

# Commodity-fetish and the awkward artificial other

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**Abstract.** The artificial other can raise anxiety, especially in terms of intimacy, as it highlights the tenuous nature of taken-for-granted relations in general. In Marxism, commodity-fetish arises when economic actors perceive one another solely in terms of the capital and commodity relationships they enter into. It is a form of reduced recognition that supplants genuine interpersonal interaction. Artificial others, in being themselves commodities, can have an awkward effect in bringing out this commodity fetish through real or perceived calls for recognition in some form. Anxiety results from thinking about artificial others as their potential dual nature as commodity and as *other* capable of recognition throws into question the problematic relations already in place among organic, natural humans. Thinking about how to treat and understand the awkward artificial other forces one to reconsider many taken-for-granted relations that are nonetheless tenuous. The artificial other can disrupt these taken-for-granted by highlighting the arbitrariness with which some reductions of recognition are accepted while others prompt controversy. One potential way out of this situation might come in an approach to social meaning that treats concepts as skills, and so social learning as a discursive ‘game’ of public rational accountability.

Key words: human cognition, perception, interaction; machine relationships

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper explores what it takes to be an interesting intersection between commodity fetish and fetishised commodities. The starting point is that robot companions are increasingly discussed as potential sex objects, or as potential intimate partners. In being artefacts, though, they are likely to be manufactured by companies and marketed in the same way as any other products. The very idea of purchasing of these products, the purchase of a non-human sex object or personal companion, has already prompted demonstrable anxiety among various sections of academia and the public more generally.

For some, the very idea that someone might purchase an object for the purpose of sex represents a diminishing of what is human. Equally shocking is the thought that, at some point, objects such as robots could be available that would stand in place of other human beings in intimate human relationships, sexual or otherwise. As they have been presented so far, the arguments for these positions are unconvincing.

Through the Marxist concept of commodity fetish [1], a line of argument will be presented here that both explains how the emerging world of intimate technology could be understood as morally risky in some respects. It will turn out that these risks are nothing new, and are played out daily. Next, there are suggestions for how the whole situation should be considered in order to minimise potential risks. Lastly, there is a discussion of how the scope of social understanding could, or should, adapt to

the new. This discussion will draw upon Robert Brandom’s [2] account of concepts such that social being is cast as a kind of skill that includes structures of public accountability.

## 2 COMMODITY FETISH

Failing to recognise goods and services as the products of complex social relationships, mediated in money and power at least, results in the thought that those goods and services are imagined to float free of social forces, somehow self-sufficient and pure in being. This quasi-religious attitude to commodities fetishises them and results in a relatively irrational approach to the marketplace.

Marx’ concept of commodity fetish might be said to be observable particularly in the world of technology where in the pursuit of the *must have* item, consumers will suspend their disbelief about workers in inhuman conditions; military connections between their phone manufacturer and states with human rights issues; slavery in obtaining components [3]. This last point shows considerable potential for being a point of moral risk.

## 3 MORAL RISK

Where consumers, shoppers, citizens, begin to fetishise commodities in the way Marx anticipates, there exists room for degradation in the conditions of workers and so in the conditions for swathes of people. Poor working conditions lead to human risks. Poor working practices also endanger, for example, the environment. Commodity fetish permits this through bracketing these evils from the act of purchasing, and from the desires of consumers. While there are limits to the effective power any one consumer has to influence these matters, [4] nevertheless the scheme ought to be one that troubles consumers in general. The apparently simple act of purchasing something can represent a complex, global-scale, moral hazard.

This is not the kind of moral risk that those who worry about sex or companion robots [5]. Instead, the risks alerted are alleged to revolve around notions of human dignity in various forms; a flight from intimacy; a supplanting of interpersonal relationships; the prolonging of misogyny. These are broad themes, and are pursued broadly. The pursuit is aimed at the stopping of production, perhaps even research, into sex and/or companion robots.

The question as to whether a sex robot (at the extreme of the discourse here) is or is not a moral risk might occupy a fair bit of discussion. A convincing argument is yet to emerge from those who oppose this technology. But it misses the point anyway. Technology, in whatever form, is not determined in any case by its mere existence. Rather, technology becomes what it becomes on the basis of knowledge claims it prompts or which are taken to be implied by it by users. This is an epistemological argument, based on the ontological nature of technology, namely its interpretive flexibility.

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Interpretive flexibility denotes the property of technology of being constituted by use. It is a position that is opposed to technological determinism, which holds that technology has an observer-independent reality and will have clear and predetermined uses and applications. Proponents of interpretive flexibility argue that technology is not fixed but will develop during perception and use. The tenets of interpretive flexibility are widely recognised in science and technology studies where different positions such as social study of technology (SST) or the social construction of technology hold such views [6][7][8] and also in related fields such as Actor Network Theory [9][10].

#### 4 IT'S NOT THEM, IT'S US

Technology, whether considered 'icky', exciting, liberating, good, bad or ugly is none of these things in itself. It is *considered* x, y, or z. What technology is and what it means is a matter of knowledge claims and so it resides in a negotiable, interpersonal space of reasons – public, and essentially contestable. A social group might come to the conclusion that sexbots are excellent technology as they can be used by marginalised groups to explore sexuality; they might be labelled evil as they are decided to represent a flight from human contact and therefore erode humanity. But in any case, these outcomes are contextualised in a reasoned discussion. The tech is not the problem, when a problem arises, the users are. In this context, any call to ban research is clearly a deeply retrograde move.

The question likely remains, though: how could people ever come to think of machines – robots, software, artefacts – as sexual partners, or companions rather than simply sex aids or *virtual pals*.

If we remember the concept of commodity fetish, and in so doing remember the social relations that give rise to the emergence of products and services, and we combine with this a view of social meaning, a way forward is possible.

#### 5 GOOD INTENSIONS

The question here, missed by the 'no' camp, is how we get from operating in a world of causes to one in which we respond to norms. This is where the 'ick' factor comes in in considering objects as intimate others. Thinking of social meaning as Robert Brandom recommends gives a way to recognise the natural world (of objects and causes) is already imbued with normativity. To understand causal notions, such as natural laws and regularities in experience, is already to use normative ideas. Asking 'why?' in a context that requires a causal analysis is not different in kind to asking a question of a social sort, requiring a normative analysis. The practice is the same: giving and asking for reasons.

Where the question is about technology and how it fits in a social / intimate role it is a useful approach to 'reverse engineer' the notion of commodity fetish and seek to locate the technology within the web of socio-technical (and economic) relations it occupies. With that context discerned, one is well placed to analyse those relations. With the meaning understood, the technology can be evaluated in the context of its users. Discussion of apparently problematic technology doesn't reduce to judgements of good or bad, but to meaning – how the intension of terms like intimate, partner, companion, sex partner,

may or may not expand or contract to draw in or resist new additions.

#### 6 THE AWKWARD OTHER

Once it is accepted that social epistemology plays a role in determining even our most intimate relationships, having explored the notion in terms of companion robots, there may remain an anxiety for those who want more than reasons to bind them to one another. The position against companion and sex technology relies on a lot of vague notions such as intimacy and on exploiting an assumed 'ick' factor. If this basis is rejected – and there is no apparent reason not to reject it – its rationale becomes particularly opaque.

The thought that a robot could be an intimate sexual partner for someone need not to have ramifications for another unless it is felt that something beyond comprehension lies behind human relationships. Something incomprehensible must by definition be taken for granted. Where the taken for grantedness is challenged as a reasonable basis for close relationships, anxiety sets in as the apparent value of mystery is challenged. This too is contingent.

Accepting mystery is as possible in a context of reasonable social understanding. It's just made explicit, and offered as a reason not a foundation. Without this context of social understanding, there is no rationale offered for having the conversations about what technology means that would unravel commodity fetishism concerning fetishistic commodities. Any of the problems feared by Richardson and others can be explored and scrutinised in this context. They cannot in a context of campaigning negativity and presumption.

#### 7 CONCLUSIONS

If technology is to pose a problem for human beings, it is owing to human beings' actions, not the technology. Where fears over intimacy and other such anxieties arise over companion technology, the same is true. The solution is to carefully discuss the meaning of the technology in an open and non-dominating context in order to permit the fair interchange of reasons in discussion.

Genuine moral risk attaches to much consumer technology – we don't need to go into sci-fi sex bots to find it. Commodity fetish means that consumers are (wilfully) blind to the despicable social relations that lie behind much of what we own. Campaigns to thwart such ignorance would be most welcome and edifying. Their rationale would necessitate that sex and companion technology received a hearing too.

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