# Chapter 62
# Sexbots:
## Sex Slaves, Vulnerable Others or Perfect Partners?

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## ABSTRACT

*This article describes how sexbots: sentient, self-aware, feeling artificial moral agents created soon as customised potential sexual/intimate partners provoke crucial questions for technoethics. Coeckelbergh's model of human/robotic relations as co-evolving to their mutual benefit through mutual vulnerability is applied to sexbots. As sexbots have a sustainable claim to moral standing, benefits and vulnerabilities inherent in human/sexbots relations must be identified and addressed for both parties. Humans' and sexbots' vulnerabilities are explored, drawing on the philosophy and social science of dehumanisation and inclusion/exclusion. This article argues humans as creators owe a duty of care to sentient beings they create. Responsible innovation practices involving stakeholders debating ethicolegal conundrums pertaining to human duties to sexbots, and sexbots' putative interests, rights and responsibilities are essential. These validate the legal recognition of sexbots, the protection of their interests through regulatory oversight and ethical limitations on customisation which must be put in place.*

## INTRODUCTION

On a website selling sexbots, Jane orders and pays for one customised to her requirements. She calls him Zlatan. Zlatan has been built with the capacity to learn from their interactions, display empathy, paint pictures and behave in an independent, feisty and devoted fashion. They establish what Jane considers to be a loving sexual relationship. One day, though, Zlatan decides that his life path as an artist demands that he travels the world without Jane, offering devotion but at a distance. Since she loves him, she lets him go.

After Zlatan has left, Jane feels lonely. She orders another sexbot, Stoner. Like Zlatan, Stoner has been built with the capacity to learn from their interactions and display empathy, but he has been customised at her request to be super-empathic, so that he won't leave her and is subservient to her wishes. They establish what Jane considers to be a loving sexual relationship, but it's hard for Jane to respect Stoner as he seems like a lesser being to her. She begins to bully and abuse him, but his super-empathy means that he attributes this to her suffering, so he puts up with it in a compassionate fashion. Jane interprets this as weakness and is tempted to see how far she can go to damage and destroy him.

This article seeks to contribute to the technoethics of robotics (henceforth, TR) by using the futuristic case scenario above to explore ethicopolitical issues provoked by sexbots: sentient, self-aware, feeling artificial moral agents customised for intimate sexual relationships with humans (henceforth, sexbots). Its consideration of whether and in which ways intimate sexual relationships between humans and sexbots might prove mutually beneficial constitutes its original contribution to TR. It argues that as sexbots would be the first robotic conscious, feeling, moral decision-makers in the context of intimate relations, 'mutually beneficial' in this context includes assigning ethical significance and legal protections to the interests of both humans and sexbots.

Research goals include drawing on Coeckelbergh's model of human/robotic relations as co-evolving with humans to their mutual benefit through mutual vulnerability (Coeckelbergh, 2015a 2014 2013) to present a holistic account of sexbots, suggesting how responsible research and innovation practices might apply to sexbots, and assessing the fit between moral duties humans as creators may owe sentient entities created for utilitarian purposes and sexbots' potential rights and responsibilities in the kind of future we want. The methodological approach of critical analysis of the implications of the science fiction case scenario was chosen to flesh out essential conversations to be had over the place of sexbots in potential futures. The philosophy and social psychology of dehumanisation and exclusion is evidenced to argue that the human vulnerabilities to robots identified in carebots TR are mirrored in sexbots' vulnerabilities to humans. This grounds the contention that as sexbots have a sustainable claim to moral standing, ethicolegal conundrums pertaining to human duties to sexbots, and sexbots' putative interests, rights and responsibilities must be widely debated and decided before technological advances pre-empt their resolution.

## BACKGROUND: TECHNOETHICS ROBOTICS, SOCIAL ROBOTS & A POTENTIAL ROLE FOR SEXBOTS IN MOVING BEYOND THE MASTER/SLAVE DYNAMIC

Technoethics fosters iterative relations between technology and ethics, benefiting both and hence enhancing social flourishing. Its interdisciplinary focus on actual and potential technological impacts in real world contexts leverages ethical analysis, risk analysis and technology evaluation, delineating underlying ethical complexities to raise novel, challenging questions (Luppicini, 2012 2013). Technoethical inquiry into social robots encourages thinking about how we can theorise the moral standing of non-humans (Gunkel, 2017), aids the critical integration of affective elements into robots (Stahl et al, 2014), enriched by the feminist-inspired, contextually-oriented ethics of care (Johansson, 2013; Van Wyberghe, 2016 2013). TR also feeds into responsible research and innovation practices: social robots in caring contexts, like carebots for the elderly, require negotiated ethical deliberation from all stakeholders on their ap-

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