

Book Review

# Sex Robots: Love in the Age of Machines

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In *Sex Robots: Love in the Age of Machines* (2022), Maurizio Balistreri tackles the provocative topic of sex robots. Through engaging with the most common questions and concerns that arise in discussions about sex robots, Balistreri provides a good overview and introduction to current debates while, at the same time, bringing their own opinion to the fore. Given that a decent array of topics are covered in just over 100 pages, the book doesn't necessarily go into great philosophical detail and analysis. However, this serves well for those who are not as familiar with the topic at hand.

In just three chapters, Balistreri broadly engages with topics such as: what sex robots are; whether we can actually have sex with a robot and, if so, whether it's moral to do so; whether there are negative implications to having sex with a robot; and whether we can have meaningful relationships with them. Although Balistreri provides a balanced discussion of these topics, there is a subtle optimism about the benefits of sex robots that characterizes the book.

In the Introduction, Balistreri, first and foremost, provides a definition of a robot and gives us an overview of different kinds of robots, and the functions they have come to serve. Examples include self-driving cars, autonomous weapons systems, and social companion robots. Balistreri points towards the benefits of some of these robots, e.g. self-driving cars could make our roads safer, given that most accidents are caused by distraction, drunk driving, or other forms of human error. However, there are also drawbacks, such as concerns surrounding responsibility gaps<sup>1</sup>: if a self-driving car, or autonomous weapons systems, injures or kills someone, who or what should be held responsible? Discussion surrounding responsibility gaps in the context of autonomous machines has become a popular and important topic and, therefore, it is great that Balistreri points to this issue as well. Generally, the introduction is informative for those who are perhaps less familiar with ethical issues in relation to the proliferation of robots. Moreover, this broader overview lays a good foundation for Balistreri to then zoom in on the ethics of sex robots in particular.

In *Chapter 1*, Balistreri raises the question of whether it is ethically problematic to have sex with a robot. Before delving into the question at hand, an overview of the features and capabilities of sex robots is provided. Balistreri points to examples of current-day sex robots – indicating to the reader that although discussion about sex robots may seem controversial and far-fetched, this technology exists (albeit still somewhat rudimentary) and, therefore, we should be paying attention to it. Interesting references are made to empirical studies indicating who, and how many people, would be interested in having sex with a sex robot. A surprising number of people are open to, or actively interested in, the idea or at least don't think it would be all that strange to have sex with

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<sup>1</sup> As machines become increasingly more autonomous, it is becoming more difficult to attribute moral responsibility to people for any harmful events caused by artificial intelligences. This problem is known as the “responsibility gap”.

a robot in the future. This, again, highlights the importance of discussing ethical issues surrounding sex robots. Perhaps, one day, sex robots will be more popular than we think.

However, before we can think about whether it is bad to have sex with a robot, Balistreri asks if it is even possible to have sex with a robot, given that sex evokes the idea of shared sexual intimacy between people. Could it be experienced with a machine? Balistreri acknowledges that sex is complicated so it's difficult to narrow down what it is, how it happens, why we have it, or how we experience it. However, Balistreri puts forward that, at least within the confines of the book, sex should be understood as an activity that gives sexual pleasure. If this is what sex is, then we are justified in talking about sex robots and having sex with them. Although some claim that sex with a robot is nothing but masturbation, Balistreri takes the view point that masturbation i.e., autoeroticism is still sex.

Following from the argument that we can have sex with robots, Balistreri makes a nice transition into engaging with the ethical concerns of having sex with robots. Generally, the question that is asked is whether it is bad to have sex with a robot. However, Balistreri addresses this question by asking three sub-questions: Does having sex with a robot say something bad about our moral character e.g., that we are comfortable with objectifying people? Would it impact how we relate to other people e.g., if we are violent towards a robot, could it make us violent towards others? Is engaging in sexual (and possibly sentimental) relations with a robot intrinsically unethical because it amounts to self-deception? Balistreri provides balanced discussions that answer to these questions, and also cites a number of relevant, and well-known, sources. Overall, however, Balistreri feels that although these are valid questions, such concerns are not justified. Sex robots are elaborate sex toys and, therefore, having sex with a robot is not tantamount to objectifying another person. Although sex acts with a robot may be repulsive for some, the author argues that there is no connection between acts of violence towards a sex robot, and moral character. As for concerns about self-deception, Balistreri points out that we allow ourselves to be deceived in many aspects of our lives, such as in books and films. In this regard, must we be so rational when it comes to sex robots, especially if creating fantasies with sex robots has the potential to make some people happy?

*Chapter 2* looks at the topic of sex robots and violence against women in particular. Given that most current sex robots are modelled upon a female appearance, there is concern that how people relate to, and engage with, sex robots could have a spill-over effect to how they treat women. Balistreri first engages with the topic more generally, discussing varying concerns that sex robots are dangerous for men, women, and society because they promote the objectification of women, thereby condoning violence against them. Similar arguments are made in relation to some pornography. However, Balistreri seeks to dispel these concerns, putting forward that what we do in play does not necessarily become a reality. Much as what is done online when playing violent video games, or in real-life when partaking in BDSM<sup>2</sup> or certain role-playing games, also does not necessarily become a reality for those engaging in these activities.

Following this, Balistreri looks at the following specific, but related, concerns: the effect of sex robots on the sex work and the sexual assistant<sup>3</sup> industries. Regarding both industries, our view on whether sex robots would have a positive or negative impact, depends on the opinion you have on these industries respectively. If one has a negative view of sex work, then sex robots could be a good thing: they could protect women from the perceived harm that comes with being a sex worker. However, if one has a positive view of sex work (that it is a profession deserving of respect, in which women have economic freedom and bodily autonomy), then we may be concerned that sex robots

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<sup>2</sup> This is an acronym that refers to “Bondage, Discipline, Submission, Sadomasochism” within the context of sexual relations.

<sup>3</sup> Sexual assistants are people who care for the sexual needs of people with disabilities.

would take away jobs. The same can be said of sexual assistants: if one sees it as another profession in which women are objectified, and placed in a caring role, then sex robots may be a good thing. Otherwise, it is also a case of robots taking away jobs. Either way, Balistreri points out that one does not necessarily exclude the other. There may still be people who prefer human sex workers and sexual assistants, as opposed to robots.

In *Chapter 3* (the final chapter), Balistreri looks beyond more superficial, sexual relations with sex robots, and questions whether we can have a deeper, loving relationship with a sex robot. To explore this, Balistreri engages with three specific sub-questions: can one be unfaithful to a sex robot? Can we love a robot? And, can robots become persons?

Regarding the topic of faithfulness and robots, a question that often comes up in casual conversation about sex robots, is whether sex with a robot would constitute as cheating, if one is in a monogamous relationship? Balistreri is skeptical of this: having sex with a robot amounts to having sex with an object, and having sex with an object does not constitute cheating. However, what we should consider, is that one's partner may feel insecure within the relationship, in the sense that they may start questioning if their partner is not satisfied, whether they are having other fantasies which are not being shared, or whether they may choose to spend more time with the robot instead of them. In this context, sex robots may destabilize some relationships.

In questioning whether we can love a robot, a common response is that although we could love a robot, a robot cannot genuinely love us back. Therefore, we cannot experience real love with a robot (at least not with current robots). However, Balistreri defends that in order to experience love, it is not necessary that it be reciprocated. For example, people experience unrequited love, or we may continue loving someone after they have passed away. This love is not reciprocal, yet we still experience it. The same could be said of robots. Moreover, drawing upon the work of David Levy, Balistreri argues that although we are uncertain about whether robots can, or could ever, have feelings towards us, they could be designed in such a way that they adequately respond to our loving advances, and could also learn through experience how to be an ideal partner. Therefore, Balistreri is of the opinion that sex robot could be legitimate partners.

Finally, Balistreri asks whether robots could ever be persons, in the sense of whether they could have moral status. This is a relatively popular ongoing debate, and one which is difficult to address within a limited scope. Balistreri, however, considers one of the main points that if a robot cannot suffer (which they, at least currently, cannot), then it has no moral significance. However, it is pointed out that our views on this may change, much as our views on animal moral status have changed. Perhaps it is not a case of considering whether robots can actually suffer, but rather a case of considering that we have the tendency to view them as more than machines, so making them "suffer" (i.e., seeing them respond in such a way that simulates suffering) may seem wrong to us. This is similar to John Danaher's ethical behaviourism approach to the moral treatment of robots. In this regard, we could possibly consider granting robots some type of moral status.

After taking us through various concerns about the proliferation of sex robots in society, Balistreri leaves us with the view that although all these concerns are understandable, they are not justified. Although the future only knows how sex robots may evolve, and how they may be accepted into society, there are many possible positive aspects to sex robots which we must, too, take into consideration.

From the perspective of someone who is familiar with current debates and literature on robot ethics in general, and sex robots in particular, the book does not necessarily bring many new perspectives to the table. Given the shorter length of the book, experts in the field may find themselves wanting deeper philosophical discussions and analysis. However, the book does complement existing literature very well and casts a refreshingly positive light on sex robots. This does well in a field wherein most well-known authors are particularly concerned about sex robot technology and its negative implications. That being said, Balistreri's discussions remain particularly balanced, with this positive spin only coming through in a subtle way.

For those unfamiliar with the current debate, this is a great introduction to what is going on regarding the development of sex robots and the kinds of questions that we should be asking when it comes to their development and utilization. Balistreri does this by discussing the most prominent questions that are being asked within the field, and also by referencing the most well-known scholars who are writing on the topic.

A particular strong point is the way in which Balistreri keeps most arguments grounded i.e., keeps arguments and discussions in line with current sex robot technology, and does not get too carried away with imagining future possibilities. References to statistics and surveys also further ground the points that Balistreri is putting forward.

Although I would have appreciated a clearer golden thread linking chapters together – at times, sub-sections feel a little disjointed – this is not hugely concerning given that the main concerns within the field are still addressed. Overall, there needs to be more discussion relating to the provocative topic, and Balistreri has made a worthwhile contribution.