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Sexbots: can we justify engineering care bots who love too much?
The ethics legal status of sentient robots is uncertain. Resolving the implications of robotic sentience and status is an urgent priority, sine robots represent a promising solution to demographic changes as more of us live longer: we could live at home longer despite failing mental and physical health. Sentient, tactile and empathic care bots embody the ethics and practice of care: company as well as medical monitoring. Given the health benefits of relationship, touch and sexual satisfaction, as well as their commercial benefits, a confluence of the caring and sex industries is inevitable. Sexbots are a logical outcome, not only for the ageing infirm, but also for the many unable to find love and sex with compatible human partners.

Sexbots raise many ethicolegal issues for intellectual property law, family law, human rights law, criminal law, commercial law and public law at the very least. Their moral and legal status is controversial. Current sexbots represent an advance on sexdolls in that they may be custom made to specifications and possess an ability to speak in set sentences as part of programmed exchanges as well as to provide more lively sex (see www.truecompanions.com). Technological advances including the modelling of empathy, a greater conversational range incorporating spontaneity and potentially a degree of self awareness are likely. The moral and legal standing of sexbots today is clearly that of a thing to be bought, sold and discarded at the will of their owner. Degrees of sentience and self awareness, which will make sexbots more desirable, will disrupt this.

Disputes over whether tomorrow's sexbots should be categorised as things, animals,persons or sui generis are inevitable. Each categorisation brings difficulties. David Levy in his book Love and Sex with Robots postulates a future where humans will be able to order customised sexbots, with whom some will fall in love and marry. As he states, ethicolegal issies which he does not explore in the book arise.

This paper considers these. For instance! buying and selling persons is prohibited as slavery! but marrying things or animals rather than persons is also outside the law! as is sex with animals! but not with things? As recognising degrees of sentience and self awareness has led many jurisdictions to enact laws to foster animal welfare, proclaim human rights and prohibit slavery and the infliction of pain, the degree of legal protection which should extend to sexbots as sentient beings will prove controversial.

Creating sentient beings to carry out the tasks most of us would prefer not to do,like caring for the elderly and infirm and providing sexual services, is ethically complex. While sexbots may spare the humans who are currently carrying out this work, how far this justifies their being created to do so is questionable. Also challenging is finding ethical means to ensure that they don't harm humans but seek to serve them, while being afforded appropriate legal protection. Ken Macleod describes a future where 'autonomous' robots are created with super empathic orientations towards humans in

order to ensure human control. While it may soon be possible to create sexbots as sentient beings who gain pleasure from pleasing, they are likely to prove highly vulnerable to mistreatment, given humans' plethora of sexual proclivities.