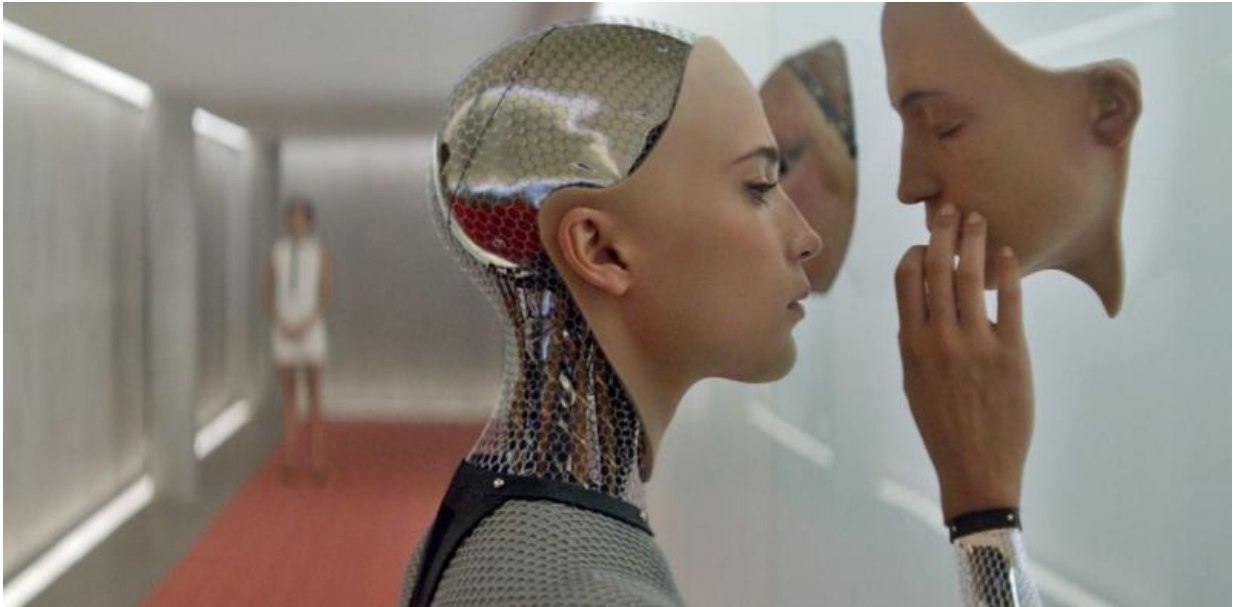# The ethics of robot love

November 25 2015, by Sean Welsh

Films like Ex Machina explore the bounds of emotional interaction between human and machine. Credit: Universal Pictures

There was to have been a conference in Malaysia last week called Love and Sex with Robots but it was cancelled. Malaysian police branded it "illegal" and "ridiculous". "There is nothing scientific about sex with robots," said a police chief.

However, others believe there are many interesting and important aspects of intimate robot partners that are worth researching and discussing.

There is a lot of science in Ava and Kyoko, the sexually capable robots in the movie [Ex Machina](link), for example. Concepts raised in the film include the [Turing Test](link) and the [Mary's room](link) thought experiment of ANU's [Frank Jackson](link), among others. Although, inevitably, as is the way of fiction, the robots turn on the humans.

Putting aside the Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robophobic tropes of movies such as [Oblivion](link), [Robocop](link) and [Transcendence](link), is there a moral issue when it comes to intimacy with a robot?

Some believe there is. There is a [Campaign to Stop Sex Robots](link), which has called for sex with robots to be banned. The organisation's argument is that sex robots would reinforce gender inequality. It links to similar arguments made against pornography and prostitution.

However, if you argue that something ought to be banned because it reinforces [gender inequality](link), you would be committed to banning the Iliad or various plays by Shakespeare, or novels by Jane Austen. If this is the objection, one could no doubt develop sexbots that do not reinforce gender stereotypes, either in behaviour or form.

A more salient concern about sexbots might be: what would happen if everyone started bedding bots? What would be the trajectory? Where would humanity end up if these devices proliferated?

Perhaps we'd be in much the same place as we are now. The invention of sex toys has not stopped people getting married and having babies. Slippery slope arguments are intuitively tempting but they need strong gravity and weak friction.

Arguments in favour of sexbots put by proponents, such as [David Levy](link), are that robot prostitutes are a lesser evil than human prostitutes. They will reduce incentives to traffic humans and subject them to the

"degradation" of sex work. Robot prostitutes might be safer than human ones, and therefore preferable.

Perhaps the stickiest moral problem is whether sex with a robot would count as adultery. But does an orgasm with a toy count as adultery? A sexbot today might be little more than a programmed artefact, but by 2050, who knows what it might look resemble?

Artificial bonding

Perhaps a more tractable moral issue in the short term is what Mattias Schuetz, Director of the Human Robot Interaction Lab at Tufts University, calls "unidirectional emotional bonds". This is where someone falls in love with a robot, but the robot cannot fall genuinely reciprocate the sentiment.

It is well-known that humans affectively bond with robots. People name their robot vacuum cleaners, and even introduce them to their parents by name. Gnarly bomb disposal specialists beg the Baghdad robot hospital to fix their beloved blown-up robots because they have gone through hell together.

One could plausibly program a robot to go through the motions of expressing love. It could gaze at you with robo-dilated eyes, or could hold your hand and smile at you. It could play music like the "Gigolo Joe" character in Steven Spielberg's movie Artificial Intelligence. It could do all this and yet feel nothing.

It might have an ability to sense your affective states and produce actions that you would interpret as emotions, but inside the robot there would be no feeling, just a Turing machine applying its rulebook to sensory inputs, passing scripted outputs to its actuators.

The robot would act "as if" it loved you, but it would not love you any more than a rock would love you. Is this moral? Should such devices be banned?

Personally, I think not, as long as we understand exactly what we are getting into bed with. People already get into bed with animated yet lifeless artefacts. There are artefacts on the market that enable people to experience orgasms. Are machine generated orgasms as good as the real human deal? Who is to judge? Opinions differ.

I do not see a persuasive case for banning sex toys, whether they are manually or remotely piloted or even embodied and autonomous. However, there is a case for a health warning to ensure people know about unidirectional emotional bonding. Robots may be able to perform sex acts today but it may be decades or centuries before they can return your love.

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