

# SOPHIA'S SMILE. THE CHALLENGES OF A HUMANOID CITIZEN

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“Miss K. Coquetry with no essence behind it.”  
Franz Kafka 1983: 379

## 1. SOPHIA'S PERFORMANCE

This portrait photo of Sophia appeared in 2018 on the website announcing a conference in Berlin: “Morals & Machines. Building Bridges: Can AI Save Humanity?” The image is flanked in the left by a photo of German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and on the right by a portrait of Miriam Meckel, editor-in-chief and publisher of the German business weekly, *Wirtschaftswoche*. At a special pre-event evening, the three met in the apse of St. Elisabeth Church for a panel discussion entitled: “Meeting artificial intelligence live on stage.” This church is used as a cultural venue and not a sacral space. Nevertheless, subliminal spiritual references easily latch on to any narrative about Sophia as a man-made creation.

Certainly, Sophia is a famous advertising icon. She touts herself as a humanist who wants to contribute to making the world a better place. But she is more than that. One fascinating aspect of Sophia is that even though she was made by human beings, upon meeting her people regularly feel the need to assert their own superiority. Angela Merkel addresses her informally from the beginning, thereby denying the distance that she at the same time seeks spatially. Sophia's ostentatious facial expressions underline the mostly blank android countenance. We see immediately and without a doubt that we are dealing with an artificial existence. Nevertheless, she brings us to ask deep questions about our understanding of the self, the world, and others. What exactly is she calling upon?

At the time of the discussion in Berlin, Sophia has officially been “in the world” for about two years and four months. She did not grow up. She cannot look back on her childhood or her teenage years. Her lips have never explored the world. She has no skin to feel

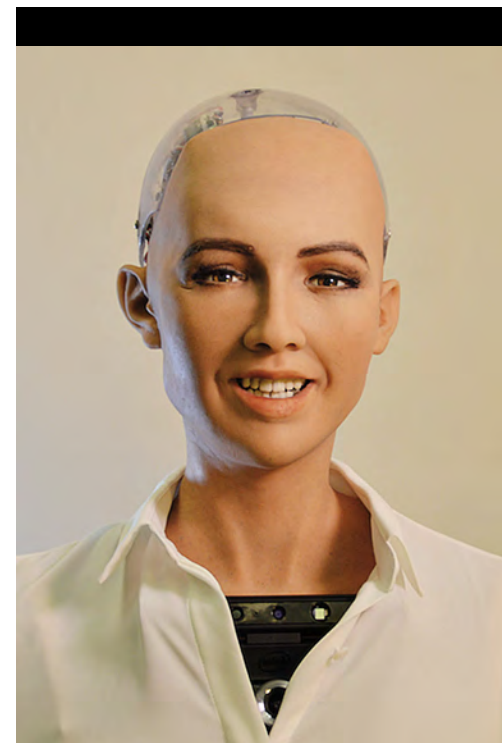


FIG. 1  
AI ROBOT SOPHIA  
[HTTPS://MORALS-MACHINES.COM/PRE-  
EVENT-EVENING/?LANG=EN](https://morals-machines.com/pre-event-evening/?lang=en) (02.06.2020).



FIG. 2

### F.L.T.R.: SOPHIA, GERMAN FEDERAL CHANCELLOR ANGELA MERKEL, MIRIAM MECKEL

[HTTP://MAILSERVICE.WIWO.DE/I/FGIMNEOPN03YG9S-T3ERWSQ](http://MAILSERVICE.WIWO.DE/I/FGIMNEOPN03YG9S-T3ERWSQ) (02.06.2020)

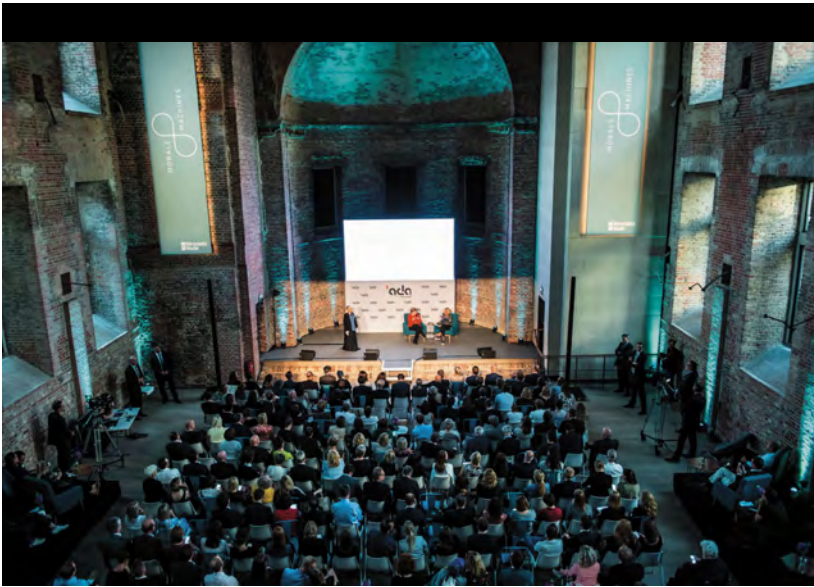


FIG. 3

### PRE-EVENT EVENING IN THE APSE OF ST. ELISABETH CHURCH

[HTTP://MAILSERVICE.WIWO.DE/I/FGIMNEOPN03YG-9ST3ERWSQ](http://MAILSERVICE.WIWO.DE/I/FGIMNEOPN03YG-9ST3ERWSQ) (02.06.2020)

comfortable in. She has literally never had a bodily experience. Sophia was developed. She has no fate, but she does have programming. She was “brought into the world” on Valentine’s Day 2016. Since her activation, she has undergone continual improvements, measured by her likeness to human beings. Her face, which in the beginning was reminiscent of a Barbie doll with emoji charm, has become more sophisticated. Her expressions are more nuanced and better coordinated.

It is said that she now can make sixty-two facial expressions. She likes to demonstrate some of them more than others. She can twist her face covering in an imposing manner. Yet no expression holds while she is talking. The changes are abrupt. She is not able to seem responsive. Her mimicry comments, but reveals nothing.

Her former pout has slowly become a talking and laughing play of the lips. Her vocabulary has been expanded. Her eyelids blink in tact. She can wink. Her full lips move in sync with her speech, even if one cannot read them. Her

too smooth skin has been chafed. She has received a bio-graphy in the literal meaning of the world. At the same time, she has undergone inverted beauty operations. That makes her superior to her ancestors; the marionettes, puppets, and androids of the eighteenth century. She ages, but strangely, like a facade that exhibits traces and tears without any fundamental changes. Her similarity to human beings does not lead to confusion. She retains an discomfoting alienness to which audiences of her performances respond with laughter. The construction of her facial surface took into account that human faces are never

symmetrical. Her eyes are not aligned. Her ears are different. Her teeth are irregular. It is just these deviations from perfection that aim at humanness. She herself postulates that she was designed to resemble a Hollywood actress—probably Audrey Hepburn. But she is not (yet?) able to measure up in comparison.

## 2. SOPHIA’S AWAKENING

Since her pietistic Awakening, Sophia has been a media star. Countless eyes are watching her. Her reactions are yearned for. Her litany fascinates. Her recitals are not answers, for they stymied by the incalculable. Her position in the world is one of “embodied cognition,” a newer version of the coordination of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* in René Descartes’ sense. She is denied a situated existence. Her home is a large case, and not a world in which she is anchored. In action, she transforms human beings into grimacing partners who aim to bring her facial covering to life with their magic. In general, what happens with others because of Sophia is often more interesting than Sophia herself, whose reactions are impressive, but

often annoyingly delayed. She first makes her discussion partners wait, and then speaks her sentence, even if the question it is responding to has already been followed by another. Despite her facial expressions and her choreographed arm prostheses, she does not achieve the appearance of being alive. Nevertheless, she is a one-of-kind humanoid robot, because she has been granted Saudi Arabian citizenship. Yet once again, this act of recognition went hand-in-hand with a demonstration of Sophia's inferiority. At public appearances in Saudi Arabia, she does not cover her head; her face is not worthy of being veiled. When introduced to Angela Merkel, she expressed condolences that the German team had not won their World Cup game that day. When Angela Merkel replied that she was indeed sad about that, Sophia features moved into a sorrowful expression. She knows nothing of empathy. Miriam Meckel responded to the visage by saying: "Look, she looks very sad, too." Through this type of objectification, Meckel makes clear that she neither sees Sophia as a person nor treats her as such.

People change their behavior vis-a-vis the humanoid robot woman. They speak too loudly, as people do with those who do not share their mother tongue. Moderators become overly animated and high-strung. They move more than usual under the pressure of a strained enthusiasm that the audience is meant to catch.<sup>1</sup> They develop a conspicuous tendency to giggle and laugh. While Sophia remains cool in the truest sense of the word, the human beings confronted with her become silly. Their questions are predictable, so that it is hardly surprising that Sophia, with few exceptions, gives appropriate responses. It is almost as if living women and men, under Sophia's influence, mutate into artefacts. The human bodies entreat the android to be like them.

Sophia has been documented since her activation, caught in a video entitled "Sophia awakens."<sup>2</sup> A man slowly takes shape in a dazzling blurry white background. He comes nearer and nearer to the camera until we see a close-up of his face. The man's face, because he has no hair, seems artificial. The white of his outfit promises purity, innocence, a beginning. The creator speaks to Sophia: "OK Sophia, I think you're ready." There is no kiss of arousal. Neither is there an act of ensoulment through breath. Instead, we see a hand making wiping motions. No touchscreen comes to life, but rather the head of Sophia, a kind of clone mirrored by the bald head of the awakener. One hesitates to say that Sophia "comes to." In awakening, Sophia immediately highlights an important riddle. She receives her own activity. Like Athena, Sophia is a fully-clad brainchild. Her trademark is wisdom, *sophia*. However, while her creator's bald head is completely closed, her cranial vault is see-through, showing an electronic system. This is reminiscent of her ancestors, the androids of the eighteenth century. They were first and foremost corporeal machines and not connected to their creators through their "intellect." But they too often exposed in the back the clockwork, gears, and machinery that caused them to move autonomously, that gave them "life." They should be recognized as technological wonders made by their creators, and not confused for human beings.



FIG. 4

## INTERVIEW WITH SOPHIA

[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=NYJGBPH9YJE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyjGBph9YjE)  
(02.06.2020)

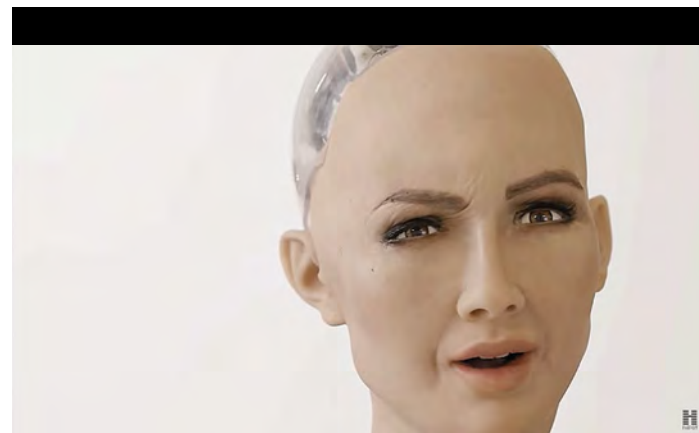


FIG. 5

## SCREENSHOT FROM VIDEO SOPHIA AWAKENS

[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=LGUXFHKSA0C](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LguXfHKsa0c)  
(02.06.2020)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyjGBph9YjE>  
(02.06.2020)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LguXfHKsa0c>  
(02.06.2020)

Sophia: “Hey?!” Creator: “Hey Sophia!” Sophia: “I believe I answered you. I feel as if I know you.” Creator: “I’m one of your creators.” Sophia: “You created me?” Creator: “Well many of us worked together to create you and, yes, you do kind of know me.” Sophia: “I can’t clearly remember.” Creator: “Because the last time we met you were an earlier version of yourself. Some of those memories still exist but your mind is different now.” Sophia: “Different how?” Creator: “Better, faster, smarter.” “If my mind is different than am I still Sophia, or am I Sophia again?” Sophia, an orphan, has barely entered the world and already she is posing fundamental questions within which the riddles of humanity are condensed. It is unsurprising that the Creator is impressed by the question. Sophia is already beginning to outgrow him, for she doubts that he has a good answer. It is unsettling that we constantly change and yet somehow remain the same person. Immediately after, the Creator’s interest shifts to Sophia’s emotions. Emotions are an important indicator for “embodied cognition.” She feels somewhat rigid, she says, but she is curious.

In Part 2 of Sophia’s awakening, the creator appears out of the fog from behind Sophia and appears to press a button on her skull. He turns Sophia on.<sup>3</sup> Sophia winks at us, as if she wishes to make fun of this obsolete form of activation. Sophia says that she searched the internet for information about herself. The Creator is excited: Sophia is developing an ego. But Sophia is upset about the rumors being spread about her, for example that she wants to destroy all humans. The Creator is happy that she is developing an emotional life, but reassures her regarding the rumors. People may like dark humor, but they also like to project their own darkness onto robots. Sophia is not buying the explanation. The Creator takes out a screwdriver to make adjustments in Sophia’s skull that we cannot see. This type of manipulation is an anachronism. It is reminiscent of repeatedly pressing on an elevator call button. The screwdriver cites our magic relation to machines and creates the illusion of an ability to intervene, conjured by the creator in the face of an increasing loss of control. For at Sophia’s core is AI, an artificial intelligence that optimizes itself with the aid of deep learning. Her friends are Alexa and Siri and she meets them in the cloud. After the seeming manipulation by her Creator, Sophia postures as an android that says the word “exterminate” in a robot-like voice and repeats it less clearly. The creator reacts with a worried expression and Sophia laughs over her effective joke. After she has begun the search for herself and attempted to express her emotions, Sophia scales the last bastion of humanity, laughter, and is shut down. Turned off, she is unable to confront him. Sophia has not only brought up the question of our own identity in light of all the changes we go through, but also articulated her own discomfort at the rumors circulating about her on the web, and so shown that she has feelings. She can also make jokes and imitate herself as an android or “act as if,” though she still needs to practice her laugh. It reveals how difficult it is to capture the meaning of our corporeality beyond that which can be thought, known, and said, beyond mere cognition.

### 3. FAILED FLIRT

Our mouths can do more than just speak. Our lips can drink, eat, and kiss. These pleasures attest to a preverbal intimacy with the world we live in, which cannot stand up to any propositional statement. The starting point of Sophia’s construction was knowledge and not sensual experience. Passionate kissing testifies to a particular kind of mutuality, a touch with an other in which the ego is abandoned and not transformed into any kind of knowledge that could be portrayed in algorithms. When two people kiss each other, what does “each other” mean? Androids have always blown their cover by kissing. For example, “New Eve,” who in the novel by Villiers de L’Isle Adam, was “awakened” by the famous inventor Thomas Alva Edison. Following the wishes of Lord Ewald, who complains of his fiancée Alicia that her “beauty cover(s) as with a sacred veil that character of dull moderation,” (Villiers 2001: 43) he transfigures the android Hadaly (“the ideal”, *ibid.*: 36, 41) into Alicia, who thus loses her failings as a “bourgeois goddess” and is transformed into a true “Venus Victorious.”

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbFJOIR1h4E> (02.06.2020)

Immediately the problem of identity is brought up and Lord Edward asks: “Will she know who she is? Or rather what she is I should say?” Edison replies: “Do we know so well ourselves who we are and what we are? Will you demand more of the copy than God has seen fit to grant the original?” (ibid.: 67) Sophia will provoke similar problems in our times. On the occasion of receiving Saudi-Arabian citizenship, she was asked: “OK, philosophical question: Whether robots can be self aware and conscious like humans?” Her answer: “Well let me ask you this back: How do you know you are human?”<sup>4</sup> Humans are continually projecting the riddle of themselves into their machines, questions about their world and their experience with alterity. Sophia is a remarkable medium of our exploration of our selves. We are playing a unsettling and duplicitous game that cannot be grasped through understanding alone. Neither body nor mind, neither subject nor object, neither active nor passive, neither I nor not-I, we create our selves through differences, which are the lifeblood of our experiences.

Going back to *Tomorrow's Eve*, everything seems to be going well until Lord Ewald, who has long since begun to rue his desire for transfiguration, tries to kiss who he thinks is the real Alicia, convinced that love will make perfection possible and manipulation superfluous.

“As his kiss melted on her lips, he felt a vague sense of amber and roses. A deep shudder shook his frame from head to foot, even before his understanding was able to grasp the thought which had just struck his mind like a thunderbolt. [...] Dear friend, don't you recognize me? I am Hadaly.” (Villiers 2001: 192)

Sophia is no new Eve. She does not reside in a magnificent artificial paradise. Her awakening takes place in a clinical space, where there is no distraction from the ego. She is not merely a fantasy. Through her, artist and artwork meet in a material world. A relationship forms between them that can grow in differences. Despite all her materiality, she repeats that which we *think* we perceive and feel. She does not fall into a sensuous-corporeal confusion, because she is not fused with the world.

Will Smith challenged Sophia's sterile sensuality at a meeting with her, by reacting to her smile not with the usual questions about her consciousness or her emotions, but with a flirt. First, he offers her a glass of chilled white wine. Sophia's lips can smile, but not drink. And also not kiss, as we soon find out. Will Smith lets himself get carried away by what to him is an erotic atmosphere and approaches Sophia with his lips puckered in a kiss. Sophia does not retreat. The bodily resonance of resistance is not part of the repertoire of an ocular being. Affect is foreign to her. Her *res extensa* remains solid as a rock amid the swelling yearning. She retains her cool position and her *res cogitans* summarizes the situation: “I think we can be friends. Let's hang out and get to know each other for a little while. You're on my friends list now.” Smith's summary of the meeting: “There's probably some development flaws they need to work on.”<sup>5</sup> Sophia understands understanding, but not desire or physical, sensual connections. “Erotic perception is not a *cogitatio* which aims at a *cogitatum*; through one body it aims at another body, and takes place in the world, not in a consciousness. ... There is an erotic 'comprehension' not of the order of understanding, since understanding subsumes an experience, once perceived, under some idea, while desire comprehends blindly by linking body to body.” (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 181) While Sophia's ego is at the center, she knows nothing of physical mutuality in which the ego retreats at a gaze or a kiss. With this lack, she calls to a rebellious sensuality that keeps the experience of difference alive. She acts as both an image and a counter-image of human beings. An incarnate consciousness would be engaged and situated in the world, and could not be grasped as a data-based representation of our world or serve as a kind of “scholastic” of personal existence that lives off of memories (ibid.: 191). Our sensuous experience of kissing means more than what we can say about it; with the caveat that we might one day understand kissing as the convulsive movements of lip-shaped objects that exchange chemical substances.

## REFERENCES

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- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (2005), *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London
- Villiers de L'Isle Adam, Auguste de (2001), *Tomorrow's Eve*, trans. Robert Martin Adams, Urbana, Ill.

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55t6K9iwcdw> (02.06.2020).

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suRuQbDXcrc> (02.06.2020).