Chapter 7
Dignity

Abstract Dignity is a very prominent concept in human rights instruments, in particular constitutions. It is also a concept that has many critics, including those who argue that it is *useless* in ethical debates. How useful or not dignity can be in artificial intelligence (AI) ethics discussions is the question of this chapter. Is it a conversation stopper, or can it help explain or even resolve some of the ethical dilemmas related to AI? The three cases in this chapter deal with groundless dismissal by an automated system, sex robots and care robots. The conclusion argues that it makes perfect sense for human rights proponents to treat dignity as a prime value, which takes precedence over others in the case of extreme dignity violations such as torture, human trafficking, slavery and reproductive manipulation. However, in AI ethics debates, it is better seen as an equal among equals, so that the full spectrum of potential benefits and harms are considered for AI technologies using all relevant ethical values.

Keywords Dignity · AI ethics · Sex robots · Care robots

7.1 Introduction

Most human rights instruments protect the inherent dignity of human beings. For instance, the opening of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (UN 1948). And the first article of the German constitution (*Grundgesetz*) reads: "(1) Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority" (Germany 1949).

Given the focus of this book on artificial intelligence (AI) ethics cases that relate to potential human rights infringements, one might think that the concept of dignity would be very useful. And indeed, as will be seen below, dignity has made an entrance into AI ethics discussions.

However, it is also important to note that the meaning of the term "dignity" is highly contested (Schroeder and Bani-Sadr 2017). The Canadian Supreme Court

Fig. 7.1 Dignity classification

even decided that dignity was no longer to be used in anti-discrimination cases as it was too confusing and difficult to apply.

> [H]uman dignity is an abstract and subjective notion that … cannot only become confusing and difficult to apply; it has also proven to be an additional burden on equality claimants. (Kapp 2008: 22)

To give specific meaning to the concept of dignity in the context of three AI ethics cases, the classification model developed by Schroeder and Bani-Sadr (2018) is summarised below.

Three broad types of dignity can be distinguished: the dignity associated with specific conduct or roles, the intrinsic dignity of all human beings and the critical interpretation, which sees dignity as nothing but a slogan to stop debate (ibid: 53) (see Fig. 7.1).

Aspirational dignity, associated with specific conduct or roles, is not available to all human beings, and it is possible to distinguish three main varieties.

Dignity as an expression of virtue According to Beyleveld and Brownsword (2001: 139), Nelson Mandela exemplifies the personification of dignity as virtue. His fortitude in the face of adversity—throughout decades of imprisonment—deserves almost universal admiration.

Dignity through rank and position The original, historical meaning of dignity is related to rank and position within hierarchies. For instance, Machiavelli (2015) believed that "dignity [is conferred] by antiquity of blood" rather than through actions individuals can take, such as being virtuous.

Dignity of comportment In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1917), two impoverished ladies are described whose gloves "were not merely shabby but had holes in them, and yet this evident poverty gave the two ladies an air of special dignity, which is always found in people who know how to wear poor clothes." Independently of virtue or rank, these two ladies display dignified comportment, which Dostoevsky singles out for praise in the name of dignity.

In contrast to these varieties of aspirational dignity, *intrinsic* dignity is available to *all* human beings and is described in two main ways within Western philosophy and Christian thinking.

Dignity as intrinsic worth The most prominent understanding of dignity in Western philosophy today is based on Immanuel Kant's interpretation of dignity

as intrinsic worth, which is not selective but belongs to all human beings.[1] It cannot be denied even to a vicious man, according to Immanuel Kant (1990: 110 [463]), our translation). Hence, dignity as intrinsic worth is unrelated to virtue and moral conduct. From Kantian-type dignity stems the prohibition against actions that dehumanise and objectify human beings—enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948)—in the worst cases through slavery, torture or degrading treatment.

Dignity as being created in the image of God The Catholic Church also promotes the idea that *all* human beings have dignity, because all human beings, they maintain, "are created in the image and likeness of God" (Markwell 2005: 1132).

These two groups of dignity interpretations (aspirational and intrinsic) are joined by a third, highly critical position. Ruth Macklin (2003) famously argued that dignity "is a useless concept … [that] can be eliminated [from ethics debates] without any loss of content". Harvard professor Steven Pinker even claimed that dignity is "a squishy, subjective notion" used mostly "to condemn anything that gives someone the creeps" (Pinker 2008). Thinkers in this group believe that dignity is often used as a "conversation stopper" to avoid having an in-depth dialogue about challenging issues (Birnbacher 1996).

How useful dignity might be in AI ethics discussions is the question for this chapter. Is it a conversation stopper, or is it useful in helping understand or even resolve some of the ethical dilemmas related to AI?

7.2 Cases of AI in Potential Conflict with Human Dignity

7.2.1 Case 1: Unfair Dismissal

"Automation can be an asset to a company, but there needs to be a way for humans to take over if the machine makes a mistake," says Ibrahim Diallo (Wakefield 2018). Diallo was jobless for three weeks in 2017 (Diallo 2018) after being dismissed by an automated system for no reason his line manager could ascertain. It started with an inoperable access card, which no longer worked for his Los Angeles office, and led to him being escorted from the building "like a thief" (Wakefield 2018) by security staff following a barrage of system-generated messages. Diallo said the message that made him jobless was "soulless and written in red as it gave orders that dictated my fate. Disable this, disable that, revoke access here, revoke access there, escort out of premises … The system was out for blood and I was its very first victim" (ibid). After three weeks, his line manager identified the problem (an employee who had left the company had omitted to approve an action) and reinstated Mr Diallo's contractual rights.

---

[1] One of us has dealt elsewhere with the challenge that Immanuel Kant bestows dignity only upon *rational* beings (Schroeder and Bani-Sadr 2017).

Commenting on the case, AI expert Dave Coplin noted: "It's another example of a failure of human thinking where they allow it to be humans versus machines rather than humans plus machines" (ibid). Another commentator used the term "dignity" in connection with this case, noting that "the dignity of human beings and their 'diminishing value' [is at stake] as we approach the confluence of efficiencies gained from the increasing implementation of artificial intelligence and robotics" (Diallo 2018).

Being escorted from the building like a thief—that is, a criminal—as Diallo put it, and without any wrongdoing on his part, can indeed be interpreted in terms of a loss of dignity. Psychological research has shown that being wrongly accused of criminal offences can have severe consequences for the accused, including for their sense of self and their sense of dignity.

> Along with changes in personality, participants also experienced various other losses related to their sense of self, for example loss of *dignity* and credibility … and loss of hope and purpose for the future [italics added]. (Brooks and Greenberg 2020)

Interpreted this way, the dignity lost by Diallo would be aspirational dignity, dignity that is conduct-related. Being publicly suspected of unlawful or immoral behaviour can, then, lead to a sense of having lost dignity. However, the reason why dignity is not helpful in this AI ethics case is that it is unnecessary to the argument. A dignity interpretation does not move the case forward. There is no moral dilemma to be solved. It is obvious that a human being should not be treated like a criminal and made redundant for the sole reason that an opaque system is unresponsive—in this example, to Diallo's line manager. AI designed to assist with human resources decisions should be understandable, and, as Dave Coplin has noted, should operate on the basis of humans *plus* machines, not humans *versus* machines.

This problem is not unique to AI, a fact that can easily be verified with reference to the success rates of unfair dismissal cases brought by employees. Useful figures are available from Australia, for instance, which radically reformed its dismissal regulations in 2006. Freyens and Oslington (2021) put the success rate of employees claiming unfair dismissal at 47–48% for the period from 2001 to 2015 (a time when cases are unlikely to have been influenced significantly by AI decision-making). Hence, almost half of the employees who challenged employers about their dismissal were deemed to have been unfairly dismissed, as Diallo was, yet most likely without the involvement of AI systems.

The challenge is summarised by Goodman and Kilgallan (2021) from the point of view of employers:

> AI will continue to develop and will likely outperform humans in some aspects of working life. However, the technology has wide implications and employers should be cautious. AI has two notable flaws: the human error of thinking AI is infallible and the lack of transparency in its outcomes.

From the point of view of employees like Ibrahim Diallo, it is also vital for the system that made him jobless to significantly increase its transparency.

7.2.2 Case 2: Sex Robots

> One of the first sex robots available to buy is called Harmony (Boran 2018). The female body of this sex doll is combined with a robotic head, which can turn; the mouth can smile and the eyes can blink. The robot's AI element is steered through an app on the owner's phone. While Harmony cannot stand up, conversation is possible as the app stores information about the owner. The machine doll has been described as "a more sophisticated, sexy Alexa" built on "a very reductive stereotype of femininity: narrow waist, big breasts, curvaceous hips, long blonde hair" (Cosmopolitan 2021). Harmony and other sex robots have been at the centre of highly controversial ethics debates.

The concept of dignity plays a big role in ethics debates about sex robots. Sex robots have been promoted as a way of "achieving 'dignity' … [by enabling] physical touch, intimacy, and sexual pleasure … [for] disabled people" and for "men and women rejected sexually by other men, or women" (Zardiashvili and Fosch-Villaronga 2020). However, it is also argued that "the everlasting availability as well as the possibility to perform any sexual activity violates gender dignity and equality, causing harm that is understood as objectification and commodification" (Rigotti 2020).

The type of dignity both of these discourses appeal to is *intrinsic dignity*, which requires all human beings to be treated with respect and not objectified. Or, as Immanuel Kant (1998: 110 [4:428]) put it in his principle of humanity,

> the human being … *exists* as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead [the human being] … must … always be regarded *at the same time as an end*.

Two main routes are available for discussing the potential moral dilemma of sex robots and their impact on the intrinsic dignity of human beings.

The first route links human rights to sexual rights and sexual autonomy. This route can start, for instance, with the World Health Organization's (WHO) strategy to count "sexual … well-being" as "fundamental to the overall health and well-being of individuals" and therefore related to article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (WHO n.d.b) (see box).

> **Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25**
>
> "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family." (UN 1948)

Historically, the sexual rights movement focused on the prevention of harm, in particular emphasising the rights of girls and women to be free from sexual violence.

Later, the same movement focused on the rights to self-expression of sexual inclination without fear of discrimination for lesbian, gay and transgender people (Miller 2009).

In 2002, going beyond the focus on harm and discrimination, a WHO-commissioned report defined sexual rights as "human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus statements. They include the right of all persons … to … pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life" (WHO n.d.a). This sexual right to a pleasurable sexual life is limited by the injunction not to infringe the rights of others (ibid). The step from this type of sexual autonomy to sex robots is short.

> If sexual freedom is an integral part of personal autonomy and interference is illegitimate whenever consent and private acts are involved, then robotic sexual intercourse will take place at home, coming to no direct harm to others and falling within the buyer's right to privacy. (Rigotti 2019)

Despite some highly optimistic predictions about the benefits of sex robots—e.g. they will allegedly fill the void in the lives of people who have no-one and therefore provide a "terrific service" to humankind (Wiseman 2015)—the linchpin in this discussion will be the consideration of potential harm. And this is the starting point of the second route for discussing the potential moral dilemma of sex robots and their impact on the intrinsic dignity of human beings.

This second route assumes as its *starting* point that the harm from sex robots is inevitable. For instance, Professor Kathleen Richardson's Campaign Against Sex Robots warns against "reinforcing female dehumanisation" and seeks "to defend the dignity and humanity of women and girls" (CASR n.d.). In her view, sex robots will strengthen a relationship model where buyers of sex can turn off empathy towards the sellers of sex and cement relations of power where one party is not recognised as a human being, but simply as a needs fulfiller framed according to male desires (Richardson 2015): a sole means, not simultaneously an end in herself, in Kantian terminology.

Richardson's views are strengthened by the fact that sex robots are almost exclusively female (Rigotti 2019), that one can speak of "a market by men for men" (Cosmopolitan 2021) and that "the tech's development is largely … focused on the fulfillment of straight male desire" (Edwards 2016). Sex robots are thus seen as an extension of sex work (Richardson uses the term "prostitution"), where "the buyer of sex is at liberty to ignore the state of the other person as a human subject who is turned into a thing" (Richardson 2015).

At this point, most commentators will note that sex robots *are* things, they do not have to be objectified *into* things. Somewhat cynically, one could ask: what harm does it do if a fanatical Scarlett Johansson admirer builds a sex robot in her image, which winks and smiles at him (Pascoe 2017)? It's only a thing, and it might even do some good. For instance, it has been suggested that sex robots, used within controlled environments, could help redirect "the sexual behavior of high-risk child molesters … without endangering real children" (Zara et al. 2022).

Fig. 7.2 Golden mean on sex robot positions?

The two routes to discussing the ethical issues of sex robots sketched above could also be illustrated as a continuum with two opposing poles which meet where sexual autonomy that does not create harm might be the Aristotelian golden mean (Aristotle 2000: 102 [1138b]). (Aristotle argued that one should always strive to find the middle between excess and deficiency: courage, for instance, lying between recklessness and cowardice (Aristotle 2000: 49 [1115b]) (see Fig. 7.2).

Ensuring that sex robots are used without creating harm might pose serious challenges, which are discussed further below. First, we look at care robots.

7.2.3   Case 3: Care Robots

> An old lady sits alone in her sheltered accommodation stroking her pet robot seal. She has not had any human visitors for days. A humanoid robot enters the room, delivers a tray of food, and leaves after attempting some conversation about the weather, and encouraging her to eat it all up. The old lady sighs, and reluctantly complies with the robot's suggestions. When she finishes eating, she goes back to stroking the pet robot seal: 'At least you give my life some meaning' she says. (Sharkey 2014)

Amanda Sharkey paints this picture of an old lady and her care robot in her paper "Robots and Human Dignity: A Consideration of the Effects of Robot Care on the Dignity of Older People".

Despite the emphasis on dignity in the title, she then delivers a very even-handed risk and benefit analysis of care robots, with only limited reference to potential dignity violations. In particular, she distinguishes three types of care robots for the elderly: first, assistive robots, which can, for instance, help with feeding and bathing, or moving a person with limited mobility from a bed to a wheelchair; second, monitoring robots, which can, for instance, detect falls, manage diaries or provide reminders about taking medication; and third, companion robots, which often take the form of pets such as the robot seal in the case description.

In her discussion of the ethical challenges of care robots, Sharkey establishes only three connections with dignity. *Assistive* robots can increase human dignity for elderly people, she believes, in particular by increasing mobility and access to social

interaction. *Monitoring* robots, likewise, can increase human dignity, she argues, by enabling elderly people to live independently for longer than otherwise possible. The only ethical challenge related to human dignity Sharkey identifies is related to *companion* robots, which could infantilise elderly people in the eyes of carers or undermine their self-respect, if offered as a sole replacement for human interaction.

Arguably, the concept of dignity does no important work in the first two cases. If a technology can increase mobility and access to social interaction, and enable elderly people to live independently for longer than otherwise possible, the positive contributions to wellbeing are easily understood without reference to the contested concept of dignity (Stahl and Coeckelberg 2016). A similar point could be made using research by Robinson et al. (2014):

> [O]lder people indicated that they would like a robot for detecting falls, controlling appliances, cleaning, medication alerts, making calls and monitoring location. Most of these tasks point towards maintaining independence and dignity.

If one removed the term "dignity" in this quote, which is a technique suggested by dignity critics to ascertain whether the concept is useful or not (Macklin 2003), then the potential benefit of robotic technology in elderly care remains, namely maintaining independence.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, when Stahl and Coeckelbergh (2016) examine exactly the same problem (the ethical challenges of health and care robots) they make no reference to dignity at all. Where they align with Sharkey, but use different wording, is on the question of "cold and mechanical" machine care, which might be seen as abandoning elderly people and handing them "over to robots devoid of human contact" (ibid). Stahl and Coeckelberg (ibid) ask whether this might be an objectification of care receivers. In other words, they employ the Kantian concept of dignity, also used by Richardson to justify her Campaign Against Sex Robots, to ask whether elderly people who are cared for by robots are objectified—in other words, turned from subjects into things.

7.3 Ethical Questions Concerning AI and Dignity

There is something behind all three AI cases that is not easy to describe and warrants ethical attention. It is linked to how people are seen by others and how this relates to their own self-respect. Jean-Paul Sartre (1958: 222) used the concept of the *gaze* to describe this situation.

> [T]he Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. … By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgement on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the other.

It was the fact that Diallo was seen by others and possibly judged as a wrongdoer that made his forced removal from his workplace a potential dignity issue. The concern that sex robots may reinforce human relationships that see women and girls

as mere needs fulfillers of male sexual desires and not as human subjects in their own right is what seems to drive Richardson's campaign to ban sex robots. And it is the fact that elderly people in care who engage with their robot pets are possibly seen as infantilised in the eyes of carers that is one of Sharkey's main concerns.

The judgement-filled gaze of the other and the link to self-respect as one passes judgement on oneself through the eyes of the other is what makes the three AI cases above relevant to dignity debates. "Dignity" therefore seems a suitable word to describe at least some of the moral dilemmas involved in the cases. One might hence argue that dignity is not a mere conversation stopper, but a helpful concept in the context of AI ethics. Let us examine this further.

It is suggested above that the concept of dignity is not necessary in drawing useful ethical conclusions from the first case, that of unfair dismissal due to an opaque AI system. This position would maintain that there is no moral dilemma as there are no proponents of competing claims who have to find common ground. Unfair dismissal due to opaque AI ought to be avoided.[2] Any technical or organisational measures (e.g. ethics by design, see Sect. 2.4.2) that can reasonably be used, should be used to achieve this goal. At the same time, it is essential that remedies be available to employees and workers who find themselves in a situation similar to Diallo's. Thus, a report presented to the UK Trades Union Congress (Allen and Masters 2021: 77) stressed the following:

> Unfair dismissal legislation should protect employees ... from dismissal decisions that are factually inaccurate or opaque in the usual way. The use of AI-powered tools to support such decisions does not make any difference to this important legal protection.

Cases 2 and 3 are more complex in terms of their dignity angle, especially Case 2, sex robots. We shall first discuss Case 3 to provide additional leads for Case 2.

In "'Oh, Dignity Too?' Said the Robot: Human Dignity as the Basis for the Governance of Robotics", Zardiashvili and Fosch-Villaronga (2020) identify eight major ethical concerns in employing care robots for the elderly: safe human–robot interaction, the allocation of responsibility, privacy and data protection loss, autonomy restriction, deception and infantilisation, objectification and loss of control, human–human interaction decrease, and long-term consequences. While the authors recognise that "[r]obots might be the solution to bridge the loneliness that the elderly often experience; they may help wheelchair users walk again, or may help navigate the blind" (ibid), they also "acknowledge that human contact is an essential aspect of personal care and that … robots for healthcare applications can challenge the dignity of users" (ibid).

We have themed seven of the above concerns into five headings and removed the eighth as it applies to all emerging technologies ("Technology … may have long-term consequences that might be difficult to foresee"). For our interpretation of Zardiashvili and Fosch-Villaronga's (2020) ethical concerns in relation to care robots and the elderly see Fig. 7.3.

---

[2] Unfair dismissal due to performance being measured by inaccurate algorithms is not covered here, as it is more relevant to Chap. 2 on discrimination than this one on dignity. For relevant literature, see De Stefano (2018).

Safety	Liability	Privacy	Autonomy	Dignity
Challenging physical and mental integrity	Unclear responsibility for malfunction	Risks for personal data protection	Challenges to independence of person	Infantilisation, objectification, neglect

Fig. 7.3 Ethical concerns about care robots and the elderly

As Fig. 7.3 shows, dignity is only one of five main ethical concerns identified in relation to care robots and the elderly. This is not unusual. It is often the case that several ethical values or principles need to be protected to achieve an optimal ethical outcome. These values may even conflict. For instance, it may be that the safety of a device could be increased through a more invasive collection of personal data. Stakeholders then have to weigh up the relative importance of safety versus the relative importance of privacy. It is in this weighing-up process that dignity may be an outlier value.

As the founding principle of many constitutions around the world, dignity is often given precedence over all other values. For instance, in the Daschner case (Schroeder 2006), the German constitutional court ruled in 2004 that a threat of duress by police forces to extract information was an unacceptable violation of the dignity of a detainee, even though the police forces were as certain as they could be that the child kidnapper in their custody was the only person who could reveal the whereabouts of an 11-year old who might be starving in an undetected location.[3] The presiding judge noted: "Human dignity is inviolable. Nobody must be made into an object, a bundle of fear" (Rückert 2004, our translation). The inviolability of the value of dignity meant it took precedence over all other values, including what the police forces thought was the right to life of a child.

If the power given to dignity in constitutional courts were to colour other moral debates, such as those on care robots and the elderly, important ethical factors might be ignored. Dignity could then indeed become a conversation stopper, overriding safety, privacy, autonomy and liability issues and moving discussions away from potential benefits. It has already been noted by Sharkey (2014) that (assistive) care robots can increase the wellbeing of elderly people by improving mobility and access to social interaction. Likewise, (monitoring) care robots can increase human wellbeing by enabling elderly people to live independently for longer than otherwise possible.

In the case of care robots, potential dignity issues therefore have to be treated as one of several ethical challenges, without being given privileged importance. Only then can the ethical risks for the technology be addressed proportionally in the context of serious social care staff shortages. Taking the UK as an example, around ten per cent of social care posts were vacant in 2020 and an additional need for 650,000 to

---

[3] In fact, the child had already been killed by the kidnapper.

950,000 new adult social care jobs is anticipated by 2035 (Macdonald 2020). It is in this context that the development of care robots for the elderly might become an ethical goal in its own right.

As a geriatric nurse commented, "Care robots don't substitute for the human being—they help when no one else is there to help" (Wachsmuth 2018).

Two aspects of the care robot discussion are useful when turning to sex robots. First, unless dealing with extreme dignity violations, such as torture, human trafficking, slavery or reproductive manipulation (Bourcarde 2004), the ethical value of dignity should be treated as an equal among equals and not as an ethical value that automatically overrides all others. For instance, those who demand a ban on sex robots to promote the dignity of women and girls (Richardson 2015) seem to make a categorical claim without considering the ethical value of sexual autonomy. This position has been criticised from a range of angles, e.g. that it relies on unjustified parallels to sex work or that it ignores the demand for male sex dolls and toys (Hancock 2020).

The position we want to take here seeks to achieve the Aristotelian mean between two extremes that would, on the one hand, ban sex robots and, on the other, declare them an important service to humankind (see Fig. 7.2). Instead, the right to "pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life" (WHO n.d.a) may include the use of sex robots to foster sexual autonomy, while researchers and regulators should monitor both potential harms *and* potential benefits.

Benefits could, for instance, involve improving "the satisfaction of the sexual needs of a user" (Fosch-Villaronga and Poulsen 2020) who might have difficulties accessing alternatives, thereby contributing to their health and wellbeing.

Harms could range from very practical considerations, such as sexually transmitted infections from sex robots employed by multiple users in commercial sex work settings (Hancock 2020), to seeking responses to actions that might be criminalised if a human person were involved. One of the most controversially discussed topics in this regard is child sex robots for use by paedophiles.

> In July 2014, the roboticist Ronald Arkin suggested that child sex robots could be used to treat those with paedophilic predilections in the same way that methadone is used to treat heroin addicts. … But most people seem to disagree with this idea, with legal authorities in both the UK and US taking steps to outlaw such devices. (Danaher 2019b)

Using the UK example, since 2017, the Crown Prosecution Service has outlawed the import of child sex dolls, referring to the 1876 Customs Consolidation Act, which forbids the importation of obscene items (Danaher 2019a). This approach is applicable to child sex robots, but other legal avenues have been suggested, in particular using the UK child protection framework or the UK's 2003 Sexual Offences Act to forbid the use of child sex robots (Chatterjee 2020). On the other hand, "proponents of love and sex with robots would argue that a CSB [childlike sexbot] could have a twofold interest: protecting children from sexual predators and by the same token, treating the latter" (Behrendt 2018). One solution between the two extremes is to restrict the use of child sex robots to cases requiring medical authorisation and under strict medical supervision (ibid).

It is noteworthy that the concept of harm rather than that of dignity is usually evoked in the case of child sex robots, which also leads to our conclusion. All ethical aspects that would normally be considered with an emerging technology have to be considered in the process so that dignity is not used as a conversation stopper in assessing this case.

> Robot technology may have moral implications, contribute to the loss of human contact, reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities or fail in delivering good care. (Fosch-Villaronga and Poulsen 2020)

We therefore argue that the use of sex robots should not be ruled out categorically based on dignity claims alone.

7.4 Key Insights

From the early days of drafting human rights instruments, dignity seems to be the concept that has succeeded in achieving consensus between highly diverse negotiators (Schroeder 2012). One negotiator may interpret dignity from a religious perspective, another from a philosophical perspective and yet another from a pragmatic perspective (Tiedemann 2006). This is possible because dignity does not seem to be ideologically fixed in its meaning, and thus allows a basic consensus between different world views.

This advantage could, however, become a problem in AI ethics debates that are concerned with human rights, if dignity considerations are given the power to override all other ethical values. While this would make perfect sense to human rights proponents in the case of extreme dignity violations such as torture, human trafficking, slavery and reproductive manipulation (Bourcarde 2004), dignity is better seen as an equal among equals in AI ethics debates, especially given the risk of losing it altogether, an approach recommended by those who believe dignity is a mere slogan.

The dignity of the elderly is an important consideration in the design and employment of care robots, but it should not be a conversation stopper in the case of sex robots. As with other ethical dilemmas, the full spectrum of potential benefits and harms needs to be considered using all relevant ethical values. In the case of sex robots this can range from the empowerment of "persons with disabilities and older adults to exercise their sexual rights, which are too often disregarded in society" (Fosch-Villaronga and Poulsen 2020) to restrictive regulation for sex robots that enable behaviour that would be criminal in sex work (Danaher 2019b).

References

Allen R, Masters D (2021) Technology managing people: the legal implications. Trades Union Congress, London. https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Technology_Managing_People_2021_Report_AW_0.pdf. Accessed 13 May 2022

Aristotle (2000) Nicomachean Ethics (trans: Crisp R). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Behrendt M (2018) Reflections on moral challenges posed by a therapeutic childlike sexbot. In: Cheok AD, Levy D (eds) Love and sex with robots. Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham, pp 96–113. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76369-9_8

Beyleveld D, Brownsword R (2001) Human dignity in bioethics and biolaw. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Birnbacher D (1996) Ambiguities in the concept of Menschenwürde. In: Bayertz K (ed) Sanctity of life and human dignity. Kluwer Academic, Dordrecht, pp 107–121. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-1590-9_7

Boran M (2018) Robot love: the race to create the ultimate AI sex partner. The Irish Times, 1 November. https://www.irishtimes.com/business/technology/robot-love-the-race-to-create-the-ultimate-ai-sex-partner-1.3674387. Accessed 13 May 2022

Bourcarde K (2004) Folter im Rechtsstaat? Die Bundesrepublik nach dem Entführungsfall Jakob von Metzler. Self-published, Gießen, Germany. http://www.bourcarde.eu/texte/folter_im_rechtsstaat.pdf. Accessed 16 June 2021

Brooks SK, Greenberg N (2020) Psychological impact of being wrongfully accused of criminal offences: a systematic literature review. Med Sci Law 61(1): 44–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0025802420949069

CASR (n.d.) Our story. Campaign Against Sex Robots. https://campaignagainstsexrobots.org/our-story/. Accessed 13 May 2022

Chatterjee BB (2020) Child sex dolls and robots: challenging the boundaries of the child protection framework. Int Rev Law Comput Technol 34(1):22–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600869.2019.1600870

Cosmopolitan (2021) Sex robots: how do sex robots work and can you buy a sex robot? Cosmopolitan, 12 July. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/love-sex/sex/a36480612/sex-robots/. Accessed 13 May 2022

Danaher J (2019a) How should we regulate child sex robots: restriction or experimentation? 4 February (blog). BMJ Sex Reprod Health. https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjsrh/2020/02/04/child-sex-robots/. Accessed 13 May 2022

Danaher J (2019b) Regulating child sex robots: restriction or experimentation? Med Law Rev 27(4):553–575. https://doi.org/10.1093/medlaw/fwz002

De Stefano V (2018) "Negotiating the algorithm": automation, artifi cial intelligence and labour protection. Employment Working Paper No 246. International Labour Office, Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_policy/documents/publication/wcms_634157.pdf. Accessed 14 May 2022

Diallo I (2018) The machine fired me: no human could do a thing about it! https://idiallo.com/blog/when-a-machine-fired-me. Accessed 12 May 2022

Dostoevsky F (1917) Crime and punishment (trans: Garnett C). PF Collier & Son, New York. http://www.bartleby.com/318/32.html. Accessed 12 May 2022

Edwards S (2016) Are sex robots unethical or just unimaginative as hell? Jezebel, 7 April. https://jezebel.com/are-sex-robots-unethical-or-just-unimaginative-as-hell-1769358748. 13 May 2022

Fosch-Villaronga E, Poulsen A (2020) Sex care robots: exploring the potential use of sexual robot technologies for disabled and elder care. Paladyn 11:1–18.https://doi.org/10.1515/pjbr-2020-0001

Freyens BP, Oslington P (2021) The impact of unfair dismissal regulation: evidence from an Australian natural experiment. Labour 35(2):264–290. https://doi.org/10.1111/labr.12193

Germany (1949) Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany. Federal Ministry of Justice and Federal Office of Justice, Berlin. https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.pdf. Accessed 12 May 2022

Goodman T, Kilgallon P (2021) The risks of using AI in employment processes. People Management, 28 September. https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1741566/the-risks-using-ai-employment-processes. Accessed 13 May 2022

Hancock E (2020) Should society accept sex robots? Changing my perspective on sex robots through researching the future of intimacy. Paladyn 11:428–442. https://doi.org/10.1515/pjbr-2020-0025

Kant I (1990) Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Tugendlehre. Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg

Kant I (1998) Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge MA

Kapp RV (2008) 2 SCR 483. https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/5696/index.do. Accessed 12 May 2022

Macdonald M (2020) The health and social care workforce gap. Insight, 10 January. House of Commons Library, London. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/the-health-and-social-care-workforce-gap/. Accessed 13 May 2022

Machiavelli N (2015) The prince (trans: Marriott WK). Wisehouse Classics, Sweden

Macklin R (2003) Dignity is a useless concept. BMJ 327:1419–1420. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.327.7429.1419

Markwell H (2005) End-of-life: a Catholic view. Lancet 366:1132–1135. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(05)67425-9

Miller A (2009) Sexuality and human rights: discussion paper. International Council on Human Rights Policy, Versoix. https://biblioteca.cejamericas.org/bitstream/handle/2015/654/Sexuality_Human_Rights.pdf. Accessed 13 May 2022

Pascoe A (2017) This Scarlett Johansson Robot is uncomfortably realistic. Marie Claire Australia, 10 May. https://www.marieclaire.com.au/scarlett-johansson-robot-sex-doll. Accessed 13 May 2022

Pinker S (2008) The stupidity of dignity. The New Republic, 28 May. https://newrepublic.com/article/64674/the-stupidity-dignity. Accessed 12 May 2022

Richardson K (2015) The asymmetrical 'relationship': parallels between prostitution and the development of sex robots. ACM SIGCAS Comput Soc 45(3):290–293. https://doi.org/10.1145/2874239.2874281

Rigotti C (2020) How to apply Asimov's first law to sex robots. Paladyn 11:161–170. https://doi.org/10.1515/pjbr-2020-0032

Rigotti C (2019) Sex robots: a human rights discourse? OpenGlobalRights, 2 May. https://www.openglobalrights.org/sex-robots-a-human-rights-discourse/. Accessed 13 May 2022

Robinson H, MacDonald B, Broadbent E (2014) The role of healthcare robots for older people at home: a review. Int J of Soc Robot 6:575–591. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-014-0242-2

Rückert S (2004) Straflos schuldig. Die Zeit, 22 December. https://www.zeit.de/2004/53/01____Leiter_2. Accessed 13 May 2022

Sartre J-P (1958) Being and nothingness (trans: Barnes HE). Methuen & Co, London

Schroeder D (2006) A child's life or a "little bit of torture"? State-sanctioned violence and dignity. Camb Q Healthc Ethics 15(2):188–201. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180106060233

Schroeder D (2012) Human rights and human dignity. Ethical Theory Moral Pract 15:323–335. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-011-9326-3

Schroeder D, Bani-Sadr A-H (2017) Dignity in the 21st century: middle east and west. Springer Int Publishin AG, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58020-3

Sharkey A (2014) Robots and human dignity: a consideration of the effects of robot care on the dignity of older people. Ethics Inf Technol 16:63. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-014-9338-5

Stahl BC, Coeckelberg M (2016) Ethics of healthcare robotics: towards responsible research and innovation. Robot Auton Syst 86:152–161. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.robot.2016.08.018

Tiedemann P (2006) Was ist Menschenwürde? Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt

UN (1948) Universal declaration of human rights. http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/. Accessed 4 May 2022

Wachsmuth I (2018) Robots like me: challenges and ethical issues in aged care. Front Psychol 9:432. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00432

Wakefield J (2018) The man who was fired by a machine. BBC News, 21 June. https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-44561838. Accessed 12 May 2022

WHO (n.d.b) Sexual health: overview. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_1. Accessed 13 May 2022

WHO (n.d.a) Sexual and reproductive health: gender and human rights. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/gender_rights/sexual_health/en/. Accessed 25 November 2021

Wiseman E (2015) Sex, love and robots: is this the end of intimacy? The Observer, 13 December. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/dec/13/sex-love-and-robots-the-end-of-intimacy. Accessed 13 May 2022

Zara G, Veggi S, Farrington DP (2022) Int J Soc Robot 14:479–498. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-021-00797-3

Zardiashvili L, Fosch-Villaronga E (2020) "Oh, dignity too?" said the robot: human dignity as the basis for the governance of robotics. Minds Mach 30:121–143. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-019-09514-6