

# Sex robots for older adults with disabilities: reply to critics

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In 'Nothing to Be Ashamed of: Sex Robots for Older Adults with Disabilities,'<sup>1</sup> I make the case that the unwanted absence of sex from a person's life represents not just a loss of physical pleasure, but a loss of dignity. Since people aged 65 and over suffer disproportionately from disabilities that impair sexual functioning, I focus on this population. Drawing on an analysis of dignity developed at greater length elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> I argue that sex robots can help older adults with disabilities and that societies ought to take reasonable steps to make them available to this population. Unlike other assistive technologies, robots invite human-robot relationships and can form close connections with older adults.<sup>3</sup> In response to the proposal, four commentators have introduced objections that I address below.

Sorell<sup>4</sup> argues that people who are young and able-bodied may wish for sex in their lives too and its absence may be a bigger concern for them than for older people. In reply, while my focus is older adults with disabilities that impair sexual function, I also acknowledge that loss of sexual function can occur at any age as can the absence of a sexual partner. I cite China's sex imbalance in the aftermath of the one-child policy to illustrate and note that the paper has unexplored implications. Sorell also argues that sex for pleasure and intimacy has value across species. In reply, nothing in my argument hinges on sex for pleasure and intimacy being unique to human beings. Last, Sorell doubts that affiliation applies to human-machine interactions because it 'requires two' and there is only one. In response, it seems that Sorell assumes that affiliation requires not just 'two' but 'two humans,' but that is an open question. I argue that humans can affiliate with non-humans, including non-human animals, robotic pets, humanoid robots, and, if they exist, space aliens and angels. While these affiliations differ from human-human ones, they still qualify as affiliations.

Boni-Saenz<sup>5</sup> raises the concern that sex robots are insufficient to meet the range of human sexual needs because what people most want out of sex is not sexual relationships, as I claim, but sexual relationships with

another human being. In response, I leave it open to those who seek sexual relationships to define their sexual identities and the kinds of relationships they seek. Boni-Saenz raises the further concern that if sex robots are insufficient, it stands to reason that society should find other means to meet threshold sexual needs for older people and asks if that might include prostitutes. In reply, I argue that sex robots can be enough for many end users and will only get better in the future as technology advances. Even if sex robots were not enough, it does not follow that prostitution should be substituted. As I note in the paper, the advantage of sex robots is that they can meet sexual needs without violating the rights of any other person.

Bianchi<sup>6</sup> addresses the sexual needs and desires of people with dementia and recommends a sexual advance directive, whereby an individual documents their preferences regarding sex robots while they have decisional capacity and these preferences would apply in the event that they lose decision-making capacity. While I welcome this suggestion, a sexual advance directive should not be the sole determinative factor, but one consideration among others in decision making for people with dementia. Elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> I discuss the limitations of advance directives for older persons with dementia in greater detail. Bianchi also recommends confirming that people with dementia have sufficient capacity to distinguish sex robots from human sex partners before offering sex robots. In reply, the capability argument I present implies that even if users lack decisional capacity, sex robots could nonetheless support other central human capabilities, such as capacities to be healthy, have bodily integrity, express human emotions, and affiliate.

Sparrow<sup>7</sup> holds that sex robots (1) offer masturbation, not sexual relationships; (2) are expensive and unsophisticated; (3) engender false beliefs, which is disrespectful; and (4) provide simulated sexual relationships that are tantamount to simulated rape, which is ethically objectionable. In reply to (1), sex robots differ from other assistive devices because they can create the sense that we are in the company of others. In reply to (2), I share the view that currently available sex robots are expensive

and unsophisticated. They tilt towards users who are young, able-bodied, heterosexual and male. Rather than rejecting them on this basis, I propose designing them differently. In reply to (3), it is possible to have meaningful relationships with robots without holding false beliefs about them. Even if it were not possible, truth may be a less weighty value in old age compared with other values, such as having human relationships that one anticipates and enjoys. In reply to (4), calling relationships with robots 'simulated' assumes that the yardstick for measuring our relationships with robots must be our relationships with humans. An alternative view holds that sex robots are a different kind of thing altogether and what they offer is a different kind of relationship. It follows that sex with a robot represents not simulated human sex, but sex with a robot.

In conclusion, supporting someone's ability to be sexual is part of respecting their identity and dignity as a person. Rather than leaving older people who struggle with impaired sexual functioning to fend for themselves, societies should take reasonable steps to help.

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