

Research Article

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Love(rs) in the making: Moral subjectivity in the face of sexbots

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Abstract: This article offers a novel reading of the criticisms of sex robots put forward by the *Campaign Against Sex Robots* (CASR). Focusing on the implication of a loss of empathy, it structures CASR's worries as an *argument from moral degradation* centered around the potential effects on sexbot users' sexual and moral subjectivity. This argument is subsequently explored through the combined lenses of postphenomenology and the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas. In so doing, it describes the type of human-technology relations that sexbots invite, identifying alterity as a central feature. It also highlights how alterity, responsibility, and subjectivity are intimately connected. However, that connection is distinctly different in sexual circumstances, making current versions of Levinasian roboethics largely inapplicable for the ethics of sexbots. To overcome this, the article delves into Levinas' phenomenology of Eros and identifies voluptuousness as a type of enjoyment of the Other that is different from the enjoyment invited by current sexbots and is compatible with responsibility. Based on this, the article provides examples of how this phenomenology of Eros can inspire the design of future sexbots in ways that alleviate some of CASR's concerns.

Keywords: sex robots, postphenomenology, Levinas, subjectivity, Eros, ethics, design

1 Introduction

As technological advancements increasingly facilitate the design of relatively affordable, interactive, and engaging sex robots, the latter have been receiving increased media and academic attention. However, not all of this attention

has been optimistic, with some instead voicing serious concerns about the deleterious effects the widespread use of sexbots may bring. This article engages with some of these concerns by offering a novel take on a well-known criticism by the *Campaign Against Sex Robots* (CASR) concerning the morally problematic effects of sex robots' normalization. Proposed in Kathleen Richardson's [1] critical paper on the topic, CASR is inspired by the conviction that "an organized approach against the development of sex robots is necessary in response to the numerous articles and campaigns that now promote their development without critically examining their potentially detrimental effect on society" [2]. On the one hand, CASR is skeptical about some of the benefits alleged by sexbot proponents.¹ More scathing, however, are CASR's concerns over the harmful consequences they foresee sexbots exacerbating:

- "We believe the development of sex robots further *sexually objectifies women and children*."
- The vision for sex robots is underscored by reference to prostitute-john exchange² which relies on *recognizing only the needs and wants of the buyers*³ of sexual abuse, the persons in prostitution are not attributed subjectivity and reduced to a thing (just like the robot).
- The development of sex robots and the ideas to support their production show the immense horrors still present in the world of prostitution which is built on the 'perceived' inferiority of women and children and *therefore justifies their use as sex objects*.

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¹ This includes the idea that "sex robots could help reduce sexual exploitation and violence towards prostituted persons, [because] technology and the sex trade coexist and reinforce each other creating more demand for human bodies" [2].

² For more information on the ways in which the use of sex robots resembles exchanges between sex workers and sex buyers (johns), see [1].

³ As Levy [3] points out, one of the advantages of sex robots would be that they can be tailored to the needs and wants of the buyer/user and would thus lead to more sexual satisfaction. This has also been dubbed as the *greater satisfaction thesis* [4].

- We propose that the development of sex robots will further *reduce human empathy that can only be developed by an experience of mutual relationship*” [2].

So CASR is worried about an escalation in terms of the objectification of women and children, claiming that increased use of sexbots somehow “justifies” this happening. What is not immediately clear, however, is how this outcome is related to CASR’s other concerns presented above. This in turn obfuscates the process by which the objectification is supposed to come about. Indeed, as it stands, the list does not present a structured argument. Not only does this frustrate the search for constructive solutions (for which we would benefit from a more well-ordered causal chain), but it also makes empirical investigations into the merits of the argument rather difficult.⁴ As such, it needs further specification if it is to be convincing.

In what follows, I first discuss previous attempts at such specification in the form of two connected but alternative readings of CASR’s criticism of sexbots: one as an argument from analogy and one from symbolic consequences. Subsequently, a third plausible reading is proposed in the form of an argument from moral degradation, which emphasizes CASR’s worry about the loss of empathy more than previous attempts have. The rest of the article substantiates this proposed argument using and combining insights from postphenomenology and Levinas’ ethical phenomenology. It ends with some initial recommendations for future, more responsible, sexbot design.

2 Arguments from analogy and symbolic consequences

In their chapter titled *Should We Campaign Against Sex Robots?*, Danaher et al. [5] present the argument by CASR as an argument from analogy, where the strength of the argument depends on the analogousness of sex

with robots to the aforementioned “prostitute-john” relations. They reconstruct the argument as follows:

- (1) “Prostitute-john (or sex worker-client) relations are ethically problematic (for a number of reasons, but particularly due to objectification of the sex worker).
- (2) Sexbot-human relations are being modeled on sex worker-client relations and so will share similar properties with those relations.
- (3) Therefore, sexbots-human relations will be ethically problematic (by analogy).
- (4) Therefore, we ought to Campaign Against Sex Robots” [5, pp. 48–49].

They then provide three main reasons why they think the argument should fail to persuade us to CASR. For one, even if the worry about objectification is warranted, one could act upon that by introducing regulation⁵ or designing sexbots so as to invite different sorts of relationships to them. As such, CASR’s conclusion is much stronger than its premises allow for. Second, Danaher et al. contend that CASR’s argument operates on a misleading account of sex work, where all sex work is characterized by objectification, denial of subjectivity, and asymmetrical power relations. However, they then proceed to show that the reality of sex work is more nuanced and that its “bad-making properties” are not unique to it. Consequently, “simply referring to those harms without showing how they are unique, uniquely bad, or would be reduced rather than exacerbated by a ban, is not enough to show that prohibition would be warranted” [5 p. 53]. Third, they identify obvious disanalogies between sex work and sex with robots. For one, there is the fact that robots are unlikely to be persons, while sex workers most definitely are. Second, while it may be likely that the way we treat persons affects the way we treat other persons, Danaher et al. consider it less obvious that the way we treat objects would likewise translate to interhuman behavior. And lastly, the analogy is said to be incomplete: since it ignores possible benefits of sex robots, no conclusion can be reached on proper policy concerning them based on this analogy because harms and benefits cannot be weighed against one another.

So this rendition of CASR’s worries *as an argument from analogy* does not support their strong sexbot-critical

⁴ Such empirical investigations are important. Social consequences of a technology’s introduction are notoriously hard to predict [6]. Similar claims to CASR’s have in the past been made about porn and violent video games, and final consensus is still lacking on the full range of effects. While pessimistic predictions of their results on sexual and violent crime rates seem to have been largely overblown [7,8], claims about pornography’s effect on consumers’ objectifying attitudes apparently have some merit [9].

⁵ Danaher et al. [5] remain vague about what kinds of regulation would be helpful here. However, Gutiu [10] presents a number of arguments that favor regulation of sexbots over prohibition, including some concrete examples of possible regulations.

position. Nevertheless, sex work and sex with robots need not be entirely analogous to support a sexbot-critical position if it is not the analogy that does the persuasive work. In the same volume, Danaher proposes an alternative reading of CASR's position: as *an argument from symbolic-consequences* [11]. Generally, the argumentative structure is as follows:

- (1) "Sex robots do/will symbolically represent ethically problematic sexual norms. (*Symbolic Claim.*)
- (2) If sex robots do/will symbolically represent ethically problematic sexual norms, then their development and/or use will have negative consequences. (*Consequential Claim.*)
- (3) Therefore, the development and/or use of sex robots will have negative consequences and we should probably do something about this (*Warning Call Conclusion.*)" [11, p. 107].

How would CASR's concerns fit into this structure? First, sex robots symbolically represent problematic sexual norms: objectification and lack of concern for the inner life of the sexual partner, focusing only on the wants and needs of the user and engaging in sexual arrangements typified by a one-sided power structure (there are others, such as unrealistic standards of beauty and sexual availability or the lack of consent [10], but those are not central to CASR's argument). Second, the development of such sex robots represents approval and would subsequently normalize this way of thinking about sex. Third, this would, according to the argument, result in the sexual objectification of women and children because these norms become part of the new sexual normal. Note that this version of the argument does not rely on the strict analogy between prostitution and sex robots for its persuasiveness. Rather, it gives us reason to be wary of modeling sexbots in such a way that they represent ethically problematic norms *like those* found in some sex work, regardless of whether they are pervasive there.

This way of specifying CASR's criticisms is useful because (a) it does not fall prey to the formal complaints directed at the one from analogy and (b) it includes normalization as a causal mechanism connecting sex robots with undesirable consequences, thus providing a clearer explanation of the process by which those consequences are supposed to come about. Nevertheless, even this reading neglects a key point raised by CASR: that the "development of sex robots will further *reduce human empathy that can only be developed by an experience of mutual relationship*". That is, sex robots are not simply accused of producing undesirable societal effects like objectification; they are also said to make us morally worse people (assuming, of course,

that empathy is desirable)! That is quite the claim, to be sure. But how are we to understand this? How is this personal moral decline connected to CASR's other points of concern? One possibility is presented by Gutiu [10], characterizing it as an additional harm to users (next to the harm to women) resulting from the representation of ethically problematic norms. Similarly, sexbot users could run the risk of social isolation by withdrawing from real contact with other people, thus not cultivating empathy in social situations [12,13]. Such accounts thus relegate the reduction in empathy to the status of a *side effect*. I disagree. Instead, I propose a version of CASR's argument that, rather than having the reduction in empathy be a (side)effect for users, affirms the reduction in empathy as an important causal factor: the *argument from moral degradation*.

3 Ask not what you can do to the sexbot, but what that can do to you ...

The argument to be developed here, then, centers around the morally problematic changes that the use of sexbots might induce in their users. To be sure, I am not the first to entertain the possibility of human-sexbot interactions having lasting effects on the humans participating. Even sexbot proponents admit as much when they propose that sexbots could have therapeutic value or could help users develop sexual and/or social skills [14]. On the other hand, and this is central to CASR's point on this reading, there are important skills that we stand to lose from the engagement as well. Not only that, the skill in question is a deeply moral one, i.e., *empathy*, which not only connects to the virtue of care [15] but is also central to our moral character [16], to the moral subjects that we are. Thus, sex robots would lead to *moral deskilling* [17] resulting in users' moral degradation, which would in turn have negative consequences for those for which the deskilled lack empathy (i.e., CASR's objectified women and children).

The question remains, however, how exclusively sexual engagements have broader effects on empathy outside of that context. After all, while it is plausible that sexual encounters with robots have an influence on users' *sexual subjectivity*, i.e., how they think about themselves as sexual beings [18], it is not yet clear how that links to their *moral subjectivity*. Given that this link is implied but not explained in CASR's criticism, I conceptually distinguish between the two in restructuring that criticism in terms of moral degradation, so that

their connection can be explored later in the article. With that in mind, reading CASR's argument as an argument from moral degradation results in the following:

- (0) Current and projected sex robots invite a specific way of sexually engaging with them.
- (1) Engaging in sex with these robots is to engage in a sexual relation that focuses solely on the needs and wants of the user, treats the sexual partner as an object (as it is in this case), and is completely asymmetrical in terms of power. These features of human-sexbot interactions mold the user's sexual habits and preferences to the extent that empathy is lacking from his/her sexual subjectivity and what (s)he sees as worthwhile sexual activity.
- (2) This lack of empathy will carryover to interhuman relations. It would do so in sexual encounters as an ingrained part of the user's sexual subjectivity, but since empathy is central to our moral subjectivity as well, becoming an unempathic *sexual* subject risks becoming an unempathic *moral* subject as well.
- (3) This lack of empathy will result in the increased objectification of others (mainly women and children), in both sexual and other social relations. The widespread use of sex robots would then lead to these immoral tendencies becoming increasingly normalized.
- (4) Hence, we should campaign against such sex robots.

While this reading of CASR also contains the mechanism of normalization, it is substantially different from the symbolic-consequences variant. For one, premises 0 and 1 leave open the possibility, at least in principle, of some future sexbots not inviting problematic sexual relations. This in turn leaves room for design as (part of) a strategy to alleviate some of CASR's concerns. Another difference lies in the fact that the argument from moral degradation's main causal mechanisms operate more on an individual rather than a social basis. That is, rather than relying on "justification", it relies on habituation and practice as forces of normalization. That also means that it is focused on concrete interactions with sex robots, i.e., their use, rather than the fact of their development. Despite those differences, however, these two arguments could end up being complementary. That is, whereas the symbolic-consequences argument primarily accounts for the effects of *indirect* normalization (e.g., caused by the development of these robots or reactions to it, such as writing books welcoming the sexbot revolution [3]), the argument from moral degradation deals more explicitly with CASR's focus on the loss of empathy and focuses on

how *direct* interaction with sexbots can contribute to the same problematic outcomes.

The rest of the article aims to (a) explicate the currently implicit conceptual links that undergird the argument from moral degradation and (b) probe the implications of the account developed. That is, it seeks to answer the following questions: *what is the connection between robots and moral subjectivity on the one hand, and between sex and moral subjectivity on the other? How do these connections play out in the case of sex robots? And, finally, how can the answers to the previous questions inspire the design of sex robots that would not result in moral degradation?* Within the context of this article, with its focus on the direct consequences of concrete interactions with sexbots, the link between technology and sex is clear: the sex robot serves as a sort of partner for users that engage in sexual activities with it.⁶ However, if the argument from moral degradation is to make sense, we also need to account for the link between sex and moral subjectivity and between robots and moral subjectivity. The following sections start with the latter.

4 On moral subjectivity and mediating technology

Philosophers of technology have long recognized that technological artifacts are unavoidably value-laden and political [e.g., 19–23]. More to the point, some have also recognized that our interaction with these value-laden artifacts has important implications for our own moral development. For example, Foucault showed how technological artifacts can help mold us into specific types of subjects in his analysis of Bentham's Panopticon [24]. He also emphasized the potentially crucial role of sexuality in subject formation [25,26]. Vallor's work on moral deskilling [17] describes how interacting with specific technological artifacts can over time cause the loss of certain moral skills that we should instead value and that have relevance in other parts of life.

The postphenomenological tradition in philosophy of technology goes even further when it articulates the *co-constitutional* relation between subjects and technological artifacts (e.g., [27,28]). That is, according to postphenomenologists, human subjects and technological artifacts cannot

⁶ The fact that we are speaking of *sex robots* means that the artifact is animated and has at least limited interactivity. The partner-criterion serves to distinguish sex robots from sexual artifacts like smart vibrators or "strokers". This connects to sexbots' "quasi-face," further explored in Sections 6.2 and 8.

be strictly separated but are always already related. Artifacts are not seen as simply instrumental but as active mediators between human beings and the world: they actively mediate our perceptions of that world, our actions in it, and the responsibilities, norms, and values that guide those actions [29–31]. As such, “[a]rtifacts are morally charged; they mediate moral decisions, *shape moral subjects*, and play an important role in moral agency” [29, p. 21, emphasis added]. And it is this recognition of the constitutive role of technology in shaping moral subjects, combined with its focus on concrete human-technology relations, that makes postphenomenology a particularly appropriate perspective from which to start our analysis of sex robots in the context of the argument from moral degradation.

From a postphenomenological perspective, then, the idea that interacting with sex robots can have an impact on our moral subjectivity is not at all surprising. Nevertheless, if we are to better understand *how* it is that sexbots would make us less empathic subjects, we need to be more specific about the way in which they could. To do so, we can make use of postphenomenology’s conceptual vocabulary on human-technology relations. That is, we need to look at the type of human-technology relation that a sexbot invites.

Indeed, technological artifacts can only play their mediating role because of their specific relatedness to us and our world. However, these relations take on different forms, with differing implications. Ihde [27] already identified four types of human-technology-world relations: embodiment, hermeneutic, alterity, and background relations, and more types have been added since (e.g., cyborg, immersion, and augmentation relations [32–33]). So what kind of relations does the sexbots invite? At least two types spring to mind: *embodiment* relations and *alterity* relations. At first glance, the former seems most plausible. After all, not only is the activity in which one would normally engage with a sexbot aimed at bodily pleasure, but the contact between subject and object involves intimate, bodily connections that are often taken to be essential to sexual activity. In spite of that, the relation to a sexbot cannot be described as embodied in the postphenomenological sense of the word. Ihde’s [27] notion of embodiment describes a relation in which I experience the world *through* the technology in question. The artifact becomes “transparent” in that interaction with the world, becomes part of my perceptual apparatus. Clearly, this does not describe the relation to sexbots, since one’s intentionality during the sexual encounter with a robot is not aimed at the world beyond, but at least partially at the sexbot itself as an object of attraction and gratification. Moreover, the sexbot does not become transparent but rather remains a focus of attention. Instead, these

descriptions are much more consistent with Ihde’s description of alterity relations, which take shape “as relations *to* or with technologies, to technology-as-other” [27, p. 98], where one’s attention, rather than being aimed at the world, is reserved for the artifact in question. Phenomena like the quasi-animation of the artifact and the possibility of interacting with it are said to increase the likelihood that the artifact is experienced as “other” and that an alterity relation is formed [27, pp. 100–101] (Ihde’s examples include a spinning top and a virtual competitor in a computer game). This coincides with two technical features of sexbots: for them to be sexbots at all, they need human-like movement/behavior and a degree of artificial intelligence [34].⁷ As such, sexbots have been designed in a way that invites relating to them, at least in part, through alterity relations. To be sure, the alterity relations focused on here are quite specific in the sense that they are characterized by sexual attraction. However, this does not have to pose a conceptual problem: according to Ihde, relations with technological “others” can have specific valences, like being fascinated with, fond of or challenged by the technological “other”. So, surely, one could be *attracted to* some of them too?

Of course, there might be other relations that surface over the course of human-robot intercourse. Nevertheless, not only is the alterity relation an important distinguishing feature of human-sexbot interaction (which makes the robot into a sort of partner rather than a simple sex toy one only “uses”) but is also intimately connected to the question of moral subjectivity. Indeed, Bergen and Verbeek [35] describe how at least some alterity relations with technology have the distinct capacity of motivating and supporting the development of moral subjectivity (see Section 6.2). As such, this connection between alterity and moral subjectivity also inspires the remainder of the analysis here. First, the link between alterity and moral subjectivity is clarified in terms of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Then, the article reflects on how this way of thinking translates to technological or robot others and explains why the current literature on Levinasian robot ethics cannot simply be applied to the case of sex robots. Instead, the article draws lessons from Levinas’ phenomenological account of Eros and how these lessons can inspire the design of sex robots that would avoid moral degradation.

⁷ Danaher includes another defining characteristic of sex robots: a humanoid form. While this may be applicable to current designs for sex robots, I do not believe this to be essential to the definition of what a sex robot is, and risks standing in the way of more creative, non-humanoid designs (see Section 8). As such, I do not include it here.

5 (S)he loves me: Levinas' moral subject

Philosophy probably knows no more intimate a connection between alterity and (moral) subjectivity than that described by Emmanuel Levinas. Working in the phenomenological tradition, he set out to develop ethics not simply as a branch of philosophy but as “first philosophy” [36, p. 304]. Thus, distinguishing his work from most of Western philosophy (in which he claims the ontological to be fundamental), he showed how the very structure of our subjectivity is always already ethical, which he claims is necessary for the development of society, politics, technology, and even philosophy itself. In so doing, Levinas describes how such a responsible subjectivity arises out of its confrontation with alterity, with the infinitely Other. The following paragraphs provide a rough outline of that link between subjectivity and alterity.

On Levinas' account, the first separation of the ego from the world is realized in the prereflective *enjoyment*⁸ of that world, as a “living-from” that provides “nourishment, as a means of invigoration” [36, p. 110]. This enjoyment should not be seen as “a psychological state among others [but as] the very pulsation of the I” [36, p. 113]. In other words, the ego is not a thing like other things; enjoyment as a *mode* of existing makes up the very substantiveness of the ego [37]. This is possible because the ego is embodied, i.e., it is characterized by *sensibility*, a susceptibility to be affected by what is other to it, an openness, a *vulnerability* [38] that allows for enjoyment “without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously [...] this is the human” [36, p. 133]. Levinas' putting enjoyment at the very heart of subjectivity in this way has two important implications here. For one, it has consequences for how we think about artifacts. As he explains: all things, “and even the hammer, needles and machines” we use are always also “objects of enjoyment, presenting themselves to ‘taste’, already adorned, embellished” [36, p. 110]. Their very materiality has an axiological underbelly of sensibility, they “materialize in satisfaction” [38, p. 73]. This can be read as Levinas' version of the co-constitution of ego and artifacts (cf. Section 4), which implies that sensuous enjoyment has a role to play in the effects artifacts have on us (especially for those artifacts aimed at sensibility and contact, like sex robots). Second,

⁸ In the original French, Levinas uses the word *jouissance*, which means intense pleasure. Interestingly, *jouissance* has connotations to *sexual* pleasure, next to pleasure derived from understanding or of the (right to) use of one's possessions.

and this relates to the previous point, enjoyment has a specific “directedness”. In enjoyment, the ego takes the world *in*, consumes it. This is “a withdrawal into oneself, an involution” [36, p. 118], an egoistic orientation more naïve than evil by which the ego exists *for itself*. As such, the possibility of enjoyment in sensibility provides the egoistic substrate of subjectivity.⁹

In the enjoyment of the world, the ego transforms what was originally other to it into its own, into the *Same*. This movement constitutes what Levinas called the “morality of ‘earthly nourishment’ [...] that] is not the last, but one must pass through it” [37, p. 64]. Indeed, this first morality is shown to be imperious and unjustified when the ego encounters an other that resists its attempts at enjoyment and mastery, which the ego cannot grasp: the infinitely Other. Unlike the things the ego enjoys, the Other *expresses itself*, as an epiphany from beyond being [36,39]. It imposes itself on the enjoying ego and shows itself destitute, hungry, and susceptible to suffering because it is vulnerable [36,38,40,41]. The Other's expression, manifested as its “face” (which is not the same as its physical face [*visage*]), overwhelms the egoistic ego, puts it into question [39], it is “an attack made immediately upon the plenitude of the complacency in oneself [...] on the identity in enjoyment” [38, p. 74]. However, this “attack” is not a violence, but has instead a “a positive structure, ethical” [36, p. 197]. That is, being called into question by the Other does not destroy the ego but calls it to responsibility. The ego is transformed from being “for-itself” to being “one-for-the-other,” a transformation manifested as *shame* [36, p. 84]. This transformation is also one of the ego into a subject, subjected by the alterity of the infinitely Other in responsibility, now self-conscious by being put into question, a subject that does not only *have* responsibilities but is also structured “by its *very position*, [as] responsibility through and through” [40, p. 17]. On this Levinasian account, then, the connection between alterity and moral subjectivity is fundamental: it is only by meeting an Other, by coming face to face with alterity that moral subjectivity is possible. For Levinas, then, there is no subjectivity that is not also moral subjectivity. Indeed, the very structure of subjectivity is unescapably ethical.

Of course, this conclusion has its consequences for the way we understand the argument from moral

⁹ This “layeredness” of subjectivity features much more prominently in *totality and infinity* than it does in Levinas' later work, where he took pains to avoid such overly “metaphysical” descriptions. However, for the purpose of discussing concrete technologies like sex robots, the older topology is valuable because its “building blocks” are more conceptually discrete.

degradation. For example, it means that a strict separation of sexual from moral subjectivity (a possibility technically left open in premise 2 of the argument) is untenable on the Levinasian account developed here. This is further explored in Section 7. More urgently, however, this account seems to also *undermine* the argument from moral degradation. That is, if we relate to sex robots through alterity relations, and alterity is linked to moral subjectivity, then should our relations with sex robots not make us more responsible and empathic rather than less? This conclusion would be hasty, however, because it assumes that all others (including technological ones) are created equal when it comes to arousing moral subjectivity, something Levinas would disagree with.

6 (S)he loves me not: Levinas and technological others

With the above, a problem presents itself for a Levinasian account of the link between sex robots and moral subjectivity: his work provides no reason to think that technological artifacts can have the alterity necessary to arouse responsibility; they cannot have a face in his sense of the term. Instead, Levinas reserved infinite alterity for human others, finding only in humanity the “primacy of the ethical, that is, *of the relationship of man to man*—signification, teaching, and justice—a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest” [36, p. 79, emphasis added]. Indeed, across his *oeuvre*, he makes it abundantly clear that the human Other is the Other *par excellence*. With that, he seems to bar other others, including robots, from making a moral appeal upon the subject. Despite the overwhelming emphasis on humanity across his works, however, Levinas left some room for the moral consideration of others, even if they are not infinitely Other. In a late interview, he admitted there was pity to be had toward animals: “[i]t is clear that, without considering animals as human beings, the ethical extends to all living beings. [...] But the prototype of this is human ethics. It is because we, as human, know what suffering is that we can have this obligation” [42, p. 172]. In other words, only after when we have been confronted by the face of the human Other can we “discover the face of an animal”, which “is completely different” [42, p. 172]. Still, that leaves us with little hope for a Levinasian account of sex robots calling us to responsibility, since Levinas claims that ethics, “the one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood” [38, p. 74]. So where does that leave us concerning the alterity of sex robots?

6.1 Levinas, technological alterity, and sexbots

Given the central concerns of his philosophical project, it is no surprise that the issue of technological alterity (including that of robots) remained undertheorized in Levinas’ work. Nevertheless, he offers two ways in which objects can exhibit alterity. First, he proposes that objects can have a form of “derivative” alterity, they can function as a “sign” referring to the Other that created them [39,43]. Our appropriation of these artifacts—be they ropes, robes, or robots—would serve to indirectly remind one of these Others and our responsibilities in an all too human technological world. However, it is unlikely that the indirect reference to the humanity of sexbot producers would induce the development of a responsible sexual subjectivity in relation to the sexbot, if only because despite this reference, the responsibility toward these producers does not suggest any particular sexual practices. The second form of technological alterity that Levinas discusses is more applicable to the case at hand: the alterity of objects of beauty. An object of beauty does have a sort of alterity of its own, it presents itself in a “pre-eminent exhibition [...], absolute exposition, even [with a] shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined” [38, p. 40]. Exhibition and shamelessness meant to hold the gaze of others certainly applies to the way in which one is projected to experience sex robots as a user. They are designed for an exposition that tickles one’s interest and induces covetousness and desire. However, this cannot be the whole story because the beautiful¹⁰ that Levinas describes is essentially characterized by “indifference, cold splendor and silence” [36, p. 193] and does not aim to satisfy a need; terms that are not applicable to human-sexbots relations meant to be libidinally gratifying, physically engaged, and interactive. Moreover, Levinas makes clear that, to his mind, the alterity of beauty may capture one’s interest but does not call one to responsibility.

With this, Levinas does provide some grounds for those aspects of sex robots’ alterity that may invoke one’s desire. However, this type of alterity is insufficient to understand alterity relations (in the postphenomenological sense) with sexbots in a way that is helpful for the argument from moral degradation. For one, it has no bearing on moral subjectivity. Second, it describes a way

¹⁰ It is doubtful whether Levinas would have found beauty in sex robots, but when it comes to the aesthetics of everyday objects, one would have to admit “to each their own”.

of engaging with these artifacts that could hardly be more different than in the case at hand. That is, whereas Levinas' objects of beauty remain silent and at a distance, sex robots are meant to invite close interaction. Of course, Levinas wrote before technology became increasingly interactive, so it makes sense that this is not reflected in his thinking on technological alterity. However, we live in another technological age, one where interaction with technology is increasingly ubiquitous. And this interactivity separates robots from many other, more static artifacts. Indeed, the interactive peculiarity of robots has inspired some to rethink their alterity and their role in ethics.

6.2 Thinking otherwise about robots

Put humans and robots together, and interesting things tend to happen. Especially artificially intelligent robots tend to elicit curious reactions from their human interlocutors [44]. Studying human reactions in interviewing an artificially intelligent humanoid robot, Bottenberg [44] found that it can make us “feel compelled to behave respectfully towards it, in virtue of our corporeal and communicative kindredness, and the fact that it seems to respond to our interactions with it”, revealing “the ways in which some technological objects stand out as more significant in their otherness to us” [44, p. 185]. In other words, the robot's alterity can invite *responsible interaction*. The question remains, however, what otherness or alterity is at work in these such interactions.

Some have taken a rather radical approach claiming, contra Levinas, that robots could actually be Others in a relevant Levinasian sense, and Levinas' hesitation to include them in the ethical realm is simply the consequence of his own anthropocentric bias. Wohl [45] argues that robots would be eligible for the status of Other if they can be infinitely complex, i.e., resist understanding. He proposes that the Turing test could be a metric for this: “the Turing test is about, how through limited stimuli (messages through a closed door) an infinity of complexity can be intuited. Surely, to pass the Turing test is to create an ethical demand” [45, p. 709]. Along similar lines, Inrona classifies all inanimate objects as infinitely Other because they are always “more than that which human intentionality brings to it” and thus also “infinitely other” [46, p. 98]. However, something is amiss here: by explicitly thinking alterity in terms of incomprehensibility, that alterity is essentially epistemic rather than ethical. The alterity that Levinas is eyeing, on the other hand, is not infinite because my powers of comprehension are

limited, but because “understanding” is not even the register in which proximity to the Other is to be had. As such, the complexity of a robot is not the road to infinite alterity. However, there are others who do not base their Levinasian roboethics on our imperfect ability for comprehension. For example, Gunkel [47] focuses on the idea that “Levinasian philosophy [...] does not make prior commitments or decisions about who or what will be considered a legitimate moral subject. For Levinas, it seems, *anything* that faces the I and calls its ipseity into question would be Other and would constitute the site of ethics” [47, p. 179, emphasis added]. Based in part on this radical interpretation of Levinas, he concludes that it is time that we seriously reconsider whether some technological others should be moral patients [47,48]. However, even if we were to grant Gunkel that it is possible *in principle* that (sex) robots could be Others in the full Levinasian sense of the word (a conclusion that would require us agreeing with his radicalization of Levinas), most will probably not be. However, would the latter be a problem for the possibility of sexbots eliciting empathic responses? Do robots really need to be so “humanlike”, so infinitely Other, or so technologically advanced for them be able to call us into question? Maybe not.

Coeckelbergh [49] is skeptical of the idea that robots could be infinite Others; a skepticism I share. And yet he grants the possibility that, in relating to them, they can be sufficiently other to make us question “our epistemological and moral egocentrism and solipsism, that deprives us of an openness and a curiosity that would enable us to be sensitive to the appearance of others” [49, p. 74]. But how is this possible if they are not infinitely Other? Once again, postphenomenology provides an answer. In articulating alterity relations (see Section 4) Ihde recognized that technologies, even though they are not Others in that full Levinasian sense, can exhibit a sort of “quasi-otherness” [27]. *Interactive* technologies tend to extend this quasi-otherness further than others, as they appear to also demand responses from their users. In her postphenomenological analysis of cell phones, Wellner [50] showed how this “demand” for a response constitutes a technological *quasi-face*, which “acts like a face that requires a response, but is not a face” [50, p. 311]. Rather, it refers to the way a technology appeals to me and invites me to react, respond, and relate to it in a way that shares at least some concrete characteristics with responses to human (or possibly animal) others. And while this does not require the technology to look or act very human-like per se (Wellner's discovers the quasi-face in cell phones), it nevertheless rings especially true for robots. Whether

talking about a relatively simple companion robot like PARO, a social robot like Pepper, or a sex robot like Harmony, they all elicit responses from us that resemble those that would be addressed at living others. In the case of sex robots, the brunt of the interaction is of course rather specific: it invites sexual intercourse. However, as Wellner explains, the quasi-face does not transcend the ontological toward the ethical. Eliciting a response is not the same as calling to responsibility. As such, even if sex robots have a quasi-face, that does not preclude the sexbot from eliciting a (sexual) relation that focuses solely on the needs and wants of the user, treats the sexual partner as an object, and is completely asymmetrical. If so, and if one's moral subjectivity is indeed diminished by cultivating this specific kind of sexual subjectivity that enjoys and desires this, then CASR's worries are plausible in light of – rather than in spite of – sexbots' specific alterity.

Nevertheless, while a sexbot's quasi-face need not call one to responsibility, it most probably *could*. Bergen and Verbeek [35] describe how even relatively banal, technologically simple and non-humanoid others like productivity apps can actually call one to responsibility. They can do so, not because they are infinitely Other but simply because they have ways to *confront* the user. Indeed, analogous to the way in which the infinitely Other confronts the ego and calls it to responsibility (as described in Section 5), confrontation is also the mechanism through which a finite, technological other can question a user's egoism, induce shame, and motivate them to better their ways. It can do so because, as explained above, the subject is always already structured as responsibility by its confrontation with human Others and, by virtue of that fact, vulnerable to confrontation by technological others [35]. Through confrontation, then, the technological other can not only elicit a response but also call a user to responsibility.

With this, at least two relevant aspects of a sex robot's alterity have been identified. First, following Levinas, there is its aesthetic quality that is supposed to induce (sexual) desire. Then further postphenomenological reflections identified the sexbot's quasi-face by which it invites sexual interactions based on that desire; interactions that may, however, still be morally undesirable. In other words, a sexbot only exhibiting these aspects of alterity would still be ill-equipped for calling its user to responsibility. To overcome this problem, confrontation was proposed as a mechanism through which sexbots could also call their users to responsibility instead of simply inviting sexual interactions. However, the relevance of such confrontation for the case of sexbots and

the problem of moral degradation is questionable, as the following section explains.

6.3 Why current Levinasian roboethics will not work, or the peculiarity of Eros

As explained above, (sex) robots could engage our moral subjectivity either by being sufficiently other to warrant moral consideration [47,48] or “merely” by having a quasi-face that invites responsible behavior. However, both possibilities would appear to be incompatible with what we want from a sex robot. That is, these approaches to roboethics rely (in line with Levinas' account of subjectivity) on confrontation, the fundamental questioning of the subject's right to its enjoyment, the frustration of its gratification, and/or the induction of (moral) shame. They do so because the interhuman relation they emulate is a *social* one (cf. Bottenberg's robot interviews above), where the ego is *confronted* by the Other across a world that the subject enjoys but the Other might need. This could hardly be more different from the purpose of sexbots whose use – at least at its best – is supposed to be *enjoyable* rather than confronting and shameful, and where the world fades into the background of one's enjoyment of the robot other. Current sex robots may have a quasi-face, but not one that questions my enjoyment of it, instead inviting the user to enjoy it even more. Indeed, they are built to appeal first and foremost to that other stratum of our subjectivity: the enjoying ego. They entice the egoistic, sensual undercurrents of our subjectivity rather than its responsible structure. In so doing, they invite the user to be for-itself rather than for-the-other.

Of course, one could object to these worries by asking whether this is so different from interhuman sexuality? After all, do people not also engage in sexual relations with one another looking for enjoyment and gratification? Indeed, when it comes to appealing to our egoistic rather than our responsible inclinations, is sex with these robots so very different from its interhuman counterpart? And thus, if these people can reasonably avoid turning others into objects for their own sexual desire and enjoyment outside of the bedroom, why would we not expect the same from sexbot users? However, this analogy would only work if interhuman sex was simply about the gratification of one's own needs, where the human partner “materializes” solely as an object for the satisfaction of one's own sexual enjoyment. The implications of this perspective would be alarming, since that would mean that interhuman sex is necessarily a relationship of “possession and power” [37, p. 88], as CASR fears it could become. Instead, there are less “minimalistic” accounts of

interhuman sex we can rely on to identify relevant differences. One such account is offered by Levinas himself. In his phenomenology of Eros (i.e., passionate love), he shows how the erotic relationship “is impossible to translate into powers and must not be so translated, if one does not want to distort the meaning of the situation” [37, p. 88]. Indeed, neither confrontation nor solitary enjoyment suffice to characterize Eros. It requires its own analysis: “one must recognize its exceptional place among relationships” [37, p. 88].

7 Aspects of a phenomenology of Eros

Levinas repeatedly returned to the theme of Eros throughout his writings. Most elaborately investigated in *Totality & Infinity* and in *Time and the Other*, his account of Eros explicitly refuses the typical account of love as fusion (exemplified by Aristophanes’ position in the *Symposium*) [37, p. 90]. Importantly, his account also substantially differs from the type of eros commonly invited by current sexbots, i.e., sexual intercourse aimed first and foremost at the one-sided fulfillment of the user’s sexual needs and wants, where the sexbot functions as an object subsumed in the user’s desire.¹¹ Instead, Levinas’ phenomenology of Eros describes how, even in the heat of the moment, in the enjoyment that characterizes the sexual encounter, ethical alterity is not erased and one’s responsibility for the Other remains ever-present. With this, Levinas draws out an important connection between Eros and moral subjectivity in the face (and arms) of the Other, a connection that could be informative in thinking about responsible ways of doing sexbots.

However, before presenting some of the central characteristics of Levinas’ phenomenology of Eros, some words of caution and clarification are in order. Below, I present a description of Eros based on Levinas’ reflections on the matter. However, selective omissions for the sake of thematic practicality risk obscuring possibly problematic features of Levinas’ account,

¹¹ This type of Eros also has a place in Plato’s *Symposium* in the form of common love (*Eros Pandemos*). Interestingly, in the context of the argument from moral degradation, Pausanias (who indirectly introduces it to the dialogue) says that it is the “love” felt by meaner men, that it only desires to achieve an end, and in doing so would do good or evil indiscriminately while being aroused by women and boys. The parallels with CASR’s worries about the objectification of women and children as well as with the argument from moral degradation are palpable.

features that are central to CASR’s case against sex robots. That is, Levinas’ work has itself been the subject of extensive feminist criticism, especially concerning his treatment of gender and sexuality.

Despite Levinas’ indications that the feminine is not inferior to the masculine [51,52] and does not simply refer to empirical women, some have rightly remained apprehensive of his preoccupation with sexual difference and the gendered nature of his philosophical language. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir already criticized Levinas for what she saw as the male gaze and privilege inherent in his description of the “feminine” Other [53, p. 6]. Likewise, commenting on “Totality and Infinity”, Derrida noted that it “pushes the respect for dissymmetry so far that it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. Its philosophical subject is man” [54, pp. 320–321]. More recent critics have also argued that Levinas’ use of gendered language (e.g., of a virile subject faced by a mysterious, vulnerable, and feminine other) remains problematic, even when read metaphorically [55]. Nevertheless, some have still sought value in Levinas’ phenomenology of Eros. There are those who have taken Levinas’ ingenuousness as an inescapably male phenomenologist to hold potential because being that explicit about the gendered aspects of his analysis amounts to opening up the gender problematic, inviting the reader to engage with it in novel ways [56,57] or to recognize the importance of the feminine for responsibility and ethics [58].¹² There are also those who read Levinas even more charitably and – while still recognizing the risk of essentialization inherent to gendered language – interpret his gendered account as describing different existential registers, ways of being, that any-body could perform in Eros (and beyond). Responding to Irigaray’s critique of Levinas [59], Podolsky offers an explicitly Queer reading of Levinas’ take on Eros: “Irigaray is outraged, because she seems to accept Levinas’ schema on the gendered terms that he offers it. It does not occur to her the possibility that Lover [masculine subject] and Beloved [feminine Other] are positions that may be assumed by anyone of any gender” [60, p. 65], basically accusing her and many other critics of reading Levinas in too hermeneutically “straight” a manner [61]. And indeed, if not in his early writings, then in his later thought, Levinas endorses a similar position:

¹² This coincides with Levinas’ position in *Time and the Other* where he says that he does “not want to ignore the legitimate claims of the feminism that presupposes all the acquired attainments of civilization” [37, p. 86], before explaining the importance of the mystery of the feminine for understanding the way erotic relations remain interwoven with being-for-the-other.

“ontological differences between the masculine and the feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species (or into two genders), they would signify that the participation in the masculine and in the feminine were the attribute of every human being” [62, p. 68]. Thus, on this view, men and women (and others) can be both Lover and Beloved for the other, which simultaneously helps to mitigate some concern over the apparent heteronormativity of Levinas’ gendered analyses.

In my reading of Eros below, I assume the latter perspective on Levinas’ analysis. Not only does this allow for understanding Eros as reciprocal (but not symmetrical) between lovers, but it also opens up the analysis to non-male users of sex robots and offers a richer and more dynamic view of sexual engagement. Nevertheless, as noted above, my description is also severely limited. For one, it does not discuss the themes of time, fecundity, virginity, maternity, domesticity, and other themes that Levinas connects to Eros. Moreover, Levinas describes lovemaking specifically as between two people, thereby disregarding less conservative possibilities, some of which are themselves facilitated by novel sex technologies [63]. And lastly, it cannot possibly claim to capture all experiences of sexuality and has no ambition to do so. However, it will hopefully suffice to further substantiate the argument from moral degradation by showing how subjectivity, responsibility, and our experience of sexual partners are intimately connected.¹³

7.1 A character sketch of Eros¹⁴

Levinas admits that Eros includes “the possibility of enjoying the Other” [36, p. 255]. But how would we even think this possible on a Levinasian account? Does the infinitely Other not confront me and *question* my enjoyment rather than being an object of it? Is a relation with the Other, even an erotic one, not a failure of enjoyment? According to Levinas, “the answer is yes, if one adopts the terminology of current descriptions, if one wants to characterize the erotic by ‘grasping,’ ‘possessing,’ or ‘knowing.’ *But there is nothing of all*

this, or the failure of all this, in eros” [37, p. 90, emphasis added]. So the enjoyment that Levinas encounters in Eros is of an altogether different kind than the egoistic enjoyment described in his account of subjectivity above. Levinas calls this specifically “erotic” enjoyment *voluptuousness*.

So what is different about voluptuousness? For one, it is “not a pleasure like the others, because it is not solitary like eating or drinking”¹⁵ [37, p. 89]. Instead, “[v]oluptuousness, as the coinciding of the lover and the beloved, is charged by their duality” [36, p. 270], a duality that is persistent because Eros “does not *ipso facto* neutralize alterity but preserves it [...] The other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us” [37, p. 86]. That is, the relation between sexual partners in Eros is neither objectifying nor a fusion. Second, voluptuousness has a different character from its solitary counterpart. Whereas the pleasure of, say, eating is “peaceful and simple” because it involves “a return to oneself, in a univocal and present world” (i.e., it results in satisfaction), voluptuousness “is the pursuit of an ever richer promise; it is made up of an ever growing hunger which pulls away from every being. There is no goal, no end in view” [64, pp. 43–44].¹⁶

These differences are due to the peculiar way in which the Beloved, the Other in Eros, presents itself and is experienced:

[t]he epiphany of the Beloved is but one with her regime of tenderness [...], an extreme fragility, a vulnerability. [...] a “non-signifying” and raw density [...] that] designates the exhibitionist nudity of an exorbitant presence coming as though from farther than the frankness of the face, already profaning and wholly profaned, as if it had forced the interdiction of a secret. [36, p. 256]

Indeed, the Other presents itself in tenderness, and yet in immodesty, with an “exhibitionist nudity” that is not the nudity encountered by “the doctor who examines the nudity of the patient” [36, p. 257] but rather the one appearing “in repulsion and desire” [36, p. 74]. As such, the Lover is confronted with an equivocation or simultaneity of frailty and desire; a non-signifying, exhibitionist nudity

¹³ Despite Levinas framing his account as a criticism of “contemporary pansexualism” in *Time and the Other*, I believe this “distilled” account can be productively applied to non-romantic, non-recurring, or non-traditional sexual engagements, like one-night stands or polyamorous relationships.

¹⁴ Levinas’ use of language when describing Eros is quite specific. It emanates a peculiar sensibility on top of making the necessary distinctions. To preserve some of this sensibility, I cite generously from the source material.

¹⁵ While Levinas presents a variety of things we can enjoy, the archetype of his general account of enjoyment lies in the gustatory pleasures.

¹⁶ Levinas anticipates criticism of his position in terms of sexual gratification: “[t]here is nothing comparable in this fall [i.e., voluptuousness] with satiety, whatever we may say when we put what is involved in love in economic categories, along with appetites and needs” [64, p. 44].

that Levinas calls the *feminine*, which is a *mysterious* phenomenon because:

The feminine presents a face that goes beyond the face. The face of the beloved does not express the secret that Eros profanes; it ceases to express [...] In the feminine face the purity of expression is already troubled by the equivocation of the voluptuous. [36, p. 260]

This equivocation in the feminine does not leave the Lover untouched. Instead, it invites a movement that, “neither pure compassion nor impassiveness, indulges in compassion”¹⁷ [36, p. 257]. However, this indulgence does not mean that the feminine is simply “a thing for the taking”. Levinas states that while it invites “disrespect for what exhibits itself in immodesty and is not discovered despite the exhibition [...], *disrespect presupposes the face*. [...] It is necessary that the face have been apperceived for nudity to be able to acquire the non-signifyingness of the lustful” [36, p. 262, emphasis added].¹⁸ This primacy of the face is why the feminine presents a “face that goes beyond the face”.

However, this means that, just as the face of the Other is beyond (and resists) our grasp, voluptuousness is characterized by an enjoyment that never reaches the Other at which it aims. It instead “discovers the hidden as hidden. An exceptional relation is thus accomplished [...]: the discovered does not lose its mystery in the discovery” [36, p. 260]. As a consequence, voluptuousness is characterized by “an essential and insatiable hunger [...] The burning bush that feeds the flames is not consumed” [37, p. 43], which is why it “is not only impatient, but is impatience itself, breathes impatience and chokes with impatience, surprised by its end, for it goes without going to an end” [36, p. 260]. This impossibility of discovering that at which voluptuousness aims is reflected in its corporeality,

¹⁷ The original French for this phrase read “... se complaint dans la compassion ...”. I do not believe that Levinas’ sudden use of the term “compassion” is accidental. In *totality and infinity*, he only uses it when discussing Eros. It is likely another symbol of the equivocal nature of Eros, where the frailty, the tenderness of the Other invites compassion, while its immodesty invites passion (insofar as the two are strictly separable), which the Lovers indulge in *together*, a *com*-passion.

¹⁸ To be sure, Levinas is not advocating treating partners disrespectfully. He is merely indicating that in enjoying the Other in voluptuousness, the Lover is not faced with the infinite alterity of the Beloved, not because the former has objectified the latter but because the latter has ceased expressing itself as such in immodesty. As such, enjoying the Other *in Eros* can never be the result of objectification, because if it was, that enjoyment would not be voluptuous and thus not erotic (in Levinas’ sense of the terms).

i.e., in the *caress*, which is different from the grasp in that it does not “seek to dominate a hostile freedom, to make of it its object or extort from it a consent” [36, p. 258]. Instead, in the caress, “there is the admission that access is impossible, violence fails, possession is refused” [64, p. 43]. It embodies desire for the feminine Other in a way that aims beyond satisfaction. As such, the caress always transcends the sensible. And yet, it also undeniably engages in the sensible, in contact.¹⁹ And in this contact of the skin, there is the possibility of enjoyment. However, such enjoyment operates as sensibility, as itself a vulnerability (see Section 5). It is exactly this vulnerability in enjoyment on the part of both Lover and Beloved that opens up the possibility of a dynamic reciprocity²⁰ or alternation in Eros, oscillating “from grasping to being grasped, like in the ambiguity of a kiss. It reverts from the activity of being a hunter of images to the passivity of being prey, from being aim to being wound” [38, p. 75]. Indeed, the Lover is also subject to the love of the Other: “[t]here is in the erotic relationship a characteristic reversal of the subjectivity issued from position, a reversion of the virile and heroic” [36, p. 270], and it “finds itself the self of an other: its pleasure, its pain is pleasure over the pleasure of the other or over his pain” [36, p. 272]. With this, we can now see that voluptuousness, the enjoyment typical to Eros, “aims not at the Other but at his voluptuousness; it is voluptuousness of voluptuousness, love of the love of the other. [...] I love fully only if the Other loves me, not because I need the recognition of the Other, but because my voluptuousness delights in his voluptuousness” [36, p. 266].

7.2 Lessons in Eros

With Levinas’ account of Eros in mind, it becomes clear why current Levinasian roboethics will not do for sexbots: “[t]he relationship established between lovers in voluptuousness [...] is the very contrary of the social

¹⁹ This sense of contact in the caress is to be read as always falling short of the beyond that the caress seeks, sensible but never *fully* realized: “[b]ut what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks” [37, p. 89].

²⁰ Levinas does not use the word “reciprocity” when discussing Eros, likely out of fear that it would imply thinking the lovers in terms of sameness, cf. “[i]n political life, taken unrebuked, humanity is understood from its works – a humanity of interchangeable men, of reciprocal relations” [36, p. 298]. However, in light of our reading the “masculine” and “feminine” as registers that could be taken up by anybody, I hope it conveys the dynamic back and forth with which that could occur.

relation” [36, pp. 264–265]. Despite that, the Other’s alterity is preserved in voluptuousness, even if it is profaned in immodesty. This means that Levinas’ account of voluptuousness in the erotic relation does not resemble the “egoistic” enjoyment one would likely have with current sexbots. For one, the Lover enjoys but does not objectify the Beloved. Second, rather than being singularly focused on the needs and want of the user, voluptuousness rejoices in the other’s voluptuousness. And finally, Eros is not defined by an asymmetry in terms of power. While it is admittedly asymmetrical, it disavows power as formative, since “[n]othing is further from Eros than possession. [...] Voluptuousness would be extinguished in possession” [36, p. 265].

So what does it offer instead? For one, it offers an Eros-specific account of enjoyment in the form of voluptuousness. This voluptuousness is only possible because the face is presupposed and thus is not in and of itself morally problematic (as the “egoistic” enjoyment of the Other *would* be). Second, it shows how intertwined Eros is with vulnerability. The Other is vulnerable in its frailty and its nakedness. The subject is vulnerable in its sensibility. However, since voluptuousness is only possible because the Other temporarily ceases critical expression (one could say it “hides”), this also implies that it can recommence this expression at any time during the erotic engagement. The subject’s responsibility for the Other is never gone, only ever suspended by the Other’s immodesty.²¹ In other words, the Lover is also *ethically* vulnerable, since the resurfacing of the Other’s face would immediately question the former’s right to its enjoyment, even in Eros. And finally, the embodied realization of Eros is the caress, which is not a grasp but a searching that breeds more desire, simply because it never arrives at the Other for which it aims. The contact that is thus established, a contact of skin on skin, signifies the vulnerability of the subject to the enjoyment by the Other. On our reading of Levinas’ phenomenology of Eros, it even opens up the erotic encounter to a dynamic reciprocity and alternation of roles.

So how do these lessons inform our reading of CASR’s worries about sex robots, the *argument from moral degradation*? First, they support the idea that interhuman Eros is indeed substantially different from sex with (current) robots because the Other’s infinite alterity is preserved in the former (profanation still presupposes the face), while it

was never present in the latter because of robots’ finite alterity. Second, they provide the link between sex and moral subjectivity necessary to substantiate the argument from moral degradation. One’s responsibility for the Other and the (sexual) enjoyment of the Other are deeply linked on this account; “Eros is possible only between faces” [65, p. 174]. As such, there is no strict distinction between sexual and moral subjectivity, and an “egoistic”, objectifying approach of the Other could well translate into non-erotic, social contexts. Lastly, it inspires opportunities for engaging premise 1 of the argument from moral degradation, i.e., it offers a new perspective on erotic relations that future sexbots can be designed to emulate. However, the question remains how that could be done, something the next section briefly explores.

8 Better design for better lovers?

Premise 0 of the argument from moral degradation states that “current and projected sex robots invite a specific way of sexually engaging with them”. This may be true of many if not all sexbots designs. However, that does not mean that they *necessarily* invite the kind of sexual engagements described in premise 1: ones that are objectifying and purely aimed at the user’s need satisfaction (as would likely be the case if sexbots are simply tailored to their users’ desires). Instead, we may be able to design for “erotic” sex robots in a more Levinasian sense of that word. Of course, the interactions such robots invite would still aim for sexual pleasure. They are sex robots, after all. However, instead of fixating on one-sided gratification, the pleasure that these new robots would be designed to arouse should be more akin to reciprocal Levinasian voluptuousness, a very different order of sexual pleasure. In turn, this would hopefully result in generating fewer and less egoistic subjects.

Of course, this is not without difficulty. Voluptuousness depends on alterity being preserved, not simply succumbing to the will of the Lover.²² But the robot does not have a true face to profane to begin with (unless we assume with Gunkel that robots could be infinitely Other). It only has a quasi-face, and the sole mechanism by which technological quasi-faces have been shown to invite some responsibility centers around

²¹ This does not mean that “anything goes,” but simply that one gains fiat to join the Other in enjoying one another, rejoicing in each other’s voluptuousness.

²² This implies that the interactions with the sex robot would have to emulate voluptuousness and thus that the sex robot should exhibit some of the “feminine” qualities that Levinas discusses (in the sense of the existential register we take Levinas to be referring to). However, that does not mean that the sex robot must therefore *only* and *always* act like the “feminine” Beloved (see footnote 20).

confrontation. Could a quasi-face that would normally call for responsibility but, instead of confronting, “hides” in immodesty even be designed? Or should we just try to achieve similar results by other means? The answer to this question cannot be fully answered here. Nevertheless, some relatively “simple” yet imperfect solutions inspired by Levinas’ phenomenology or Eros are discussed below.

For example, sexbot designers could be inspired by the vulnerability involved in Eros. One way would be to make robots vulnerable, either by making them artificially frail/fragile or by giving them the ability to react to “painful” input as well. The former solution is simple, but risks turning sex with robots into a frustrating and vigilant game with little else to lose than the time necessary to reassemble and start over. The latter one would provide a more “ethical” form of resistance but does not disallow engaging in one-sided, possibly even violent sexual encounters. In those cases, it could even aggravate the problem CASR worries about because users might become additionally desensitized to expressions of pain. However, one could also be inspired by the vulnerability of the user, either in terms of an alternation of sexual initiative or by appealing to their moral vulnerability. To have the user undergo either the virtual “voluptuousness” or the expression of a “no” would serve to make the sexual engagement less one-sided or guaranteed.

Designers could also try to emulate the profanation of the Other, the “hiding” of the face by embedding the robot in a larger context that is not purely sexual. The robot could have a confronting quasi-face in a non-sexual context and subsequently retract those forms of expression in a sexual one. Of course, one should then also keep the possibility for that confronting quasi-face to resurface during its intended use.

Another option would be to try and design for the possibility of a sort of “quasi-caress”, a technological emulation of the interhuman caress that never arrives at the Other for which it aims. One way in which this might be emulated through design is by having the robot react (whether through motion, sound, or visual cues) to its artificial “skin” being touched in ways that would result in the need to change plans, to adjust, to be led in new directions during sex with the robot; reactions that invite an engagement that keeps the user searching for how to engage the robot well and that simulates the reciprocal nature of voluptuousness.

Lastly, when combined with some of the postphenomenological insights explored in this article, these options prompt the question of how closely sex robots designed for Eros really need to resemble human bodies and the way they move in order to invite “erotic” interactions.

As presented in Section 4, Danaher [34] proposed that human-like movement or behavior is an essential feature of sex robots. However, what exactly constitutes “human-like” here remained undefined. However, given that the quasi-face as developed by Wellner [50] does not require technological others to be very humanlike to elicit responses and interaction, and that non-humanoid technologies like productivity apps can call one to responsibility [35], I take the extent to which sex robots can deviate from exactly mimicking human movement, behavior, and form to be an open question. Of course, the sex robot’s “expressions” (visually, auditory, and/or physically) have to be apprehensible to its human user if the robot is to serve as a sort of “erotic” sexual partner, but I see no *a priori* reason to reject the possibility of designing other kinds of robot bodies (e.g., with more abstract shapes and/or different colors and textures) that could still have the expressive capabilities to elicit less one-sided sexual engagements.²³

These recommendations may be both imperfect and incomplete, but they nevertheless demonstrate the potential for designing sexbots otherwise, according to a different regime: one of Eros rather than gratification.²⁴ And this possibility should assuage some of the worries of CASR and those who share them, since it has the potential to make the class of sex robots that trigger the argument from moral degradation significantly smaller. As a consequence, we could come to a point where we should not campaign against all sex robots, but only some of them; a position that is compatible with the conclusion of the argument from moral degradation.²⁵

²³ This section prompts the question of whether less humanoid sexbots could soften concerns about the objectification of women and children specifically, since such sex robots could be designed to have fewer humanlike and gendered signifiers. I recognise that this might pose a problem for the *prima facie* “attractiveness” of a sex robot, but I do not think that one necessarily *has* to be attracted to the robot outside of the sexual act to be able to enjoy the robot as a sexual “partner” during it.

²⁴ I am not claiming that current sexbots cannot react to touch and other inputs from users. However, this would not be enough to emulate Eros. If the robot’s reactions are aimed at user gratification, solely toward the confirmation of their needs and wants, the resulting enjoyment would still be egoistic. And this would include selecting a “vulnerable” sexbot setting when that would appeal to the user’s appetite of the day.

²⁵ To do this responsibly, one might consider the introduction of new types of sexbot as a sort of social experiment with concomitant ethical guidelines [6,66], as proposed by Danaher [11].

9 Conclusion

This article engaged with criticisms put forward by the CASR, which worries about increased objectification of women (and children) if sex robot use were to become normal. It discussed two current readings of this argument: one as an argument from analogy and one from symbolic consequences. Neither of these genuinely engage with a central point made by CASR: that a decrease in empathy is likely to result from the use of sex robots. As such, the article proposed a novel reading of CASR as making an *argument from moral degradation*. This version of the argument was then fleshed out using insights from postphenomenology and the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas.

The former shows that it is at least *prima facie* plausible that technological artifacts like sex robots can have profound effects on our moral subjectivity and that the alterity relations users have with sexbots are central to these effects. Importantly, however, *one alterity relation is not like the other* when it comes to the development of moral subjectivity. On the one hand, Levinas' phenomenology indicates that there is indeed a close link between alterity and responsibility and between responsibility and subjectivity. On the other hand, the alterity he discusses is clearly different than the one encountered in current sexbots. This highlighted a problem: neither the standard reading of Levinas nor the work of his more recent roboethical and/or postphenomenological proponents can be directly applied to the case of sexbots because the confrontation with alterity so central to the *social relation* they take as a point of departure seems *antithetical* to the enjoyable, close interactions in sexual encounters, including ones with sexbots.

The gap between these two was conceptually bridged through Levinas' phenomenology of Eros, which served a double purpose. First, it described the intimate connection between passionate lovemaking, enjoyment in the form of voluptuousness and responsibility; a connection current sexbot designs are not usually designed to emulate. This also indicated that on this Levinasian account, a strict distinction between sexual and moral subjectivity (the possibility of which was left open in premise 2 of the argument from moral degradation) would be spurious. Second, while we may not (yet) be able to build robots that can have a face capable of profanation, Levinas' account of Eros can serve as inspiration for *designing future sexbots* in ways that seek to avoid the asinine dynamic described in the argument from moral degradation.

Finally, what can we conclude from the above for CASR's case against sex robots? First of all, there is at least some philosophical support for the link between the use of

specific technologies and moral subjectivity that CASR implies (although this support should be subject to empirical investigation). Likewise, the Levinasian account presented supports campaign against sex robots claim that a less one-sided relationship is necessary for developing empathy. Second, the ambiguous phenomenology of Eros and the enjoyment of the Other provide support for the idea that sex robots warrant investigation and scrutiny beyond that given to many other technologies. And finally, the question should not simply be whether we should campaign against sex robots or not. Rather, we could first ask what kind(s) of sex robots we may or may not want, since there is potential to design for less objectifying human-sexbot relations.²⁶

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²⁶ Of course, I remain skeptical about the extent to which free market structures could incentivize the responsabilization of sex robot design. Regulation might be necessary [5,11]. Still, those practical hurdles should not suppress the recognition that such responsabilization is indeed possible, at least in principle.

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