



An Ethical Inquiry to Personhood as the Standard for Sexbot Ownership: A Response to S. Petersen

John Andrei E. Esguerra, Daniel Christopher L. Haduca,
and Jeulian Clarisse C. Manalo
De La Salle University Integrated School, Manila

Abstract: In the field of robot ethics, debates about sexbots, their personhood, and their moral status continue. To provide our stance in this debate, we ask the question: Is it unethical for sexbots to be owned? This paper responds to the claims of Steve Petersen's (2016) paper "Is it good for them too? Ethical concerns for the sexbots", where he argues that sexbots are not wronged for performing the functions they are designed for. We respond to this claim by arguing for John Danaher's Theory of Ethical Behaviorism (2020). If ethical behaviorism is correct in claiming that behavior is a sufficient ground for moral status ascription, we see sexbot ownership as unethical. We argue for our claim and show that the moral considerability of the sexbot could be proven under the standards given in our framework for ascribing moral status.

Key Words: ethics; robot ethics; robot servitude; sexbots; ethical behaviorism

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing prominence of artificial intelligence usage in media and technology has enabled a debate in robot ethics to persist. Starting from Turing's Turing Test (1950) to the Chinese room experiment (Searle, 1980), there has been growing interest to unravel the moral and ethical implications of the trend for both users and the machines (Headland, C.K., Teahan, W. J., & Cenydd, L., 2019).

This paper is a response to Petersen's 2016 paper which argues that sexbots are not being wronged by the virtue of their function. However, insofar granting sexbots their ethical significance by assuming their personhood, Petersen's arguments on "wronging" the sexbot were reliant on the sexbot's design. In this paper, we argue that assessing what wrongs the sexbot should be due to the ethical significance we grant them, in this case, personhood. First, we will establish that sexbots are persons following the framework of John Danaher's Ethical Behaviorism (2019). This framework suggests that it is permissible to grant moral consideration to entity X, an entity with no moral status, as long as it displays rough performative equivalence to entity Y, an entity with moral status. In effectively establishing that sexbots are persons, we disprove Petersen's arguments and conclude that sexbots may be wronged by virtue of their function, especially if it entails being owned.

2. A Review on Petersen's Arguments

In his 2016 paper "Is it good for them too? Ethical concerns for the sexbot", Petersen inquires whether sexbots are being wronged by virtue of their

function as a sexbot. He claims that sexbots are not being wronged by analyzing them under four assumed causes of how we may wrong the sexbot. Petersen (2016) also characterized sexbots as: (1) as ethically valuable & intelligent as humans; (2) sexbots can stimulate real pleasure; and (3) sexbots are persons.

The first asks whether we are wronging the sexbot when we design sex as a necessary pleasurable activity for them. Petersen (2016) claims we do not since sexbots do not have existing pleasures prior to their creation. Here, we agree with Petersen's implications of denying his claim, because if sexbots are wronged by their design for sex, then they can be wronged by any design which will not make their creation entirely possible.

The second asks whether fixing sex sexbots desires wrong them because they do not have access to other pleasures necessary for well-being. Petersen (2016) argues that if sexbots are specifically designed to find sex as the only necessary desire, then it sufficiently satisfies its well-being. We grant here that assessing their well-being according to design does not bear ethical concern if not for the ethical significance we assume they have. Since it is innate for a person to pursue other activities than sex for well-being, we will establish that Petersen's claim is wrong and that his concept of sexbot personhood is not consistent with the moral consideration he gives them.

The third assumed cause asks whether the sexbots are wronged for what it's desiring since according to Mill & Aristotle, a good life must pursue higher intellectual pleasure. He claims that if we design sexbots to engage all of its higher faculties in sex, they will still live a good life. However, we reject



this claim since the inquiry of what is a “good” life for a sexbot should be due to their ethical significance as persons and not in their design.

The fourth assumed cause asks that regardless of whether the sexbots live a good life, they may still be wronged if they are enslaved and owned. Petersen argues that allowing sexbots to function for sex does not wrong their autonomy since it is within the constraints of its design. However, while we agree that they are not being wronged if they function within the constraints of their design, should they be given the ethical status of personhood, the fact that they are owned and enslaved already wrongs them.

However, Petersen already claimed that there is no need to compare human lives to sexbot lives, and perhaps he also meant their personhood. Not unless Petersen establishes a clear distinction between sexbot personhood and human personhood, the objection runs valid. The approach we will take in arguing against Petersen is by establishing that sexbots are persons. Proven of their personhood, only then can we question the wrongness we do to sexbots on their ethical significance. The way that this claim will be established is by operating John Danaher’s (2020) Theory on Ethical Behaviorism.

3. On John Danaher’s Ethical Behaviorism

John Danaher (2020) claims in his Theory of Ethical Behaviorism that the performative artifice of entity X (an entity with no moral status) that is similar to entity Y (an entity with moral status) is a sufficient ground for that entity to be granted the same moral status ascription, compared to the conventional approach in which we question an entity’s moral status based on its qualities. Since these qualities are also mostly metaphysical, ethical behaviorism claims that we can only have access to this by observing behavior. It does not disprove the standard approach but rather sees the epistemic limits we have on the metaphysical qualities. Finally, this implicates behavior as a sufficient ground in evaluating the moral significance of an entity.

This provides us space to argue for the moral considerability of sexbots—especially those who behave like humans—in a different light, in the instance that they are owned. In this paper, we will also tackle the standards with what rough performative equivalence to humans will the sexbots need to surpass in order to be granted the same moral consideration.

4. Standards of Unethicality for Sexbot Ownership

In its essence, our argument is as follows:

- P1. It is unethical for persons to be owned.
- P2. Sexbots are persons.
- C1. Therefore, it is unethical for sexbots to be owned.

The first premise, taken *prima facie*, inquires on what it is with persons that make owning them unethical, and we examine whether it can be applied to sexbot persons. The second premise, following ethical behaviorism, will be established by imposing the standards of the rough performative equivalence sexbots must pass in order to be granted the personhood status. We conclude that if sexbot personhood is established, then it would be impermissible to own sexbots. This draws back to our main claim that sexbots are persons, thus their ownership is morally impermissible

4.1. Why is it unethical for persons to be owned?

Persons are granted supreme moral and ethical significance because they constitute complex metaphysical qualities, such as intelligence, exercised meaningfully by autonomously pursuing its desires for himself and his well-being. This is the reason why respect is due to their moral worth as persons. Humans, as the only entities so far to have the status of personhood, constitute these metaphysical qualities, and therefore their moral rights are treated with supreme moral significance. This is because they are persons, not simply because they are humans. May (1976) argues that a human can only become a person once he becomes encultured to the environment within which he trains all of his abilities to reach the complexity needed for personhood.

If what has been established is true, then the thrust of the following premise is coherent with this. Rather than examining the properties sexbots should have to qualify for moral significance, it might be correct to observe them the way they make themselves “meaningful persons.” This gives all the more reasons for us to accept ethical behaviorism as the framework for this argument.

4.2. Establishing that sexbots are persons

With the framework of ethical behaviorism overruling the argumentation, we are met with many dilemmas. While tempting to accept the theory first hand, we must ask first: what is the standard, and how are we going to determine whether a sexbot has enough characteristics to be considered an entity



deserving of moral status and patience? Danaher (2020) establishes that it is based on their rough performative equivalence, considering that ethical behaviorism argues performative artifice as sufficient to claim such moral status.

However, we acknowledge the speculations raised when establishing that of robot personhood. It is a common point of inquiry to question the standards set when establishing the robot as a person. We see the importance of this establishment, especially with the course of discussion and the issues surrounding robot ethics. More importantly, the problem becomes magnified when the robot in question is a sexbot, as it may so be compared to that of a human slave because of its utility and purpose.

We now come to a crucial part of our paper: the setting of standards as sufficient grounds for full moral status. As mentioned, there has been a rather lengthy discussion regarding this standard, as Petersen (2016) justified that sentience and intelligence are enough to grant it some kind of moral consideration. However, we fail to see this as an essential characteristic. With its purpose being to serve its human partner sexually, we see it fitting that one of the most critical standards one must consider when establishing robot personhood should instead be the robot's ability to engage in sexual acts.

Through this sole ground, we avoid many of the points that may be raised: On conscience, we avoid the issue of granting moral status to unconscious humans; On sentience and intelligence, we avoid the issue of moral status being granted to humans who are not sentient and are unintelligent. This goes by factual examples: the infant being that of the unconscious being and the animal being that of the unintelligent being, all still warranting themselves as beings with sufficient moral status, as a *prima facie* argument.

Thus, we reiterate Danaher's (2017) assertion: sex robots are indeed changing, and we must be prepared, as higher beings, to give them the considerability they deserve. These sexbots, rather these persons, are no other different than us beings exactly because their actions and our actions are one

4.3. The unethicity of owning sexbots

Jaworska, A., & Tannenbaum, J. (2013) established the idea of "incompletely realized sophisticated cognitive abilities" of robots as a standard for the personhood of robots. In that sense, they can improve and develop. Since the subjects do not comprehend the cognitively sophisticated activities at the moment, that does not mean they are void of personhood at the moment. This is compared to a child who is growing up or a dog who is being trained.

After all, sexbots are often modeled after

human beings, achieving hyperrealism within the competitive industry. These sexbots are also usually modeled to sell sex without any ethically implicating dilemmas, which means that the innovations made are to maximize profits. The manifestations of this are the aforementioned Turing Test. Since then, the lines have been blurred to the extent that we achieve a more realistic and pleasurable sexual partner. Therefore, their development, although made for profit, is development nonetheless. Our suggestion of personhood is consistent with the development of sexbots that Petersen supposes is a fact (Petersen 2016, p).

This consistency levels us in the framework that Petersen is operating upon, increasing the relevance of the analysis we are employing against his paper. The first and second premises have already proven the relevance of ethical behaviorism. It is logical to say that when the meaningfulness of one's personhood is removed, especially to an extent of mass-producing the person, they are at risk to have that meaningfulness further taken away. Moreover, since the development of sexbots will continue, it will also be increasing the likelihood of wronging the future, more sophisticated, and possibly more meaningful persons. Therefore, Petersen's case about performing "what they are purposed to do" is not consistent with the conclusion that sexbots can develop to be more sophisticated beings.

The relationship between human slavery and robot slavery asks now: what does it mean to remove a proportional amount of rights from the robot? It means eliminating these rights of a sexbot would also be parallel, to some extent, to that of removing the rights of humans. At least, what we mean by rights here are freedom and autonomy. This is clearly a concession that sexbots are not humans; however, sexbots deserve at the very least an extent of moral considerability to assess the most horrendous attack on personhood, slavery.

2. CONCLUSIONS

What has been established is a reply to Petersen's claims: there is no inherent wrong in designing sexbots and using them for their virtue. Here, we debunked the contradictions of his arguments especially upon acknowledging the future artificial capacities and ethical value of sexbots compared to humans, as well as concerning himself to caring whether the sexbots live a good life. If Ethical Behaviorism is correct, and it effectively establishes the sexbot's personhood, then it is wrong for the sexbot to be owned and to be used against its will to act—as future artificially sentient and intelligent beings—regardless if it is sexual or not since it violates what is contingent to its personhood; respect of its moral value.



On another note, perhaps it might be difficult to accept this argument because of anthropological biases. However, we need not run on this prejudice. We are living in a contemporary age where humans and technology interactively share one sphere. And by claiming this, we do not anthropomorphize non-human entities. Instead, we regard them as co-equal who extend one's capacities while utilizing the other.

3. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with immense gratitude that we acknowledge the support and help of our research adviser, Mark Anthony Dacela, whose work as a philosopher inspired us to conduct this study. With his father-like attitude and genius intuition, he guides and advises our direction and ideas as a team. With his expertise in Philosophy, we thank him most for his help and guidance in making a conclusive and cohesive philosophy thesis. Without his dedication and counsel, this paper would not have been possible. We would like to thank De La Salle University - Senior High School Manila for creating and holding a conducive learning environment and equipping us with resources to explore and research our ideas to corroborate with others. Their staff and faculty who have been cooperative with us through the makings of our study, for being considerate of the quality of our learning and research through these trying times, and completely supporting their students and giving them quality over results.

We are deeply grateful for our God and Country, our faith, service, and communion, all for their name and glory. We owe our lives and everything we do for God, and we owe our service and ideas for the betterment of the people of our country.

4. REFERENCES

- Brown, I. (2020). AI won't replace humans, just like computers didn't. Theiet.org. <https://eandt.theiet.org/content/articles/2020/08/a-i-won-t-replace-humans-just-like-computers-didn-t/>
- Coeckelbergh, M. (2010). Moral appearances: emotions, robots, and human morality. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 12(3), 235–241. doi:10.1007/s10676-010-9221-y
- Coeckelbergh, M. (2013). The Moral Standing of Machines: Towards a Relational and Non-Cartesian Moral Hermeneutics. *Philosophy & Technology*, 27(1), 61–77. doi:10.1007/s13347-013-0133-8
- Danaher, J. (2017). Ethical Behaviourism in the Age of the Robot. *Philosophical Disquisitions*. Retrieved from <https://philosophicaldisquisitions.blogspot.com/2017/12/ethical-behaviourism-in-age-of-robot.html>.
- Danaher, J. (2020). Welcoming Robots into the Moral Circle: A Defense of Ethical Behaviorism. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, (4): 2023-2049. Retrieved from <https://philpapers.org/archive/DANWRI>
- Fletcher, J. (1972). Indicators of Humanhood: A Tentative Profile of Man. *The Hastings Center Report*, 2(5), 1. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3561570>
- Headland, C. J., Teahan, W. J., & ap Cenydd, L. (2019). Sexbots: a case for artificial ethical agents. *Connection Science*, 32(2), 204–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540091.2019.1640185>
- Jaworska, A., & Tannenbaum, J. (2013). The Grounds of Moral Status (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Stanford.edu. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/grounds-moral-status/>
- May, W. E. (1976). What Makes A Human Being To Be A Being of Moral Worth? *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, 40(3), 416–443. doi:10.1353/tho.1976.0012
- Musial, M. (2017). Designing (artificial) people to serve - the other side of the coin. *Journal of Experimental & Theoretical Artificial Intelligence*, 29 (5), 1087-1097.
- Petersen, S. (2007). The ethics of robot servitude. *Journal of Experimental and Theoretical Artificial Intelligence*, 19 (1): 43-54. <https://philpapers.org/rec/PETTEO>
- Petersen, S. (2011). Designing People to Serve. In Patrick Lin, George Bekey & Keith Abney (eds.), *Robot Ethics*. MIT Press.
- Petersen, S. (2016). Is it good for them too? Ethical concern for the sexbots. <https://philpapers.org/archive/PETIIG.pdf>
- Searle, J. (1980). The Chinese Room. <https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil201/Searle.pdf>
- Turing, A. (1950). Computing Machinery and Intelligence. *Mind*, 49 (433-460).