark, sad, lonely, frightening and immoral side of society and human relations.

All of these scathing and gloomy assertions that I have tried to outline above, are widely enunciated and propagated in the current debate about sexbots. They may contain, to a certain extent, a measure of truth. But they leave out of the equation one of the chief characteristics of the human psyche: unlike machines, what makes us quintessentially human, is our ambiguous and often contradictory nature, especially when it comes to complex emotional experiences, such as love and sex.

We are undoubtedly multifaceted, multidimensional beings, akin to a kaleidoscope which relentlessly mirrors into our souls the inconsistent choices that we sometimes tend to make and the opposed values we hold in certain situations. In my opinion, few authors described this better than Montaigne, the French Renaissance philosopher, whose "Essays" revolve around the idea of man's ambivalent subjectivity:

"(...) whether it be that I am then another self, or that I take subjects by other circumstances and considerations: so it is that I may peradventure contradict myself, but (...) I never contradict the truth" [8].

With regard to the topic of this paper, the truth may probably be elsewhere: people shouldn't be envisaged as monolithic blocks of unchanging ideas, values or emotions. Johns have unquestionably the capacity of being loving and caring fathers and husbands, consumers of porn can promptly oscillate from crude onanism to wholehearted compassion for the other, sadomasochists enjoy rough sex (to speak euphemistically) but also more *vanilla* or traditional intercourse. Sexbot users will certainly be able to distinguish between a machine and a human, or they might build a totally different type of relationship with the former.

In other words, the overwhelming majority of men are not immature lunatics, mentally challenged sadists, blindfolded sex maniacs, serial rapists or evil

<sup>2</sup> The unrequited love with his fifteen-year-old cousin, Ursula, probably goaded Bellmer to create his dolls [1, pp. 21–23].

<sup>3</sup> Apart from some notable and remarkable exceptions, such as Realbotix's "Harmony", sexbots do not really exist and still do not constitute a mass market, widely available product.

domineering predators seeking power and submission: they *do* understand the differences between right and wrong, good and bad, pleasure and pain, consent and refusal, rough play and personal boundaries, make believe and reality, hardcore and softcore, fantasy and fiction, positive or negative *objectification*. Conversely, not *all* women feel that they are at all times the eternal, miserable, inconsolable victims of male sexual appetite.

For many people, whatever their sex, preferences or leanings, sexuality is merely *one part*<sup>4</sup> of their life and does not necessarily always define who they are as persons, nor their identity.<sup>5</sup> Sexuality is nevertheless an extremely powerful driving force, that determines great portions of our lives and many of our actions, choices, joys or sorrows. *But I contend that other potent passions have equally the capacity to galvanize the human mind: I am alluding to political and ideological passions, as I will try to show implicitly in this essay.* Throughout history and until this day, more people are willing to pay the ultimate price and die voluntarily or kill others in the name of their ideological, political or religious beliefs, than those who are ready to sacrifice themselves or others, on the altar of concupiscence and lust.

These are, in a nutshell, some of the miscellaneous ideas that I will try to develop and elaborate in the following pages. Firstly, I will outline, to the best of my understanding, some of the moral foundations of opposition to sexbots. I will put an emphasis on the concept of *objectification* and *gender theory*, as key antagonistic notions in today's debates surrounding sexual issues such as pornography and prostitution for example, which have direct ramifications and a strong impact on sexbots (Section 2). Afterwards, I will lay out the main arguments that in my mind, make sexbots moral, or at least, *do not make them immoral* (Section 3).

# 2 Is there a moral case *against* sexbots?

Let us now return to my starting point and at the same time delve into our subject-matter: how did we transition from Bellmer's political-erotic dolls in the first half of the twentieth century to outright bellicosity or suspicion towards sexbots more than eighty years later, at the dawn of the third millennium<sup>6</sup>? In my estimation (what I wish to call in very pompous terms) this peculiar *reversal of paradigm*, from sexual liberty and freedom to fantasize, to a contemporary form of sexual prohibition or puritanism, originates in a set of at least seven main *reasons* linked to very *diverse ethical* and *philosophical concepts*:

#### (1) Political or ideological:

- (a) Sexbots are seen as an offshoot of almighty steamroller *capitalism*, which transforms the *human body* into a money-making *commodity* and defies all sense of humanistic morality.
- (b) Sexbots embody the opposition between a *collectivist* vision of society and *individual freedom*.
- (c) *Fear* used as strategic political tool (see also points 5 and 6, below).
- (d) *Gender* and *objectification* theories, used as a political and ideological tool, against sexual freedom and human nature (see also points 2a, 2b, 4a and 4b, below).
- (2) **Ontological**: Breaks down into two subcategories:
- (a) Sexbots are a sexualized *representation* of a human being, especially women (see also point 1d, above).
- (b) Sexbots convey the idea of what a human being (or a woman) *is* and should *not be*, i.e., a sexual being by nature (see also point 1d, above).
- (3) *Metaphysical*: Sexbots act as an inconvenient divulging mirror: they reflect upon us the image of our inherently carnal, animal side.

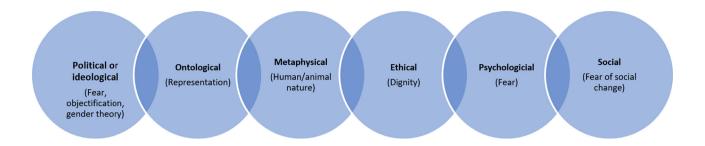
#### (4) Ethical:

- (a) The sexualized *representation* undermines the *dignity* of the human person and especially women (Kantian deontological ethics see also points 1d, 2a, 2b, above and the following point as well).
- (b) Sexbots *objectify* women which leads to their *dehumanization* and encourages *violence* against them (a blend of Kantian deontological ethics and consequentialism see also points 1d, 2a, 2b and 4a, above).

<sup>4</sup> That is the reason why in the colloquial language, we speak about one's sex life, professional life, family life, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Some people in contemporary postmodern Western culture do feel the need to foist upon themselves a *sexual identity* as their sole attribute and thereby distinguishing themselves from their peers or fellow-citizens. Others tend to define and affirm their uniqueness, through multiple identities (cultural, national, ethnic, religious, community based...) including their *sexual identity*.

<sup>6</sup> The "Campaign Against Sexbots" has published on its website a petition in Italian, calling for the prohibition of sexbots. The illustration featuring alongside the short text shows the stiff metallic skeleton of a sex doll with its silicone limbs peeled off and sloppily scattered on the ground. The similarity of this image with Bellmer's dismembered dolls is very striking and quite insightful, in my opinion (please see illustration number 4 at the end of this article).



- (c) Anthropocentric humanism or anthropocentric naturalism: It overly values humans as part of nature as opposed to artificiality.
- (5) *Psychological*: Here, the main impetus (or *passion* in philosophical terms) is *fear*, of which I have identified three offshoots (see also point 1c, above):
- (a) Fear that sexbots will herald the *end of humanity*;
- (b) Technophobia: An irrational fear or deep distrust of science and technology (which is not always baseless);
- (c) Fear which leads to rejection of the radical otherness of the other.
- (6) **Social**: Corollary to the previous point in terms of *fear* for sub-points a to c (see also point 1c, above):
  - (a) Fear that sexbots might encourage violence against women or children (in the case of CSB's').
  - (b) Sexbots might cause deep modifications in the way we envisage relations between human beings, and risk destroying forever the social fabric of society.
  - (c) Resistance to social change induced by science and technology.
  - (d) Sexual desire is seen as a pathology that endangers society and should be cured.
- (7) A combination of all or parts of the previous points.

### 2.1 Sexual scarecrows: fear, annihilation and the end of humanity

What stands out predominantly from all the reasons I have enumerated above (which, of course, aren't exhaustive) are:

- (1) The emotion of fear, which permeates through points 1 to 6, in various degrees;
- (2) None of these reasons, as I will be showing, are based on any kind of hard factual evidence;
- (3) Consequently, we are mainly dealing with hypothesis and extrapolations, enshrined in a very solid

theoretical framework, which I will outline in the next sub-section.

### 2.1.1 The centrality of fear as an effective political and ideological tool (point 1c)

Let us therefore firstly consider the centrality of fear as an extremely powerful ideological, political, psychological, ethical and social tool that cannot be overstated nor underestimated, especially when it comes to sexbots (as well as with robots in general). The prominent French contemporary philosopher Luc Ferry, exposed brilliantly in several of his books the conceptual *modus operandi* of fear. He contends that philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) or Hans Jonas (1903–1993), both understood the sheer effectiveness of fear as a fundamental "political passion" [9].

Hans Jonas is among other, the author of the "The imperative of responsibility" ("Das Prinzip Verantwortung") which is a critique of science and technology in the modern era. He believed that mankind has a responsibility towards himself and his environment, that he should be wary of selfdestruction by science and technology, and in order to be free, humans should preserve the authentic character of their humanity [10]. To achieve these noble goals and avoid the self-destructive tendencies of men, Jonas advocated for a "benevolent tyranny" [10, p. 62] and favored a Marxist type of government, instead of a democratic capitalistic system [10, p. 62]. His book has had, in the "history of ideas of the twentieth century" [10, p. 59] and beyond, a longstanding and far-reaching influence in the fields of bioethics in general and modern ecology in particular. Thus, according to Luc Ferry's interpretation, fear has been converted by Hans Jonas into a "positive passion" [11] and hence becomes the "first step" [11, p. 95] towards "wisdom" [11, p. 95].

### 2.1.2 From human annihilation to the "Flesh Fair" (points 1c & 5a to 5c)

This very particular blend of fear as a humanistic virtue and a political passion, triggering the instinct of human

self-preservation in light of a hypothetical destruction of humanity by science and technology, has in my opinion shaped the views of some authors opposed to sexbots. For example, the very renowned feminist anthropologist and staunch adversary to sexbots, Kathleen Richardson, repeatedly makes use of this conceptual narrative of fear in her works. Based on the recurring Armageddon patterns in science-fiction movies and novels about robots, she strongly believes that humanoid machines will spur *annihilation* and herald the end of humanity:

"(...) we must take seriously the fear of the end of the human that is circulated in robot narratives" [12].

Elsewhere, during a fascinating talk, she echoed the same idea in relation to sexbots, claiming they represent the male "fantasy of female annihilation" [13] and if "left unchallenged will result in the end of humanity" [13].

In the same vein, the Australian writer and civil servant Anthony Ferguson, concludes his remarkable and thoroughly documented book on the history of sex dolls, with a grim note:

"Here is the basic fear: if it is possible to go from the cradle to the grave without ever experiencing an intimate relationship with another living being, then we will surely stagnate as a species" [1, p. 204].

Nevertheless, his resort to fear is more balanced and cautious, because he offsets it with some dismal human realities:

"(...) the dolls seem to offer some people a peaceful companionship in solitude (...) in a sometimes cold and unforgiving world" [1] (I will be dealing with this aspect in the third section of this paper).

These selected quotes represent of course a tiny fraction of a wider sea of books, movies, press articles, scholarly articles and the like, that cater at varying degrees to the basic emotion of fear in relation to robots in general and sexbots in particular. Fear, as the great French nineteenth century author Guy de Maupassant famously wrote, is:

"(...) something horrible, an atrocious sensation, a sort of decomposition of the soul, a terrible spasm of brain and heart (...)" [14].

I must stress here that I am certainly not urging anyone to scoff at the very serious concerns the general public have fostered in the last few years pertaining the new robotic revolution, which are totally legitimate, and must be addressed and taken into account. Some aspects of robotics and sex with machines may indeed generate a *spasm of the brain* for many people. Nevertheless, this natural (and even

at times irrational) fear is often *skillfully rationalized and elevated into a sophisticated and conceptual scholarly form*, as I have tried to outline very sketchily above.

While it *might* be true that robots in general and sexbots in particular *might* prompt the end of humanity, it is also likely that this robotic doomsday scenario will not occur at all. In fact, both possibilities (destruction or non-destruction) are plausible and have equal value in my eyes. But proponents of a nightmarish apocalyptic scenario make claims that they believe are true, which are not based on any kind of hard factual evidence, but rather on their own moral convictions. It is indeed almost impossible to harvest any kind of data or evidence for this type of assumption, because the potential destruction of humanity lies in a distant future (this timeline is of course quite convenient, due to its vagueness), which very few can forecast accurately. And to the best of my knowledge, we still cannot time-travel in order to compare these gloomy predictions with reality. Furthermore, supporters of the end of humanity theory never tell us when the destruction will occur and seldom provide us with details on how these alleged events will unfold.

Will it happen because sexbots are inevitably bound to become more and more sophisticated, appealing and ultimately be the perfect emotional companions and sexual partners; and consequently, no human will ever more want to mate with another fellow-human in order to produce offspring? This type of unconvincing argumentation has already been made on countless occasions against same-sex marriage [15] and homosexuality in general [16]. But the data shows clearly and beyond any reasonable doubt that in the most democratic, advanced, pluralistic, affluent and liberal societies, which are open to sexual diversity and committed to individual liberty, overall life expectancy at birth is among the highest in the world [17].

Or will humanity be destroyed as a moral punishment, because of robotic depravity and sexual permissiveness? Scholarly opponents to sexbots do not mention, to the best of my knowledge, the myth of Sodom and Gomorrah as a moral parable, but it certainly encompasses their basic premises and conclusions: unnatural sex is wrong and is a dangerous slippery slope that inevitably leads (part of) humanity to its annihilation. This is precisely what happened to the inhabitants of the aforementioned infamous ancient cities, according to the biblical account:

"And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground" [18].

As I have just stated above, when it comes to robots, the influence of science-fiction permeates massively through the realms of science, technology and ethics, and *vice versa*. Scenarios of annihilation and the

takeover of human society by malicious robots, are rife and commonplace. However, there are a few movies, which present a different perspective.

In Steven Spielberg's masterpiece "A.I." (2001), the sentient child-robot David is programmed to love his human mother. She decides with her husband to get rid of David, because she's torn between her love for her human son and her ambivalent feelings towards the machine. In one of the most heartbreaking scenes of cinema history (in my opinion, at least), David's mother abandons him unwillingly in a forest. Disheartened by this brutal and unfathomable separation, he finds himself alone, full of grief and discovers the cold, unforgiving world: some humans chase and literally kill robots. They are convinced that by doing so, they are saving humanity from a robotic deluge. David gets snatched by such anti-robot campaigners, who conduct merciless public destructions of robots, in giant arenas. These gruesome gatherings, similar to public executions, are called "Flesh Fair - Celebration of life". The huge crowd attending these events rejoice every single time a robot is crushed, decapitated or dissolved with acid. David pleads for his life in the arena, but the ringmaster callously declares:

"We are only demolishing artificiality" [19].

This remarkable scene unravels countless ethical, philosophical and psychological questions. But, according to my interpretation, it symbolizes some of the conceptual tensions we are witnessing today, between the advocates of a return to nature, who long to preserve the pure, unadulterated humanity of humans, and on the other hand their opponents. Moreover, it also shows the formidable moral dangers of *fear* as an operative concept: it can trigger a whole array of actions that are deprived of compassion towards the *radical otherness of the other*, as would have said the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

This is what I wish to call *anthropocentric humanism*. It is almost identical to the classical school of thought of Western philosophical *anthropocentrism*, which divides the world into two very distinct and impermeable categories: *humans* and *non-humans* or *animals*. But as I see it, *anthropocentric humanism* is part and parcel of the *bioconservationist* movement, and it has some distinctive features that are based on the following disparate premises:

- Universal humanistic values and principles: human rights, equality, social justice, ecology, including animal rights (contrary to classical anthropocentrism, which does not consider animals worthy of rights);
- (2) The strong affirmation of a human uniqueness, a human identity, almost akin to a universal human nationalism or exclusivism, seeking nevertheless

- harmony with nature (contrary to anthropocentrism, which seeks dominion over nature);
- (3) Some aspects of science and technology, seen as a (predictable and avoidable) fallout of all-mighty self-destructive capitalism, imperil nature and thus humanity, which is an intrinsic part of nature;
- (4) Consequently, this type of ecological-conservationist inspired movement does not only care about protecting animals and plants and conserving the biodiversity of nature, but also extends its reach to human conservationism.
- (5) All of these entangled concepts put together, lead to a unifying rationale: *robots in general and sexbots in particular, are considered as a medium to high threat to humanity.*

#### 2.1.3 Argumentation strategies

The most striking rhetorical feature of the campaign against sex robots (CASR) and other opponents to sexbots, in my opinion at least, is the grammatical use of future and present tenses, respectively indicating the certainty of a prediction or a future event, and on the other hand, alleged truths about empirical reality or a description in purportedly accurate terms of the current state of affairs. For instance:

- (1) sexbots will end humanity, instead of they might;
- (2) they *encourage* mistreatment of women and rape, instead of *it appears that they might encourage*, or *they risk encouraging*.

Methodologically speaking, these assertive statements are very problematic to say the least, because we simply don't know yet what will be the social implications and the outcome of the generalized availability of sexbots. I must add that the data used by the CASR – and above all the conclusions they draw from it – is mainly based on their moral opposition to prostitution<sup>8</sup> or pornography in relation to sexbots, and it can always be challenged.

### 2.2 Some issues surrounding objectification theory (points 1d, 2a, 4a, 4b, 6a and 6b)

Sexbots are machines specifically designed to satisfy (in the majority of cases) men's sexual desire and emotional needs.

<sup>8</sup> In its report on the human rights of sex workers, Amnesty International states that it is in favor of the decriminalization of voluntary prostitution and opposed to the Scandinavian model penalizing the client [20].

For example, the famous *Harmony* prototype produced by Matt McMullen's "Realbotix" [21] company is endowed with the most beguiling feminine physique: large and bountiful breasts, beautiful chestnut shimmering hair, plump glossy lips and a lubricious *femme fatale* gaze. But she is also customizable, almost infinitely, to cater to specific clients desires.

Displaying sexual perfection in such an explicit manner in a creature which is always available for intercourse (and is even programmed to like it<sup>9</sup>), raises numerous issues and questions for critics, and especially for the CASR. Let us recap here some of their main beliefs and concerns:

- (1) sexbots, due to the *representation* of females as an *object* of male lust, might spiral violence against women [22];
- (2) lead to the increase of forced prostitution [23];
- (3) they also complain about the fact that treating a sexual partner as a "thing" [23] shows lack of humanity and "will reduce human empathy" [23];
- (4) finally, sexbots violate the "principles of human dignity" [23].

As I have already indicated earlier *objectification* is one of the key doctrinal points which is deeply-rooted in contemporary feminist thought. This notion holds undeniably some particles of truth to it, but it also implicitly involves wild assumptions, preconceptions and generalizations about men's (and women's) sexuality and their psychology.

While it is almost certain that heterosexual men consider women's bodies as objects of sexual gratification, it must also be the case that women *do* see men's bodies as objects of pleasure. Incidentally, let us not forget that male beauty and sex-appeal is nowadays widely used as an effective marketing tool in advertising, on television, in movies and on the Internet. Therefore, it is equally undeniable that men are also sexually objectified.

It is also highly dubious to state that *all* heterosexual men, always and *at all times*, including when they are not in the contexts of courting and intercourse, treat females exclusively as mere *things*. This point should equally be applicable to the relations between lesbian women and homosexual men, but to the best of my knowledge, very few feminists assert that sapphists *objectify* other females or gay males *objectify* their masculine counterparts.

The prominent psychiatrist, robot specialist and member of the French *Academy of Technologies*, Serge Tisseron, rejects the objectification argument and believes there is no clear factual evidence that sexbots might harm women or even children:

"if we follow this line of thought, we should also ban sextoys" [24].

He also reminds us that developing empathy towards objects [24, pp. 133–134] and even worshiping them, as it is the case in animistic beliefs, is definitely not a new phenomenon in human history. But he warns us that our empathy towards objects might "never be reciprocal" [24, p. 134].

David Levy, in his breakthrough book "Love and Sex with Robots", which has now become a classic, explored in detail our attachment and emotional relationship to objects. Based on research in the field of psychology, he believes that we tend naturally to establish a "sense of connectedness" [25] with objects surrounding us. Any object, of course, changes us and our way of life, but by the same token:

"what we do with that object will usually bring about a change in the object itself, even if it is a very small change, such as having experienced some wear (...)" [25].

#### 2.2.1 Positive and negative objectification

It is also quite objectionable to imply that *all* women always and at all times suffer from being considered as objects of desire by men. The American philosopher Alan Soble articulates very rightly (with, however, a smidgen of wit and provocation) in one of his critical books about pornography and feminism:

"(...) There are women (and men) who excel at being nothing more (or nothing less) than a package of sensory experiences, who enjoy being that package, who realize they have absolutely nothing else to offer the world than being that package, and who are grateful that they have at least this value, instead of nothing. (...)" [26].

In some cases, it might indeed be preferable to be a *thing* with some seductive value attached to it, rather than *no-thing*. And why should it necessarily be *dehumanizing* to treat someone as a mere *object* within the realm of sexual desire? Moderate feminist thinkers like Martha Nussbaum have recently "challenged the idea that objectification is a necessarily negative phenomenon, arguing for the possibility of positive objectification" [27]. As we shall see afterwards, *it can* 

<sup>9</sup> To be more precise: the machine is programmed to give the user the *impression* that it is enjoying itself.

equally be dehumanizing and even distressful for some people in want of intimacy, not to be treated as objects of desire by others. According to the very sharp-tongued Alan Soble:

"The claim that we should treat people as 'persons' and not dehumanize them is to reify, is to anthropomorphize humans and consider them more than they are. Do not treat people as objects we are told. Why not? Because goes the answer, people qua persons deserve not to be treated as objects. What a nice bit of illusory chauvinism. People are not as grand as we make them out to be, would like them to be, or hope them to be" [28].

### 2.2.2 Human dignity in relation to objectification (point 4a)

As I have already alluded to elsewhere [7] scholars using (what I will be calling henceforth) the *negative objectification* argument in relation to sexbots, pornography or prostitution, generally refer to (directly or indirectly) *German philosophical idealism* and particularly to Immanuel Kant's maxim advising us not to treat a human being as a *means*, but as an *end* (in itself).

If I exclusively treat someone's body as a *means* in order to obtain sexual gratification, it would imply that I am committing a *moral sin* because I am using, abusing and exploiting that person, and consequently impinging on his or her *dignity* as a human being. This type of rigid, outdated deontological code of morality, is very questionable in the framework of free sexual encounters between consenting adults, and also out of touch with empirical reality.

For instance, the famous Belgian prostitute Sonia Verstappen,<sup>10</sup> who is now retired and a vocal activist for sex workers rights, was recently asked in an interview if she felt she was treated as an *object* by her clients. She replied:

"Absolutely not. I define myself as a *subject* and my clients understood this very well. They have never been disrespectful towards me, nor spoken to me with contempt or hit me. I have always chosen the men I hosted and clearly set my limits" [29].

Moreover, according to Alan Soble, the moral outlook on *negative objectification* within the spirit of Kantian ethics, is somewhat paternalistic:

"(...) treating an adult person as a child is to lessen that person's dignity [26, p. 58] (...)." And he adds: "(...) isn't being a provider of sexual pleasure an important and valuable attribute (...)? Maybe we should construct a theory of human dignity based on our sexual capabilities [26, p. 58] (...)."

But *human dignity* is a highly problematic and versatile concept which lacks precision, since it can entail different meanings and be used in opposite moral contexts. One brief example will suffice: proponents of euthanasia often invoke *the right to die with dignity* [30]; and opponents to euthanasia will, by the same token, claim that they are fighting for terminal patients to *live with dignity* [31].

Pertaining sexbots, the most common claim, as we have just seen above, is that these machines tend to jeopardize women's dignity by *negatively objectifying* their bodies. If we blend together Alan Soble and Martha Nussbaum's outlooks we could, on the contrary, easily argue that sexbots could be seen as objects of *sexual dignification*, praising women's bodies. Nevertheless, I would be extremely cautious when it comes to the concept of *dignity* in any ethical debate and even tend to rule it out altogether.

The theory of *negative objectification* applied to sexbots could also fit into the same category of polysemic, imprecise, aporetic and faltering concepts such as *dignity*. Precisely because sexbots, at this stage of technological development, are not only mere non-conscience, non-sentient *objects* but – and above all – they are *signifiers of what we want them to be: an outrageous representation of women (or men) as sexual slaves, or, pleasure machines representing a human being.* 

As I shall try to explain in Section 2.3, negative objectification is not neutral, but rather a highly politically charged concept: it is inextricably linked to a collectivist humanistic [7] moral perspective which values pre-eminently the interests of certain social groups seen as weak and in need of special protections, over individual freedom. In other words, from a cost-benefit perspective, it is desirable and totally justified, in the eyes of a collectivist humanist, to curb individual freedom, as long as victimized groups are deemed to be protected from any hypothetical or symbolic harm that might endanger them. But caring and protecting minorities or vulnerable members of society are already solid well-established legal and moral prerequisites, in the overwhelming majority of modern democratic countries. Thus, negative objectification operates essentially as an ideological argument from authority and it is empirically wrong to use it as a blanket moral theory, universally applicable to all contexts.

<sup>10</sup> She has always defined herself as a *voluntary prostitute*, working independently and not for a pimp. Her career has spanned several decades. After retiring, she read anthropology and obtained her master's degree at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, in Belgium.

#### 2.2.3 Objecting to objectification through objectivity

For the sake of clarity, let us sum up some of the main points of this long subsection on the concept of (negative) objectification:

- (1) It is broadly and implicitly based on rigid *Kantian deontological ethics*, which prohibits using a human being or its representation as a means.
- (2) It is inseparable from the concept of *human dignity*, which is conceptually ambivalent to say the least.
- (3) It stems mostly (but not exclusively) from a *collectivist humanistic* political ideology.
- (4) It values collectivism over individual freedom (or collective interests over individual interests).
- (5) This concept should therefore be ruled out of the field of ethics applied to sexbots, because:
- (a) It acts as a peremptory, closed shop concept, which leaves very little room for leverage between opposing moral points of view;
- (b) It is not based on indisputable facts;
- (c) It is ambivalent and lacks moral clarity;
- (d) It is biased from the outset with too many political and ideological undertones.

### 2.3 Collectivism vs. Individualism (point 1b)

Men might *sexualize* women's bodies in different erotic circumstances, but feminist proponents of the *negative objectification* theory tend not only to *sacralize* women's bodies, but also would like to *desexualize* or sanitize them forcibly. They believe that pornography or sexbots, which respectively portray a real or imaginary woman in a hypersexualized fashion, should be seen as a collective affront to *all* women. Individual women choosing to exhibit their charms, do not make a personal, autonomous decision. They are rather considered as victims of a male-dominated society, which gives them no choice but to nurture men's predatory instincts and fantasies.

In the same way, sexbots are perceived by some radical feminists as a product of a masculine exclusivist world, which extends its testosterone-charged tentacles to dominate culture, science and technology. They are after all dolls designed by men, destined to satisfy men's ruthless sexuality, and they reproduce unjust social patterns which are collectively hurtful to women, as it is the case in *negative objectification*.

Such an ideological, political and revolutionary vision of machines and technology in general, is best portrayed in Donna Harraway's famous opus, "A Cyborg Manifesto", published in 1985. Her elegantly written but

extremely abstruse prose, seems to be very critical of technology and correlates it with "heterosexism" [32], "oppression" [32], militarism and what she believes is a deeply-entrenched:

"Western (...) tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism" [32, p. 7].

I should mention here that the concept of *fear*, as I have already analyzed above, lies in the background of Harraway's essay and is used as an argumentative tactic, in order to make her case:

"Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves *frighteningly*<sup>11</sup> inert" [32, p. 11].

Harraway's aim is to "deconstruct", what she sees as "deeply-embedded markers of identity" [10, p. 178] and overcome them through the cyborg, as a conceptual fictional figure representing technoscience. And although somewhat critical of radical feminism [10, p. 179], she however shares a common pool of ideas, core values and convictions with her fellow ideological comrades.

In this regard, one interesting example, among a plethora of authors and writings, is Shulamith Firestone, the Canadian–American radical Marxist feminist, who published in 1970 "The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution" (fifteen years before "A Cyborg Manifesto"). I think it is worthy to insert here two short quotations of her book, in order to appreciate the similarity of tone and ideas between these two authors, with regard to male-dominated science and technology:

- "(...) the new technology, especially fertility control, may be used against them [i.e. women] to reinforce the entrenched system of exploitation. (...) so to assure the elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass (women)" [33].
- "(...) The catalogue of scientific vices is familiar: it duplicates, exaggerates, the catalogue of *male* vices in general. This is to be expected: if the Technological mode develops from the male principle then it follows that its practitioners would develop the warpings of the male personality in the extreme" [33, p. 183].

In my estimation, these quotations could be interpreted in a certain way, as an anachronistic critiques of sexbots. Feminist opponents to sexbots might even discern through these words, a visionary sort of warning to humanity, a wise prophesy. Nevertheless, it must be

<sup>11</sup> Italics are mine.

said that, to my understanding, Shulamith Firestone was by no means a *technophobe*, she even sensed *beauty* in science. She and Donna Harraway, as I tried to outline above, resent what they feel is the unyielding masculine social structure, which replicates tainted cultural patterns in science and technology.

This type of wariness towards modern science and technology falls within the conceptual framework of:

- (1) A sharp feminist critique of male dominance (which is to a certain extent, let us be fair, justified).
- (2) Coupled with *Marxist dialectics* as a methodological and ideological basis, which in this particular case, replace the *struggle between the classes*, with the *struggle between the sexes*;
- (3) Both of these intertwined ideas thrive on the fertile conceptual ground of *fear*.

## 2.4 Let's get meta-physical: sexbots and the beast inside of us (point 3)

Sex under the spotlights, as it is the case in pornography, overemphasizes crude and animalistic aspects of intercourse. According to Alan Soble, objections to pornography which are made on Kantian grounds, are akin to:

"cultural indoctrination. One of humanity's oldest wishes or hopes is to be more than the animals we are (...). The ballooning and squirting mechanics of the genitals and their proximity to the organs of urination and defecation are cruel manifestations of our animality" [26, p. 67]. Moreover, "If humans are just and already animals, having nothing special about them metaphysically" [26, p. 68] they are "in a sense committing Thomas Aquinas's gravest mortal sin, bestiality" [26, p. 68].

Opponents to sexbots<sup>12</sup> and pornography foster a nostalgic vision of an idealized world, a return to a golden age immersed in nature, where human relations, interactions (or "intersubjectivity" as we have seen above) were purer, more authentic and mostly freed from the medium of technology. But, paradoxically, and at the same time, they appear to implicitly frown upon (mainly male) sexuality as a remnant of our animal

nature, an embarrassing manifestation of the beast inside of us. Aquinas's mortal sin of bestiality seems to be resurrected by today's collectivist secular Kantinspired theologians: sexuality, especially men's, should be tamed, acculturated, moralized.

But even in its most elegant, civilized and romantic form, sex is embarrassing for most of us, because it unveils our weaknesses and inner flaws. The sexual act *in itself* behind closed doors (and everything surrounding it) remains crude, brutish, instinctive and mechanical: it reminds us that we are after all animals, hard-wired by nature into seeking orgasmic pleasure.

Desiring someone else's body and expressing it, is not always a decent, well-mannered and chivalrous enterprise, filled with soft-spoken words and roses. It can be at times very rough, naughty or raunchy. Humans are highly ambivalent creatures and as such, most of us do relish variety: we like swaying between silky romanticism and crude intercourse, and sexbots will certainly be able to offer us these different types of experiences we aspire to in our emotional lives.

Moreover, sexbots have a very ambivalent and contradictory ethical status, because they gather and at the same time they transcend the traditional philosophical, metaphysical or ontological oppositions, such as *nature* and *culture*, *spirit* and *matter*, *animal* and *human*... Indeed, they are a product of human culture, but are meant to cater to our most inner animalistic and raw side. They are purely made up of matter, they look like us, but most of us still can't discern any deeper spiritual value in them, any humanity.

### 2.5 Anti-porn rage and moral panic

I have tried to show obliquely up until now that many moral issues and objections surrounding pornography are inextricably similar to the emerging field of sexbot ethics. Some *pornophobic* feminists make the highly disputable claim that pornography and sexbots, might lead to an increase in acts of violence against women, among other things because, as we have just seen above, it negatively objectifies their bodies.

In his book about the ethics of pornography, French philosopher Ruwen Ogien, has thoroughly and critically analysed such whimsical claims, which are rarely based on hard evidence. As a matter of fact, some of the data he examined shows beyond any reasonable doubt that, for instance, "sex crimes" [34] have not increased in Japan since the widespread "liberalization and distribution of

<sup>12</sup> I think it is worth pondering on the fact that most opponents to sexbots are technologically literate and savvy. In order to spread their message across to a wider audience, they do not hesitate to use computers, the internet, social media and traditional media, such as television, radio, newspapers and the publishing world, which are all heavily dependent on modern technology and deeply indebted to it.

pornographic material" [34], between the years 1972 and 1995. On the contrary, impartial experts have even observed a sharp "decrease" [34] of such crimes. Similar statistical results have been harvested in "Germany, Denmark, Sweden and the United States" [34].

In contrast, the Canadian self-confessed "pro-sex" [35] anarcho-capitalist feminist, Wendy McElroy, stated in her thought-provoking book "XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography", that pornography "benefits women both personally and politically" [36]:

"It gives a panoramic view of the world's sexual possibilities (...) allows women to *safely* experience sexual alternatives and satisfy a healthy sexual curiosity", "offers (...) emotional information (...)" and "provides us with a sense how it would *feel* to do something" [35].

McElroy also believes that the contemporary radical feminist wave rose as a result of a steep decline of the movement in the late seventies and eighties in the United States. She suggests that using anti-porn rhetoric could have been a way to reinvigorate feminist's social and political struggles:

"Pornography offered radical feminists a clear target for their rage, complete with clear moral categories: Men were villains, women were victims. There was a brotherhood of oppressors, a sisterhood of victims. Pornography became the symbol of man's supposedly unquenchable hatred of women (...). They desperately needed a cause to galvanize the movement in much the same manner as abortion had in the sixties. Radical feminists needed a holy crusade around which to rally alienated and angry women. And pornography was perfectly suited. It provided a clear target. It commanded the instant attention of the media, who love to use sex to boost their ratings or circulation. Attacking pornography allowed the media to titillate viewers while remaining socially responsible. Pornography fits in perfectly with the politics of revenge and the ideology of rage" [36, chapter 4].

This type of *ideology of rage*, so bluntly described by Wendy McElroy, is quite similar to Ruwen Ogien's pertinent expression of "moral panic" [34, p. 21], which animates *pomophobes*. Moral panic lacks moral clarity and coherence, and leads naturally to several awkward consequences: among other things, it implies that deontological hardliners have difficulties breaking free from their preconceptions and thus, refuse to take into account the points of view and the autonomy of those they claim to protect [34, p. 22]. Ruwen Ogien also suggests, quite accurately, that we are living in an age in which "moral wars" [34, p. 14] are frequently waged between opposing factions, who believe their respective outlook is *morally superior* to their rival's [34, p. 15].

### 2.6 Gender theory or the "struggle against reality" [37]?

One of the most prominent *moral wars* being fought currently in the public arena, is between adherents of *gender theory* and those opposing it. According to French psychoanalyst, Philippe Valon:

"Once upon a time, life was easy: there were men and women (...). But humans are never satisfied, and they always want to improve things. (...) beyond the anatomical sex they have created a social sex, that they have named *gender*" [38].

Broadly speaking, gender theory promotes beliefs such as:

 The biological sex determined at birth, does not necessarily constitute an unavoidable, unchangeable fact.

In other words: You truly are what you "feel" you are internally and not how your body looks anatomically or what you are from the point of view of your chromosomes.

(2) Belonging to a given sexual category (*masculine* or *feminine*), does not automatically determine our sexual preference for the opposite sex.

In other words: Social norms and "gender stereotypes", dictated by the masculine heterosexual patriarchy, foist upon us a very specific "binary" sexual behavior that we are expected to follow blindly, at risk of being considered as an outcast.

(3) But above all, it surmises that *masculine* and *feminine* are socially constructed binary categories.

In other words: There's no such thing as "masculine" or "feminine" per se, gender theorists and their followers prefer using terms such as "gender fluid", "gender identity", "non-binary"...

(4) These socially and historically constructed categories are markers of institutionalized oppression, mainly against women but also against sexual minorities. They belong to a wider array of social control and exclusion mechanisms, that should be deconstructed, such as *class* and *race*.

In other words: Gender theory is part and parcel of a holistic political and ideological trinity, which comprises gender, class and race.

### 2.6.1 Gender theory as an ideological construct

Gender theory might sound coherent on paper and full of good intentions, but it is highly disputable and, like any theory, comprises some methodological shortcomings: it is

generally based on vague or flimsy facts; and it relies heavily on the challenges faced by sexual minorities, considered as a universal template applicable to the general population. But these smaller, non-homogeneous groups (such as transsexuals or homosexuals, for example), only constitute a minute percentage of the general population,13 which is overwhelmingly heterosexual. This latter group, seldom experiences issues with their sexual preference or sexual identity.

Moreover, as we have just seen above, gender theorists purport that sexual categories are just a social construct. Therefore, shouldn't gender theory (which sees itself as a critical theory) consider itself as a social, historic and ideological construct as well, since nearly all of its foundations are precisely social, historic and ideological? Is it an ideology of rage, unconsciously driven by moral panic, convinced that it holds the absolute and ultimate truth? Or is it philosophically similar to Nichola of Cusa's "De docta ignorantia"? This book, written by the genius German fifteenth century philosopher, was a very interesting theological attempt to prove and square, among other things, the dogma of the Trinity, central to the Catholic church, through mathematical logic and reason.

Let us now have an extremely brief and nonexhaustive look into some historic milestones of this theory. Judith Butler's landmark book entitled "Gender Trouble" (1990) has had a massive influence in many different fields of research and beyond, including sexbots. A little bit less known, was British sociologist Ann Oakley's book "Sex, Gender and society" (1972): this was one of the first academic attempts to overthrow the word sex and supersede it with the grammatical and technical term gender<sup>14</sup> [40].

According to the French philosopher Bérénice Levet, in her thorough and critical analysis of this theory, the very fact that it uses the seemingly innocent term gender, is not "neutral" and is:

"filled with metaphysical and anthropological assumptions (...)" [40, pp. 28-29]. Moreover, "(...) at the heart of gender theory, lies an asceticism, a puritanism, determined to clip off the wings of heterosexual desire (...)" [40, pp. 34-35].

### 2.6.2 From "compulsory heterosexuality" to "nonheterosexual worms"

Thus, gender ideology is wary of heterosexuality which it considers as a norm imposed by a capitalistic society, dominated by men. I have already mentioned above Donna Harraway's cyborg: an imaginary conceptual figure, incarnating the ultimate, idealistic goal of a futuristic, revolutionary, genderless being. In fact, the cyborg is a new regenerated, purified, fluid being, freed from the shackles of class or sexual distinction, obsolete dualisms and binary walls, all hailing from oppressive capitalism:

"There is nothing about being female that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as being female (...) constructed in contested scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race or class (...) is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of (...) patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism" [32, p. 16].

It might be interesting to quote here a revealing footnote in her book. She recounts partaking in a demonstration against the building of a nuclear facility in Nevada, alongside a:

"constructed body of a large, nonheterosexual desert worm" [32, p. 71], created by the protestors.

Judith Butler also uses, on a number of occasions in her own book, odd and reactionary expressions, such as: "compulsory heterosexuality" [41]. This is inaccurate in my estimation, because in the case of sexuality, most societies have spontaneously created norms, standards, customs and rituals, based upon the sexual preferences of the vast majority of men and women. Judith Butler however believes that these norms or laws, as she calls them, are no more than a "fabrication" [41, p. 36], or an authoritative story of the origins of humanity [41, p. 36]:

"(...) The binary relation between culture and nature promotes a relationship of hierarchy in which culture freely imposes meaning on nature (...)" [41, p. 37].

#### 2.6.3 A new sexual order?

We could of course make endless conjectures, but by using common sense it should be reasonable to assume that some human norms regarding sexual matters usually come after biological facts of life and not before them. Sexual norms were not intentionally fabricated by wicked, power thirsty, machoistic, patriarchal, heterosexual, binary-biased men, seeking to impose their power over women and submit

<sup>13</sup> For example, according to Cambridge University professor of statistics, David Spiegelhalter: "(...) 1 in 80 adults under 75 would consider themselves gay/lesbian and 1 in 80 bisexual (...)" [39]. 14 The recent tendency in many media outlets, academia and even administration to sanitize language for ideological purposes, using technical and grammatical gibberish terms, in order to be neutral, non-offensive and inclusive, according to gender theory, is quite disconcerting and off-putting.

them. Similarly, hunter-gatherers or the first farmers in human history did not artificially construct our biological need for calorie intake, in order to submit their fellow tribesmen progeny to the future capitalistic food industry.

In this regard, gender theorists seem to share in some instances, the same basic methodological postulates as conspiracy theorists. This is unfortunate, because gender theory, as disputable and divisive as it might be, could also be seen as an intellectually stimulating endeavor from a philosophical point of view and a precious moral tool, in order to promote rights for sexual minorities. It should be therefore acknowledged that: it is undeniably true that throughout history and up until this day, some men and women did indeed take advantage of a common accepted norm, and at times even distort it in order to consolidate their domination over others and exclude those who did not conform. It is also emphatically true that women have long suffered inequality, and those who deviated from established sexual norms have experienced persecution. These incontestable facts that have affected women and sexual minorities are, without a shadow of a doubt, morally wrong.

But in the same vein, *it is morally wrong to condemn the sexual majority*. Scoffing and withering at the natural desire of heterosexuals towards the opposite sex, as an artificial or cultural construct, does not serve the interests of those who claim being oppressed. Striving towards the ideal of *nonheterosexual worms* and genderless cyborgs, and trying to impose it on society as a new sexual order, <sup>15</sup> can only fuel rage, opposition, bitterness, unnecessary divisiveness and conflict. Acknowledging that human societies have been constructed, among other things, upon biological and natural foundations, does not necessarily lead to the rejection of the other. And as Bérénice Levet wisely reminds us:

"The great illusion of our time is the belief that we can construct something out of nothing" [40, p. 103].

### 2.6.4 Preaching the gender gospel to an alienated civilization

Attempting to *sexually engineer* society through gender ideology (which lacks a solid empirical basis) in order to

construct from scratch new outlandish gender identities, *exclusively rooted in the deconstruction of social norms*, definitely constitutes an illusion: it is posited on how the world *should be* according to gender theorists, and not how it *is* according to reality.

Do we need to uphold the institutionalized equality between men and women, which we have achieved in most enlightened democracies, and even strive for more? Should we consider transsexuals, homosexuals and people experiencing various types of gender trouble, as full members of society, respect them and protect their basic rights? There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we should. Nevertheless, all of these cases are very limited in numbers, and whether we like it or not, human civilization is still naturally binary. Gender theory promotes *fluid* and *non-binary* alternative sexual identities, which are totally legitimate. But at the same time, it inevitably establishes a binary, oppositional, matriarchally antagonistic, dialectically machoistic relationship, between itself and civilization. This is a crucial point of gender theory, as I understand it, which has also been pinpointed by Bérénice Levet's analysis:

"Civilization, society are not anymore seen as the framework of man's humanization, but rather as the domain of his alienation." [40, p. 99] "(...) gender [theory] wants to believe in the end of history (...). It is not a classless society that it promises us, but a world without sexes" [40, p. 123].

The practical effects on society as a whole – including the ethics of sexbots – of this revolutionary, politically binary, posthuman, post-biology, post-fact, relativistic theory, is best summed up in a remarkably prophetic and witty scene of Monty Python's "Life of Brian" (1979):

"(...) Stan: I want to be a woman. From now on, I want you all to call me 'Loretta'.

Reg: What?!

Loretta/Stan: It's my right as a man. (...) I want to have babies. Reg: You want to have babies?!

Loretta/Stan: It's every man's right to have babies if he wants them.

Reg: But. you can't have babies.

Loretta/Stan: Don't you oppress me.

Reg: I'm not oppressing you, Stan. You haven't got a womb! – Where's the fetus going to gestate?! You going to keep it in a box?! (...)

Francis: (...) We shall fight the oppressors for your right to have babies, brother. Sister. Sorry (...).

Reg: What's the point of fighting for his right to have babies when he can't have babies?!

Francis: It is symbolic of our struggle against oppression.

Reg: Symbolic of his struggle against reality" [43].

<sup>15</sup> The University of Milwakee, as do many universities, published an online handbook, with a list of about thirty new gender pronouns. For example: "xe", "xem", "xyr", "xyrs", "xemself", instead of she/he, her/him, her/his, herself/himself. If not used correctly, "it could", according to the academic institution, make people "feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric". And failing "to respect someone else's gender identity (...) is not only disrespectful and hurtful, but also oppressive" [42].

#### 2.6.5 Love and sex with robots, not ideology

Male and female sexbots are a natural and logical reflection of how most humans look physically and the world as it *is* in reality. However, according to the distinguished British computer scientist and university professor Kate Devlin, who is not opposed to sexbots and espouses to a certain extent, some central tenets of gender theory:

"(...) society has enough problems with gender stereotypes, entrenched sexism and sexual objectification (...). Aided by technology, society is rethinking sex/gender dualism. Why should a sex robot be binary? (...)" [44].

The word *stereotype* originally comes from the French language: it is a nineteenth century printers' term [45] which was shaped on the Greek base *stereos*-, meaning *solid* [46]. Thus, a stereotype is a *solid* archetype that should originally and etymologically mean something that is *solidly* rooted in the real world, or that is a faithful reproduction of reality. Yet, by a semantic shift, *stereotype* has acquired over the years a very pejorative meaning. In our specific case, it would therefore mean that in the mind of opponents to sexbots or gender theorists and their followers, female sexbots are stereotypical objects representing women's sexappeal, in order to please unfettered male sexuality.

This has indeed some truth to it: a male or a female sexbot will reproduce a sexual stereotype of each respective sex, but it is only reproducing something that has a solid basis in empirical reality. A condom for instance, is not considered as a pejorative stereotypical object of masculinity, because it coincides with empirical reality: the shape of male genitalia, for the overwhelming majority of males, regardless of their sexual preferences or their gender identity, is determined by biological facts.

Therefore, and in my estimation, producing on a massive scale female or male sexbots with stereotypical female or male sexual characteristics, does certainly not constitute prejudice against women or men. Nor does it imply having a preconceived idea of what men or women are: quite to the contrary, it implies having a *post-conceived* idea of what they truly are from a sexual and a biological point of view, based on reality, facts and observation. It also implies that manufacturers of sexbots have a very accurate *post-conceived* idea of what generally attracts men and women to the opposite sex (or to the same sex): masculinity is a highly desirable trait in men, <sup>16</sup> and femininity is a highly desirable trait in a woman.

All of this does not necessarily preclude sexbot manufacturers from producing *genderless robots*, in order to meet very specific and niche demands from some customers. Nevertheless, in its excellent and comprehensive report on sexbots, the Foundation for Responsible Robotics supports Kate Devlin's viewpoint and states that:

"a robot is a machine therefore it is genderless" [44, p. 19].

While it is perfectly true that a robot is merely a machine and therefore not endowed with a given biological sex and its corresponding chromosomes, it is however highly questionable to assert that a sexbot is totally genderless. A washing machine or a car, for example, could easily be considered as genderless machines, since their primary purpose are respectively cleaning the laundry and driving, and they are not meant to provide sexual services for the human user. Conversely, dildos and other sextoys explicitly representing parts of male or female sexual anatomy are not genderless objects: just as condoms, they are unambiguously and almost universally acknowledged as gendered objects. Paro is a famous Japanese therapeutic robot (also known as a *carebot*) representing a cuddly seal. Designed to treat mainly the elderly, its developers claim that it brings patients the "benefits of animal therapy" [48]. Is it (or should it be considered as) an animal-less robot, since it is just a machine? According to healthcare professionals, Paro is "like a cute, gentle animal" [49].

As I tried to point out earlier, robots in general, and particularly humanoid robots, including sexbots (as well as objects), are *signifiers* of what we want them to be. It therefore seems that some gender theorists and their followers are attempting to *ideologically objectify* sexbots; while sexbot users are merely interested in *sexually objectifying* their robots. Strapping around a sexbot the tentacles of gender ideology is akin to the *gender-ification* process, <sup>18</sup> *gender-ificaion* amounts to the enforcement of fashionable norms emanating from a very interesting, but highly questionable theory.

Hence, sexbots *do* indeed constitute a deliberate stereotypical representation of a specific sex (or gender) and, as objects of pleasure, they are explicitly designed

<sup>16</sup> Women are statistically more attracted to muscular, tall men, according to a joint American and Australian study, published by the Royal Society [47].

<sup>17</sup> Synthetics is a Los Angeles based sex doll manufacturing company, which offers special products and customizable dolls for transsexual clients (http://sinthetics.com/shop/transgender-products).

<sup>18</sup> A massive influx of middle-class residents in a pauperized neighborhood, resulting in the displacement of the original poor denizens.

to sexually and emotionally satisfy their user. 19 I think it 3.1 The flesh as man's weakest link is important to underscore that:

- The whole point and raison d'être of a sex robot, is precisely the stereotypical representation of a particular sex (or gender), since its users are mainly searching for sexual stimulation or emotional companionship<sup>20</sup> with their preferred sex.
- Sexbot users are looking for love and sex with robots, not ideology.

In other words, and to use again Philippe Valon's pertinent expressions that I quoted earlier: most sexbot or sextoy users are chiefly interested in anatomical sex, and not in social sex.

### 3 The ethics of compassion and sexual equality

In the previous pages, I tried to highlight the fact that opponents to sexbots and pornography are mainly galvanized by generalist, broad, theoretical and abstract concepts or ideas, which are by their very nature, debatable. However, these (sometimes) convoluted scholarly discussions very rarely include, in my estimation, compassion or empathy as a primary ethical concern. They seldom address the down-to-earth, pragmatic, emotional plight of particular individuals (men and women alike, but particularly men) suffering from loneliness and sexual misery.

In fact, sexual dissatisfaction or deprivation is still, to a certain extent, considered as a shallow tribulation, a petty anxiety, not really worthy of much empathy. Victims of sexual misery often tend to be pathologized and are considered as lacking the proper social and emotional skills to find or keep a mate: something is wrong with them, they must learn to open up, to build human relationships, it is said, and are advised to undergo therapeutic counselling. In many cases this might be helpful, but not necessarily for groups such as the disabled, autistic or unattractive persons, for example.

Moreover, we are the heirs of a deep-seated tradition of wariness towards natural physical urges and sexual desire. For the Ancients, in order to attain contemplative and philosophical wisdom, one had to endeavor in separating the bodily yearnings, from sullying the purity of the soul. This type of moral outlook on the body and its needs has left a very strong mark on Western thought and culture. Hence, not being able to overcome sexual temptation and lust is still considered as sinful or indicative of a weak character and is, in most cases, unworthy of compassion. The following famous verse from the Gospel of Matthew, is a very clear cultural guideline of the moral depreciation of the body, versus the glorification of the soul, in the Western tradition:

"(...) the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" [51].

Approximately five centuries before these lines from the Second Testament were written, Socrates was portraved by Plato as the epitome of a self-restraining wise philosopher, who knew how to overcome his bodily passions and sexual urges. And, in his timeless wisdom, Socrates observed the following fact about human nature:

"(...) For whence come wars, and fighting, and factions? Whence but from the body and the lusts of the body? (....)" [52].

A small number of (mainly men) resort to sexual violence in order to mitigate different types of frustrations. Sex crimes have of course multifactorial origins and could be nurtured, among other things, in an individual's innate propensity to violence, his upbringing, or induced by drug abuse, alcoholism or even in a wartime context [53]. According to the eminent British statistician, David Spiegelhalter it is very hard to quantify sexual violence with precise numbers:

"(...) statistics in these areas are generally of poor quality. (...) this is a very difficult area to research. Defining sex against your will is a problem in itself (....)" [39, p. 281].

### 3.2 Selective empathy

However, in an article against sexbots Kathleen Richardson argues that men lack empathy, because they commit overwhelmingly more violent and sexual crimes than women [54]. This type of assertion is methodologically misleading for at least three main reasons:

<sup>19</sup> Sexbots might be considered genderless on a phenomenological level, but my discussion here focuses on a very down-to-earth ethical perspective.

<sup>20</sup> A sixty year old Californian man, known under the very graceful pseudonym of Brick Dollbanger, is the owner of the Harmony sexbot. Quoted in the aforementioned article, he states that he is very "excited" like a child about the "companionship aspect" with the robot [50].

population.

(1) Men who commit violent crimes or sex crimes *do* indeed lack empathy toward their victims, but it is incorrect to therefore conclude that *all* men lack empathy.

(2) In other words, it is factually and morally wrong to

make *generalizations* about *all men*, exclusively based upon a *small fringe group of male offenders*: this is precisely the way stereotypes, racism and sexism work.

Incidentally, I have already tried to show above the *modus operandi* of some gender theorists and proponents of *negative objectification* (which constitute the two sides of the same coin): they mainly rely on extreme examples or groups which are marginal in numbers, and then

erroneously apply their conclusions to the general

(3) Men (or women) might lack empathy towards their victims, while carrying out their offences. But do they necessarily, always and at all times, lack empathy? Why couldn't they be (or not be) compassionate individuals before or after committing their abhorrent crimes? As I tried to show in my introduction, unlike machines, what makes us truly human is our profoundly ambivalent nature.<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately, sexual frustration and sexual misery do not lead to violence in the majority of cases. But when confronted with the absence of bodily encounters and affection, most humans do nevertheless suffer a great deal. It is a truism to assert that non-reproductive sex and companionship contribute greatly to the general well-being, psychological state of mind and physical health [55] of the overwhelming majority of men and women [56] (some very rare exceptions might of course occur).

## 3.3 Minimalistic ethics as a path to compassion and sexual tolerance

Therefore, I believe that voluntary prostitution and pornography offer a perfectly acceptable (but not ideal) outlet for people (mainly men) in want of intimacy. Despite the multiple challenges facing these strictly money – and business – orientated industries, it can be argued:

(a) In virtue of *minimalistic ethics* advocated by the French philosopher Ruwen Ogien, as *opposed* to: (a) strict

- deontological ethics; (b) combined with the traditional suspicion and depreciation of bodily pleasures;
- (b) That prostitution and pornography constitute important underground *social institutions*, which in fact *do* contribute at least to a certain extent, to the *general well-being*.

In other words, and according to Ruwen Ogien's rhetorical question:

"Isn't the sexual relief that pornographic magazines provide for the ugly, the shy, the handicapped etc., a kind of contribution to collective well-being?" [34, p. 41].

I believe that from the standpoint of *minimalistic ethics*, as well as with a pragmatic (non-idealistic) outlook, issues relating to the commodification of the human body and sexuality, should not be seen as immoral, provided no coercion is involved towards the sex worker.

The prime motivation of pornographers and prostitutes is of course not to offer empathy, social support or any type of emotional charity to their clients. But in practical terms, one cannot deny that they do provide some sort of physical and psychological relief for pariah individuals (albeit, unwitting and temporary), which could indeed be seen as akin to human empathy.

I am aware that this might be a highly disputable claim for committed abolitionists of prostitution and pornography, or even be interpreted as a kind of *moral blasphemy* against women, in the eyes of some radical feminists. The ethical questions and the social issues surrounding prostitution and pornography as well as the potential ills they incur, shouldn't be ignored or downplayed. Nor can any type of *involuntary* sex work or exploitation of women (or men), be tolerated. I nevertheless think that acknowledging the usefulness of these underground social institutions is a matter of *respect* towards women (or men), who wind up or choose, at a certain point in their lives, such unusual career paths.

### 3.4 Technology and empathy coincide

In other words, and to put it in laconic terms: the practical outcome of prostitution and pornography could easily be defined as involuntary empathy. By the same token, in most cases, the prime motivation of sexbot manufacturers is of course unlikely to be active empathy. But sexbots do and will fill (to a certain extent) an emotional and/or sexual gap endured by their user and cater to their feeling of emptiness and/or loneliness. If it

<sup>21</sup> I am putting aside here the small number of individuals affected by mental illnesses and other serious disorders, such as psychopaths for example. I do not wish to rule out the possibility (in a very distant future) of robots endowed with an advanced form of A.I., becoming more and more sophisticated and thus, becoming as ambivalent as humans.

weren't the case, they simply wouldn't exist. Incidentally, we have been witnessing in recent years a small-scale but increasing trend of robot owners falling in love and marrying informally their cybernetic companions [57].

As I tried to point out on numerous occasions above, opponents to sexbots espouse *deontological ethics*, which judges mainly the *intention* of the moral agent as good or bad, rather than the (negative or positive) *consequences* of a given action. These positions (*moral intentionality* or *deontology* and *moral consequentialism*) are so distant from each other, that the gap between them is as matter of fact unbridgeable.

Thus, my standpoint pertaining to sexbots could be defined as *pragmatic consequentialism*, because I consider that moral intentionality leads to *moral inertia*: it is an obstructive theoretical force, uselessly burdensome, that is opposed to *moral action*. In my mind, *moral action* means enabling a moral agent to make a decision that will have an immediate beneficial effect upon him or her. Laying down such a moral framework, positively empowers the moral agent and improves his/her life. In fact, I would even argue that permitting sexually and/or emotionally disenfranchised individuals to use sexbots, is mainly driven by *compassion*.

Etymologically speaking, compassion means *suf-fering with* the other, understanding his/her plight. It usually (though not in all cases) leads to *moral action*, triggering the compassionate individual to instantly alleviate the pain he is witnessing. In that respect, most social robots could be seen as inherently compassionate machines, immersed in the concrete world and designed to help people.

Thus, from a minimalistic moral point of view, combined with a pragmatic and down-to-earth approach, sexbots could be seen as perfectly moral and compassionate machines. Moreover, sexbots could even contribute to *sexual equality*, as well as *sexual justice*, between those who are fortunate enough to find a partner and on the other hand the emotionally or sexually deprived. Hence, sexbots could potentially improve the general well-being of a given society.

Why after all, shouldn't the access to sexuality not be considered a social issue, as important as health, education or housing, for example? Why shouldn't this basic physiological need, which is hard-wired into our brains, not be included in the *equal opportunities* ethics that have arisen in recent years, throughout the Western world and beyond? Why should it be considered just in a postmodern society which prizes *equality* as a cardinal and quasi sacred value, that some individuals are deprived of intimacy? Why

shouldn't technology not be seen as an appropriate means to tackle *sexual injustice*?

Critics would argue that sexbots are artificial, that they lack the unique human dimension which characterize normal and natural relations between people. They would probably also say that sexbots are mere *substitutes* and not the *real thing*. They would also say that robots do not offer reciprocity in a relationship, for which the emotionally disenfranchised are longing. The French scientist and member of the French National Academy of Sciences, Catherine Bréchignac, rightly stated in an interview, that robots do not have the capacity to fall in love with humans [58] (not yet).

These objections are to a certain extent legitimate and somewhat well-founded, but some of them are also terribly patronizing, moralizing and self-righteous. Moreover, treating the root cause of a problem does not always alleviate its symptoms. For people who simply do not have the possibility of fulfilling their emotional and sexual lives in a conventional human-to-human manner, whatever the reason, the alternatives are scant and grim: (months, if not years of) therapy for those who need it, with no guarantee of success, onanism or resorting to the often costly services of prostitutes. Apart from the last example, these traditional approaches to solitude do not offer immediate relief for those who are in want of intimacy and companionship.

# 4 Conclusion: Freedom to fantasize and sexual justice

I have tried here to analyze academic and scholarly opposition<sup>22</sup> to sexbots, which is mainly based on ideological postulates and political preconceptions, but seldom on hard indisputable facts. Therefore, arises the question which I posed in section two: *is there really a moral case against sexbots*? In order to answer this question properly, I think it might be useful to briefly recap what I attempted to show throughout this paper.

Political and ideological convictions are usually intertwined with core moral values. Here are, according to my interpretation, two of the most important,

<sup>22</sup> Opposition to sexbots is mainly but not exclusively confined to the academic and scholarly worlds and has not yet become, to the best of my knowledge, a grassroots movement.

determining and kernel moral and philosophical values that trigger the opposition to sexbots:

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- (1) *Collectivism blended with humanism*: collective interests are considered as superior to individual liberty, in almost all cases.
- (2) Maximalist or rigid Kantian-inspired ethics: a moral law should be upheld and respected no matter what, and in spite of the consequences induced by the law or the peculiarities and special circumstances of a given situation.

Each moral and ideological system has its merits, its own vision of the world and its particular understanding of how we should (re)act as *moral agents*. Very few systems (if any) can truly boast about being the most complete, holistic, just, good and valid for all of humanity at all times, across all cultures and in all cases and circumstances. It is virtually impossible to theoretically ponder over all of the unexpected situations, contingencies, twists and turns that arise from life in the real world.<sup>23</sup>

Most feminist opponents to sexbots might be totally in line with their particular value system or moral convictions and feel they are right from the point of view of their ideology. Their basic premises might even have resonance with some women (and even men). However, the way their arguments are put forward, literally seal off any attempt to take into account opposing moral views, and leave very little room for compromise. But above all: they rarely address the tragedy of sexual deprivation and loneliness, which affect both men and women. Their primary concerns are general, abstract ideas about humanity and how it should or shouldn't be, but not necessarily the well-being of humans as individuals.

There *is* definitely a moral case *against* sexbots, but at the heart of it lies hardcore uncompromising principles, that are staunchly opposed to individual freedom and thus are:

- (1) *Not inclusive to sexual diversity*, under its current evolving technological form.
- (2) Opposed to equal sexual opportunities for all.
- (3) Therefore, opposed to sexual justice.
- (4) Finally, and this is probably the most important point, they *lack compassion*, which has become in our time, one of the cornerstones of most modern ethical debates.

### Illustrations

1. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée* (1934) [59].



2. Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée* (1935–1936) [4, p. 27].



<sup>23</sup> My moral outlook with regard to sexbots might be labelled as "situationist", "relativist" or "contextual ethics/morality".

3. Hans Bellmer, Les jeux de la poupée (1936) [4, p. 39].



4. Doll photography by Sharon Marie Wright, as it appears on the *Campaign Against Sex Robots* website [60].



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