Virtues, Robots, and Good Lives: Who Cares?

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1 Introduction

I begin with a general overview of the primary elements of Virtue Ethics (VE) as a global tradition which in its Western*[1] developments turns centrally on *phronēsis*, both "practical wisdom" and the capacity for reflective judgment. Starting with Antigone, *phronēsis* grounds what become Western* traditions of civil disobedience and conscientious objection. At the same time, there are strong arguments that *phronēsis* is not computationally tractable (i.e., *phronēsis*'s processes and capabilities cannot be fully replicated by computational technologies and techniques such as Artificial Intelligence (AI)). This will have important consequences for the uptake of VE as an increasingly central framework for Information and Computing Ethics (ICE). This is in part as ICE *qua* global ethics must avoid what I have called "computer-mediated colonization," i.e., the imposition of Western* norms and values upon the rest of the world. A *pluralistic* VE – as I have developed in terms of a *pro hen* interpretive pluralism – seeks to avoid such colonization as well as the fragmentation and potential violence of a simple ethical relativism: that is, as such relativism abandons efforts to achieve shared norms, practices, etc., cultural differences can be used to justify violence in the name of protecting local identities, norms, practices, etc. against all "Others" who may (appear to) threaten such local identities, etc.[2] How privacy is understood across diverse

1 Following a convention suggested by Grodzinsky, Miller, and Wolf (2008), the asterisk indicates that this term is deeply fraught, contested, and highly ambiguous – perhaps even no longer meaningful at all in certain ways. There is no space here to explore the possible variations and nuances: the term can be used here only as a shorthand or heuristic. I will also flag privacy* in this way for similar reasons.

2 For example, during their visit to Oslo, Norway, in late January, 2022, when confronted by journalists with questions regarding their plans for protecting young girls' rights to

cultures – first of all as cultures vary their emphases on more *individual* vis-à-vis more *relational* conceptions of selfhood – serves as a primary example of such pluralism.

This second section continues with a series of common objections to VE and replies. Especially important here are critiques of VE as *human-centric*. On the one hand, feminist and posthumanist decenterings of the (male) human are vitally important to enhancing our possible relationships with computational agents as well as the larger world: such decentering overrides especially Christian and Cartesian dualisms entailing master-slave relationships between mind vs. body, male vs. female, human vs. nature as well as machines as artifacts – foregrounding rather an inextricable web of relationality and greater equality with such Others. On the other hand, throwing out modern notions of autonomy entirely thereby ejects the grounding for the still urgent insistence on equality, emancipation, and democratic norms.[3] These tensions thus force the question: How to preserve and enhance democratic rights and norms of equality, emancipation, and disobedience in a posthumanist philosophical anthropology?

As sexuality and intimacy are especially sensitive dimensions of our possible relationships with social robots as driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML), in the third section I explore this tension by reviewing an application of VE to sexbots. The feminist phenomenological and ethical analyses of Sara Ruddick (1975) helpfully conjoin virtue ethics with deontological norms of equality and respect as part of "complete sex" – and further uncover both care and loving itself as virtues, i.e., capabilities that must be cultivated and fostered. I argue that while "good sex" between human and

education and women's rights in general, the Taliban spokesman replied that these were Western perspectives that did not apply to them. This use of relativism to defend local differences has been followed up subsequently with sometimes violent repression of these rights in Afghanistan in the name of protecting the Taliban's interpretations of Sharia as the law of the land. Cf. Wong (2020).

3 As Janina Loh makes clear, not all postmodernists or posthumanists threaten these notions of autonomy (2022). But certainly early postmodernists such as Lyotard ([1979] 1984) undermine these notions as merely parts of the Enlightenment «master narrative», i.e., in contrast with stronger ontological and/or philosophical anthropological claims grounded in philosophical arguments, etc. Reduced to narrative, such claims can then be easily switched out with postmodernist narratives that can elide or simply eliminate these notions. At least some versions of early postmodernism, especially within the US context, thereby fell into simple epistemological, ontological and ethical relativisms that eliminated these central claims entirely.

machines may well be possible and desirable, a "complete sex" is not. As a start, Ruddick's conditions for complete sex include first-person phenomenal consciousness, mutuality of desire, and autonomy as issuing in a deontological insistence on equality and respect. As with *phronēsis*, however, these and related conditions such as genuine emotions and embodied desire, are (likely) not computationally tractable.

At the same time, such differences between human and machine – starting with the absence of autonomy – might inspire us to see these devices as simple means to our ends, treating them analogously to "just meat," as articulated in prominent criticisms of sexbots as, for example, reinscribing traditional patriarchal and racist attitudes. To counter this, I turn in the fourth section to more recent developments in a "more than human" ethics of care. These developments extend a postmodern rejection of the Cartesian master-slave relationship between mind and body, human and nature, male and female, and thus humans and machines. This expanded ethics of care thus add to central notions of a pluralistic VE, as exercised by relational autonomies, to a posthuman philosophical anthropology that promises to foster possibilities of good sex between humans and machines. This is particularly prevalent as machines are now understood to be endowed with a default goodness and moral status. Such an ethics will also help in cultivating still larger relationships of care and repairment between humans and the more than human webs of relationships within which we are inextricably entangled.

In sum: I argue that good lives of flourishing are possible by way of a relational VE coupled with ethical pluralism vis-à-vis four problems, beginning with developing an Intercultural Information Ethics that avoids both ethical relativism and computer-mediated colonization. Second, risks to undermining autonomy as core to democratic polity, norms, and emancipatory imperatives are initially resolved via feminist notions of *relational autonomy*. Third, risks of reinstating master-slave relationships in conjunction with sexbots can be overcome for the sake of "good sex" with our machineries by way of an ethics of care for our more than human webs of relationships. A fourth problem, that of ethical deskilling, of unlearning the virtue of care, can be resolved via a heightened commitment to care. Our cultivation of care, along with *phronēsis*, loving itself, and *courage* thus emerge as at least necessary conditions for good lives of flourishing and pursuits of emancipation, equality, and respect in our human and more than human webs of relationships.

To see how this is so, we begin with a careful look at virtue ethics.

2 Virtue ethics in Information and Communication Technology Ethics

2.1 VE – an overview

Versions of VE are found more or less everywhere – both in major global traditions such as Confucian thought as well as classical Aristotelian VE, but also in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) as well as indigenous traditions. This global reach may arise in part from the fact that VE starts with a very simple – and, it would seem, a near *universal* human interest: namely, in achieving a life of contentment or *eudaimonia*. This is to say that VE starts with the question: what sort of person do I want/need to become to feel content (*eudaimonia*) and to *flourish*, to feel that my abilities and capacities unfold and become better over time – not simply in the immediate present, but across the course of my entire (I hope, long) life? This basic interest in *a good life* leads to the central insight that certain basic *habits*, *capacities*, and *abilities*[4] are necessary to acquire and cultivate in order to achieve such contentment and flourishing. To begin with, as Shannon Vallor has foregrounded, the capacities of patience, perseverance, empathy, trust and, indeed, loving itself are necessary conditions for communication, deep friendships, as well as long-term commitments such as partnership or marriage, much less parenting (e.g. Vallor 2010). As I paraphrase her accounts – recall when you were very young and small and were dragged to visit some boring relative or another: how much patience, perseverance, and so on did you have when confronted with the expected communication and relationship with, for example, an ancient grandmother? Such qualities are notoriously absent in four-year-olds,

4 In several languages and cultures, "virtue" and thereby "virtue ethics" can carry overtones of a sort of moralizing that is no longer useful or attractive. For example, in Anglophone usage "virtue" became a euphemism for a young woman's virginity: to "lose one's virtue," especially in more Victorian and Puritanical times, was a great sin, shame, and scandal. In Scandinavia, my students tell me, when I talk about virtue ethics I sound like a "Konfi-leder," the person leading young people preparing for Confirmation – something like a Sunday School teacher in the US. If "virtue" in your language / cultural experiences carries such off-putting, moralizing overtones, you can substitute "capability" or "ability" for the term. In fact, there is a related – but also importantly different – form of ethics developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen titled "capability ethics" (Robeyns/Byskov 2021). But it would go too far afield to explore the important similarities and differences in this context.

for example: as should be clear, these are capacities or abilities that we acquire and develop only over a very long time – indeed, a lifetime. But as, for example, musicians, gamers, people skilled in various crafts, etc. will recognize, we must also acquire and practice these abilities – for instance, when confronting a difficult game, musical score, project, and so on – along with our more particular skills and abilities, in order to accomplish our aims with excellence and thus enjoy *eudaimonia*.

More generally, as Vallor elaborates (2016: pp. 36-49), diverse VE traditions have emerged emphasizing contentment and flourishing in terms of *harmony* [*He* in Confucian thought] – either a more internal harmony (e.g., among the elements of the *psyche* ["soul"] in Plato) or more external harmony with the larger society and (super)natural order (e.g., *tian* ["heaven"] in Confucian thought). Specific to Western* traditions, however, is the central virtue of *phronēsis* – a term that means both "practical wisdom" as well as the essential capacity of a reflective form of *judgment*.

Phronēsis is arguably centrally distinctive to Western* traditions – starting with Sophocles' play *Antigone*. Antigone's brother Polynices has been killed in the Theban civil war and left on the battlefield on orders of Creon, the new tyrant. Antigone's familial and religious obligation is to give her brother a proper burial: doing so, by Creon's decree, will be punished by death. Antigone's own use of *phronēsis* leads to her making the startling – indeed, revolutionary – decision to defy Creon's orders and bury her brother, no matter the cost. This "Antigone moment" (Rockwell F. Clancy, unpublished manuscript: cf. Clancy 2021) appears to root what becomes a distinctively Western* tradition of civil disobedience and protest – as further manifest in Socrates' accusations against Athens, and his willingness to put his obedience to a higher law in conflict with the decrees of the state, even if the cost is death.

In Plato, *phronēsis* is especially tied with the key image and example of the steersman (*cybernetes*): 'An outstanding pilot [*cybernetes*] or doctor is aware of the difference between what is impossible in his art and what is possible, and he attempts the one, and lets the other go; and if, after all, he should still trip up in any way, he is competent to set himself aright' (*Republic* 360e-361a, Bloom trans.; cf. *Republic* I, 332e-c; VI, 489c, in Ess 2007a: 15). *Phronēsis* appears here as both a practical wisdom in the understanding of what is both possible and not possible, and as a capacity for judging what the best course or treatment might be within a specific context. Most importantly, *phronēsis* entails our capacity to learn from our mistakes: experience, including making what

turn out to be *judgments* leading to undesirable consequences or errors, can thus inspire an *ethical* self-correction – and thereby enhance and refine both the substance of our practical wisdom as well as our capacity for reflective judgment.

Last but not least, *phronēsis* is especially critical vis-à-vis social robots as driven by AI / ML. As Joseph Weizenbaum's title suggests, *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation* (1976), *phronēsis* is arguably distinct from and not tractable by computational techniques. These arguments have been amplified in recent years – perhaps most powerfully by Katharina Zweig, a bio-informaticist who explores in considerable but highly accessible detail what she characterizes as the "machine room" of AI / ML (2019). The first part of her German title is telling: *Ein Algorithmus hat kein Taktgefühl* – an algorithm has no sense of tact, where tact means primarily a sense of what is socially appropriate. Zweig links this sense of tact explicitly with *Urteilskraft* – judgment. She forcefully argues that given the details of how algorithms and ML systems are designed and implemented, they are unable to replicate the sorts of qualitative, context-sensitive judgments that human beings must thereby make in their stead (cf. Cantwell Smith 2019; Sullins, 2021).

2.2 VE in information and computing ethics

To begin with, the *cybernetes*' capacity for self-correction is manifestly the inspiration for 'cybernetics' as taken up by Norbert Wiener as 'the science of messages' ([1950]1954: 77; cf. Bynum, 2010). Wiener's particular vision draws from the French Enlightenment notion of *liberté* – understood more precisely as "...the liberty of each human being to develop in his freedom the full measure of the human possibilities embodied in him" (1954: 106; Ess 2019: 82). Such unfolding of one's best possibilities is manifestly part of a larger pursuit of flourishing and a good life.

The past twenty years or so have witnessed an ever increasing emphasis on VE, for instance, in Kari Gwen Coleman's "Android Arête: Toward a virtue ethic for computational agents" (2001). Coleman hereby begins a now prominent thread of VE especially in conjunction with Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), and social robots as incorporating these technologies.

In particular, VE and its central concept of *phronēsis* entail that it is not just professional philosophers who might be good at making reflective judgments: rather, as is emphasized especially in its Aristotelian antecedents, *all*

of us are "ethicists" precisely in the sense that each of us must make such difficult reflective judgments throughout our lives, in the face of both large and small ethical dilemmas. This insight has become powerfully instantiated in the recent work of the International Electronic and Electrical Engineering (IEEE) association' project to develop "ethically-aligned design" for AI and ML. The executive summary of the first major document in this direction is worth quoting in its entirety:

> "Whether our ethical practices are Western (e.g., Aristotelian, Kantian), Eastern (e.g., Shinto, 墨家/School of Mo, Confucian), African (e.g., Ubuntu), or from another tradition... our goal should be ***eudaimonia***, a practice elucidated by Aristotle that defines human well-being, both at the individual and collective level, as the highest virtue for a society.
>
> ...
>
> Autonomous and intelligent systems should prioritize and have as their goal the explicit **honoring of our inalienable fundamental rights and dignity** as well as **the increase of human *flourishing*** and **environmental sustainability**." (Ess 2019: 2, emphases added)

This last sentence shows clear commitments to both deontology as grounding rights and dignity and to the now recognizably central elements of eudaimonia and flourishing. This statement is further helpful as it points out the literally *global* reach of VE traditions, as noted above. This is to say: I (and others) have argued that VE is central, perhaps inevitable in an information and computing ethics (ICE) that is an unavoidably global enterprise. As Krystina Gorniak-Kocikowska (1996) pointed out early on, "computer ethics" must become a global ethics as ICTs become globally distributed technologies, most especially via the internet. Gorniak observed that such a global ICE must meet two criteria. One, such an ethics hence requires recognition as ethically legitimate and compelling in diverse cultures around the world ("global reach"). Two, this ethics must squarely confront and resolve what I have called the problem of "computer-mediated colonization," i.e., how to establish such a global ethics of (quasi-) universal norms, values, principles etc. *without* imposing (colonizing) these *homogenously* across the globe? (Ess 2002a, 2002b, 2006a, 2006b, 2020; Bynum/Kantar 2021)

These issues have been taken up since at least 1990, in what Rafael Capurro designated as Intercultural Information Ethics (1990; cf. Ma 2021) and what more recently has been designated as an Intercultural Digital Ethics (Aggarwal 2020) and Intercultural Ethics of Technology (Verbeek 2021). My approach

has focused on the development of what is most elaborately designated as an interpretative *pros hen* ("towards one") pluralism that seeks to hold together both (quasi-) universal norms or values (or, alternatively, what Clifford Christians (2019) has identified as "proto-norms") alongside irreducible differences distinguishing local practices, traditions, and so on. The central insight here is that we can recognize, in at least some important and prominent examples, that such local differences are not necessarily the result of an ethical relativism – i.e., the claim that there is no such thing as (quasi-) universal values that are ethically legitimate over (most) human cultures and histories: rather, there are only local practices and norms that are thereby ethically relevant solely within ("relative to") a given time and place. *Contra* such relativism, pluralism rather argues that these differences result from diverse *interpretations*, applications, and/or understandings of *shared* norms and values. As a first example, privacy*[5] is a norm that is shared across many cultures in one way or another – but sometimes understood or applied in dramatically different ways. To begin with, in contemporary Western* societies, privacy* is understood as a *positive* good and primary right – primarily for *individuals* in Anglophone societies as well as for more *relational individuals* in Scandinavian societies. For example, privacy rights are part and parcel of Human Subjects Protections in Anglophone societies, whose research ethics emphasize obligations to protect individual's privacy and thereby confidentiality by way of practices of informed consent, anonymization, and so on. In Norwegian research ethics, the emphasis is on protecting the privacy of both a given individual *and* that of those who are included in the close relationships of one's *privatlivet* [private life] and *intimsfære* [intimate sphere] (NESH 2006; Ess 2019).

In sharp contrast, traditional societies emphasize especially *relational* conceptions of the self – i.e., where selfhood and identity are entirely defined by one's relationships with others. In Confucian tradition, for example, who we are as spouse, friend, parent, child, sibling, aunt or uncle, a specific vocation, and member of larger communities – social, natural, and, in some worldviews, "supernatural" – constitute the *entirety* of our sense of self: in contrast with modern Western*, especially strongly atomistic conceptions of selfhood,

5 As noted in ftn. 1, the asterisk serves as a reminder that this term / concept is so contested and ambiguous that its meaning(s) must be much more carefully specified: but as with "Western*, " to further specify privacy* with required detail and nuance would require considerably more space than is available here. Proceed with caution.

there is no such "self" left over if these relationships are compromised or destroyed (Ames/Rosemont 1999; Ess 2011: 17.) Similar understandings are documented in Buddhist societies, as well in Southern African understandings of "Ubuntu" (Paterson 2007: 157-158). In these societies (at least prior to their interacting with and thereby being influenced by contemporary Western* societies), privacy* was understood either as something entirely negative, for example, as something shameful or hidden (Lü 2005) or as a relational privacy such as familial privacy in traditional Thailand (Kitiyadisai 2005). In a pluralistic interpretation, these sharp differences are thus nonetheless clear examples of *interpreting* or applying a shared norm – refracted, as it were, through the lenses of very different assumptions of selfhood and identity, to start with (cf. Hongladarom 2017; Ess 2019, 2020; Ma 2021).

Such a pluralism helps us to avoid an ethical relativism that, in effect, gives up on a shared global ethic and defends instead – sometimes with violence – the legitimacy of a solely local tradition as irreducibly different from others. At the same time, this pluralism allows for a shared set of global norms that, precisely as refracted and applied differently, thereby protects and preserves local cultural identities, practices, etc. Stated differently, pluralism thus avoids imposing norms *homogenously* in all times and places – erasing cultural differences in a (computer-mediated) colonization or imperialism.[6]

2.3 Virtue ethics – objections, replies, clarifications

2.3.1 Individual cultivation?

Of course, VE is not without its limitations and criticisms. A first set of critiques clusters about the assumption that VE rests and focuses solely upon *individual cultivation*. This is to say, as Luciano Floridi argued early on, VE thereby does not scale up – it is not an ethics that can be adopted on a society-wide scale (Floridi 2013: 164-168; cf. Floridi 1999: 41, in Bay 2021: 361).

6 *Pros hen* interpretive pluralism is manifestly Western* in its origins: this opens up debate as to whether or not, despite its best intentions, it nonetheless risks a conceptual colonization across diverse cultures. I and others have argued that forms of pluralism can be found in both religious and philosophical traditions "East and West" (e.g., Moon 2003; Ess 2020; cf. Hashas 2021): at the same time, others have argued that pros hen pluralism either needs refinement to fully avoid such colonization (Hongladarom 2021) or is better understood as one approach to pluralism that resonates but is not fully identical with, e.g., the Indian dialogical process of Samvād (Gautam/Singh 2021; Ess 2021a).

Floridi's critique, however, is fundamentally countered first of all by the emphasis in contemporary ICE on *relational* forms of VE. This is certainly the case with Shannon Vallor's foundational work on "the techno-moral virtues" as cultivated among human beings as relational (2016): this means, as Bastiaan Vanaker put it more recently, that virtues are in fact learned among a community of peers (2021: 348-349). This is especially so for a VE drawn from Confucian traditions, as both Vallor (2016) and Pak-Hang Wong (2012, 2020) have developed (cf. Bay 2021: 359-360). I have also pointed out that the ancient roots of Western* VE in Antigone, Socrates and Aristotle likewise presume a more relational self: beyond Vallor's work, such a self is articulated in contemporary feminist accounts of *relational autonomy*. As but one example, Andrea Westlund notes that "Some social influences will not compromise, but instead enhance and improve the capacities we need for autonomous agency" (Westlund 2009: 27; in Ess 2019: 78). These understandings that we can be *more free* through our relationships with others – as others, e.g., can introduce us to and encourage us in our cultivation of specific skills and abilities – are especially well exemplified in specific Scandinavian practices and law. For example, the *allemannsretten*, "every one's right" to access to otherwise private property for the sake of camping, picnicking, and so on, is a form of *inclusive property* or Commons that acknowledges shared rights of access coupled with shared responsibilities to *practice* care in accessing these Common spaces (Ess 2019: 79-80). More specifically, David Gunkel (2018) and Mark Coeckelberg (2020) have applied relational versions of VE to the ethics of AI, ML, and social robots.

2.3.2 Naturalistic objections

These begin with *empirical* observations of how people appear to make ethical judgments and decisions, emphasizing that they don't do so by way of VE, and therefore VE is not a viable ethic. So, for example, in her ethnography of Danish robotics engineers, Jessica Sorensson (2019) documents in fine detail how these engineers largely do not think of "ethics" as part of their work – or, more harshly, as simply something that gets in the way. More elaborately, Vanaker (2021: 348-349) summarizes critiques of VE from "situationists" who interpret experiments in moral psychology as demonstrating that people's decisions, for example, to help others, are based more on random environmental factors than on a VE model of moral cultivation. Perhaps most harshly, Vanaker points to recent work in personality studies demonstrating that "both per-

sonality and situations guide behavior [such that] what circumstances [and] what traits will affect behavior is the main concern" (2021: 348).

Beyond Vanaker's persuasive rejoinders to these critiques, I would further point out that all of these critiques fit the model of the classic *naturalistic fallacy* – that means, seeking to argue from *what is* the case to what *ought* to be case. As crude examples: most societies have practiced some form of slavery (what is) – therefore, we also ought to practice slavery. Or: most societies have subordinated women and children – therefore we should, too. And so on. In these instances: where our empirical studies show that at least many people do not judge or behave according to VE (what is), therefore, we must argue that people *ought not* to pursue VE. While there is much debate about naturalism in these directions (e.g., Baldwin 2010), I hope the examples of slavery and patriarchy make clear that naturalism is a risky approach to ethics.[7]

2.3.3 VE as (excessively) human-centric?

These criticisms are broadly based within postmodernism and subsequent expressions of feminism, posthumanism, postcolonialism, and, more recently, decolonial analyses and theoretical frameworks. At the risk of a painting with a very broad brush, all raise central critiques of especially "the modern liberal subject" as articulated especially in more atomistic conceptions of a rational self in early modernity. Early postmodernism, for example, undermines these classical assumptions as part of a "master narrative" defining Enlightenment views and aims: *contra* arguments for a reason or rationality that will provide us with a universal knowledge of both *what is* (natural science) and *what*

7 These examples evoke a further question, however: by contrast, how do we know if / that we are being virtuous when we do what we ought to do? Very briefly: our benchmarks begin with the phronemoi – the good persons whom we recognize as exemplars (equivalent to the *junzi* in Confucian thought) and who serve as sources of guidance as we attempt to (phronetically) judge in a given context / case, e.g., "What would Jesus – and/or Antigone and/or Socrates … – do?" Other exemplars would include 19th ct. Abolitionists in their struggle to eliminate slavery, the Suffragists to establish women's voting rights, and so on. As these latter examples further suggest, conjoining VE with deontology as insisting on protecting and enhancing our autonomy (as a start) means that those virtues and phronemoi that aim towards greater equality, respect, and emancipation (including, as we will see below, among the more than human webs of relationships) are most likely reliable virtues and moral exemplars indeed (Ess 2016a).

ought to be (ethics and politics) – postmodernism characterizes these as nothing other than relatively arbitrary narratives that can and should be replaced by more contemporary ones (e.g., Lyotard 1979). This inaugurates a broadly shared strategy of "decentering," of moving away from notions of a Cartesian pure reason as defining the human as thereby the "master and possessor of nature" (Descartes [1637] 1972: 119-120; Ess 2017). Similarly, important feminist critiques of early Habermasian notions of the ideal speech situation and the importance of "the unforced force of the better argument" persuasively demonstrated that these notions were excessively "masculinist" and thereby excluded especially women and children as traditionally understood (e.g., Benhabib 1986). Importantly, this strand of critique led not to a final rejection of Habermas, but rather to its revisions and expansions so as to include, e.g., affective dimensions such as empathy and solidarity. More recently, May Thorseth (2008) draws on Iris Marion Young's critique of Habermas' early emphases on a neutral and dispassionate rationality as these exclude the less powerful (traditionally women and children) whose communication may depend upon emotion and rhetoric as well. Coupled with William Regh's defense of rhetoric in a Habermasian model and Kant's account of *judgment* as interwoven with aesthetic and affective dimensions, Thorseth develops an expanded notion of Habermasian notion public deliberation as incorporating *narratives* as well, so as to thereby incorporate especially the voices and experiences of women and children as traditionally portrayed.

Additional critiques along these lines include Donna Haraway's foundational "Cyborg Manifesto" ([1985 1991) as well as more recent postcolonial and decolonial theories (e.g., Battell and Mayblin 2011). In my view, these critiques represent important *extensions* of Enlightenment – indeed, far more ancient – impulses and aims towards emancipation and equality (see especially Ingram 2018). This is manifest in efforts to resolutely emphasize the voices and experiences of those previously marginalized by excessively masculinist notions of reason – women, children, people of color, and so on. Equally importantly, more recent expressions of such decentering seek to further include the nonhuman or "more than human" within our ethical focus and networks of care. A primary example here is Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Information (PI) and affiliated Information Ethics. Floridi "… takes reality qua information as intrinsically valuable" – a philosophical position manifestly inspired by the rise of ICTs and networked computing technologies as now "enveloping" us in what Floridi has aptly called "the infosphere" (2014). Floridi's information ethics thus deeply resonates with and takes on board in varying ways any

number of shifts over the past several decades within sociology and then environmental and feminist philosophies that share a central focus on, e.g., "webs of relationships" (Gilligan 1982) and the interconnection of all things more broadly (Ess 2009: 161-162). These shifts have been further accelerated by feminist and related critiques of 19th ct. positivism as an extension of Descartes' notion of a masculinist reason radically divorced from body and thereby nature more generally (such a divorce is the philosophical precondition for then claiming that men – meaning *men* – can then assert themselves as masters and possessors of nature: Descartes, *ibid*; Ess 2017). Perhaps most importantly, the rise of relativity theories and then quantum mechanics dramatically undermines both the ontological and epistemological assumptions required for positivism – leading instead to centrally *relational* notions yet once again, such as "the entanglement of matter and meaning" (Barad 2007; cf. Wendt 2015). Not accidently, these notions further reflect the growing influence over these past decades of other non-dualistic philosophies such as Buddhism and Confucian traditions. Floridi's PI in particular, is further allied with a "philosophical naturalism" to be found in Western figures such as Plato and Spinoza (Ess 2009: 94).

On the one hand, especially given our interest here in social robots and related technologies, these moves towards a non-dualistic decentering of a once privileged male rationality, are crucial. They not only have overcome or, more precisely, transformed various forms of high modern human-centric modes of thinking and *feeling* as we pursue ethically central values and goals of greater equality and emancipation (as foundational to democratic polity and norms as well), and ecological inclusiveness: they thereby ground an emphasis on the moral status of the larger order of "things" – including ICTs and devices such as robots. This is to say: Floridi's PI in particular, along with more relational accounts of VE such as articulated by Gunkel (2018) and Coeckelbergh (2020) attribute a 'default goodness' (my term) that presumes some degree of intrinsic value in all existent entities as inextricably interwoven with one another.

On the other hand, several important criticisms of these developments are likewise critical. Most briefly: for all their demonstrated emancipatory, egalitarian and democratic aims and impulses – they run the risk of throwing out the human / ethical agent with the modernist bathwaters, and thereby pulling the ethical and argumentative rugs out from under the feet of those of us who endorse precisely these central Enlightenment impulses and aims.

Within the domain of ICE, Rafael Capurro (2008) criticized Floridi's PI in these directions. Capurro argued that PI's non-androcentric insistence on the intrinsic (if easily overridable) value of all entities will inevitably lead to a potentially disastrous undermining of our emphases on the value and responsibility of human beings as key moral agents (Ess 2008: 93).

More broadly, any number of feminists early on recognized these risks as well – i.e., that eliminating all trace of modernist conceptions of human beings as (relationally) autonomous moral agents thereby likewise threatens feminist insistence on gender equality and thereby full enjoyment of the multiple rights defining democratic polity – however much, of course, these had only until recently been recognized as rights for white heterosexual males. For example, Linda McClain (1999) has argued for a reconstruction of earlier conceptions of privacy that would recognize feminist critiques of the modern liberal subject whilst avoiding its complete deconstruction. The preservation of privacy is especially crucial in the US context as the central legal defense for abortion rights. As we have also argued more recently, such privacy remains especially critical to protecting and fostering LGBTQIA2S +[8] sexualities, identities, practices, and so on (Lagerkvist et al, forthcoming).

In particular, the emergence of feminist notions of *relational autonomy* is inspired in part precisely by the concern that the complete loss of some version of autonomy would thus undermine central arguments for equality, dignity, respect, justice, emancipation, and democracy (e.g., Westlund 2009; Veltman 2014). Specifically, Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper explicitly link Kant's notion of autonomy to VE: "autonomy is one primary good among others that a person needs to live a good life or to achieve human flourishing" (2014: 2).

More broadly, Mireille Hildebrandt has pointed out that autonomy in modern law encodes the central rights to resist, disobey, and contest what others, including police and other governmental authorities may accuse us of, in a court of law (2015: 10). Hildebrandt thus articulates the modern legal defense of what may also include rights to *conscientious objection*. As we have seen, Western* traditions of conscientious objection can be traced to Antigone and then figures such as Socrates. In the modern era, conscientious objection and practices of non-violent civil disobedience have been central to all manner of emancipatory movements, such as the 19th ct. Abolitionists and

8 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, and plus, in effect, what is yet to be discerned and claimed in for sexualities and identities (my paraphrase).

Suffragettes, and then in the 20th century, for example, Gandhi's campaign for Indian independence, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s struggle to achieve Civil Rights for US people of color, global opposition to the Vietnam conflict, followed by global efforts to achieve equal rights and recognition for the broad spectrum of identities and sexualities currently indicated with LGBTQIA2S+. Preserving autonomy in some form is hence critical as it grounds primary notions of equality and rights, democratic polity and norms, and the central insistence on equality and emancipations that marks the majority of these diverse developments over the past decades.

In the fourth section I will return to the central question forced by these tensions – namely, how to preserve and enhance democratic rights and norms of equality, emancipation, and disobedience in a posthumanist philosophical anthropology? But first, I take up a central application of VE to sexbots as the site of centrally human experiences of sexuality and intimacy. This exploration opens up the possibility of "good sex" with machines – but also ethical risks of treating them as simply means to our own ends. The fourth section will explore a care ethics oriented towards the "more than human" web of relationships as including machines and thereby counters the risks of our treating them as mere devices and slaves.

3 Virtue ethics, sex, and robots

As in many other domains, the ethical proof is in the ethical pudding. That is, what do we gain or achieve by taking up VE with regard to robots – in this case, sexbots? I have taken up virtue ethics, coupled with deontology and intimations of what becomes an ethics of care (Ruddick 1975; Ess 2018), as a primary framework with which to approach the many contentious questions surrounding possibilities of love and sex with robots. I review this application here first for the sake of what it may contribute to our assumptions and understandings of love and sex may be – certainly between humans and possibly between humans and machines. Moreover, this analysis thereby foregrounds important ethical limitations to human-machine sex – ones that at the same time will be helpful as we consider in the final section what it might mean to extend VE and care ethics to "more than human" webs of care that encompass not only our technologies, but the larger (super-)natural orders within which we must all live and breathe.

As we have seen, taking up VE in conjunction with robots is by no means a recent turn (Coleman 1999). Earlier work has also applied deontological ethics – for example, to the matter of a central form of *deception*. On the one hand, enthusiasts for robot sex and love – primarily, David Levy (2007) – argue that even if robots cannot genuinely *feel* love, affection, and/or desire for us, this is no objection or hindrance towards our feeling such for them. Specifically, in what is now well documented and exploited in *affective design* – we humans are easily triggered into feeling care and concern for inanimate devices insofar as they can imitate behaviors indexing emotive states. *Contra* Levy's endorsement of such a design, John Sullins has clearly argued that such design amounts to deceptive trick – where deception is morally objectionable: "It is unethical to play on deep-seated human psychological weaknesses put there by evolutionary pressure as this is disrespectful of human agency" (Sullins 2012: 408; in Ess 2016b: 65).

In turn, I have taken up Sara Ruddick's careful phenomenological accounts of "complete sex" vis-à-vis "good sex" (1975). Most briefly, Ruddick discerns a series of necessary conditions for complete sex between two human beings,[9] starting with the requirement for the presence of a first-person phenomenological consciousness – minimally, a consciousness that is both aware of itself and the larger world, including the beloved, and thereby imbued with both moral agency and critical reflection. Such self-consciousness is specifically interwoven with emotions, including those of love and care, and embodied desire: for Ruddick, these must be genuine emotions and desire, not faked or feigned. According to Ruddick, moreover, we experience complete sex when our desire for one another is *mutual*: this means not simply that our desire for one another will be (roughly) equal – more fundamentally, I desire that the beloved desire my desire. Such mutualities are then key to a first ethical consequence and condition: they encourage us to regard one another as free and thus as equals, thereby meeting the first Kantian requirements for autonomy, namely reciprocal respect and thus equality.

Ruddick is perfectly aware that such conditions are rarely met: among other things, it is notoriously difficult in sexual encounters not to let ourselves be overcome by desire to the point that we regard the beloved as mere

9 While Ruddick seems to assume heterosexuality between two persons – there is nothing that I can find in her account that would restrict it to either heterosexuality and/or sex/intimacy between to just two persons. But I encourage curious and critical readers to work through her account and decide for themselves.

"meat" – in Kantian terms, simply a means to fulfill our ends.[10] Neither does Ruddick argue that "complete sex," as meeting these conditions, is the only form of "good sex." Rather, good sex – for example, between partners who may experience different levels of desire, but who still hold one another as autonomous persons to be respected – is very likely far more common and thereby still ethically in order. At the same time, however, these challenges to full mutuality means that loving in these ways is a *virtue* – a capability that hardly comes naturally, but must rather be cultivated and practiced.

Given these conditions: is complete sex between human and machine possible? Clearly not. To begin with, for all the advances in recent years in the domains of AI / ML, the "settled position" within these domains that these technologies completely lack any possibility of first-person awareness or self-consciousness (Selmer Bringsjord, personal communication). The same holds true for acquiring genuine emotions and most especially a felt sense of embodied desire (Bringsjord et al. 2015: 2; cf. Searle 2014; Nyholm/Frank 2017). To use a common image: such devices would be zombies – specifically, "moral zombies" (Véliz 2021; cf. Rambukkana 2021; Peeters/Haselager 2021.)

Perhaps most importantly: as we saw above, the key virtue of *phronēsis* is not computationally tractable. Such a capacity is required, however, first of all to *interpret* the contexts and determine what, if any, particular gesture, motion, etc. is indeed desired and desirable; what of these work to sustain fundamental respect for the beloved as an equal and thereby sustain the autonomy of the other. While there might be machine approximations (i.e., Sullins' "artificial *phronēsis*," 2021), the fact remains that a datafied *phronēsis*, like artificial desire and faked emotions in machine thereby lacks the fundamental condition of autonomy that undergirds phronetic judgment.

This is not to say, however, that sex with robots – at least with full awareness and acceptance of these limitations – would *prima facie* be ethically problematic: on the contrary, it is easy to see that sex with robots could be good sex in a number of contexts, including therapy, aiding those whose disabilities

10 To be precise: one formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative states: "act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" [Kant [1785] 1959, p. 47]. Our lives manifestly require that we treat one another means – such as the store cashier who serves as a means to expedite my purchases. But I am still fully obligated to treat the cashier as an autonomy due full respect and equality – i.e., never as a means only. By the same token, both good and complete sex entail sustaining respect for the Beloved as an autonomy, never as a means or mere object only.

challenge the possibilities of establishing intimate relationships with others, and so on.

Certainly, a raft of additional objections to robot sex are important to notice and take on board, starting with how the sexbot industry caters to and thus inscribes and reinforces highly patriarchal assumptions regarding who (what) is sexually attractive and arousing for Western* cis heterosexual men – namely, young, if not childlike women, Asian women, and so on (Richardson: 2015). These conceptions are further manifest in what Mia Consalvo aptly identifies as the "techno-femme fatale" in science fiction from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* through any number of more contemporary films and TV series (2004). I have argued elsewhere that these conceptions appear to be rooted in not only Cartesian dualisms that divorce a pure (male) mind from an impure (female) body – and with it, sexuality and nature more broadly. Moreover, such a Cartesian mastery and possession of nature reflects a master-slave conception of the relationship between men and women in turn (Ess 2017).

Most importantly here: *contra* these backgrounds and prevailing designs of sexbots, Ruddick's account of good sex and complete sex would rather endorse our treating sexbots and related machineries more broadly as something more than the technological equivalents of "just meat," as sex slaves that are solely means to our own ends. But especially as machines will lack autonomy and related capabilities such as real emotion, embodied desire, and *phronēsis* – Ruddick's interweaving of care ethics with deontology provides minimal, if any grounds, for countering master-slave relationships between humans and machines, as deontological duties of respect and norms of equality turn on autonomy. Good sex – i.e., as sustaining relationships of respect rather than exploitation – between humans and machines will require an additional ethical layer.[11]

11 As noted earlier, good or ethically legitimate sex with robots is certainly possible, and there may be specific exceptions to this general ethos of approaching robots with postures of care and respect, such as particular sorts of therapies, providing aid to those whose disabilities challenge their possibilities for developing intimate relationships with humans, and so on. But see also Sparrow (2017) and Danaher (2017) as important contributions to the debates over what may and may not be justified regarding our treatment of robots, e.g., as objects of (stimulated) rape.

4 Preserving human autonomy / democracy + moral status of robots (and beyond): the "more than human" ethics of care

We have seen above a "relational turn" as part of the unfolding of contemporary VE, including recent ethics work on social robots (Gunkel 2018, Coeckelbergh 2020; Ess 2021b; cf. Bynum/Kantar, 2021). This relational turn is in part a response to critiques of VE as both (excessively) individualist as well as intrinsically human-centric (e.g., starting with postmodernism). At the same time, relationality along with some ways of deconstructing or decentering the modern liberal (especially male) subject run the risk of thereby throwing out notions of autonomy that are central to ethical arguments for respect, equality, democratic polity, and thereby emancipation of the countless "others" who have otherwise been marginalized and exploited in patriarchal authoritarian hierarchies. These tensions led us to our second problem: How to preserve and enhance democratic rights and norms of equality, emancipation, and disobedience in a posthumanist philosophical anthropology?

I initially foregrounded feminist notions of relational autonomy as conceptions that are consonant with the many maneuvers of deconstruction, decentering, decolonization, and so on – while nonetheless preserving understandings of autonomy that can sustain equality, democracy, and emancipation. We can now expand on these understandings in a final way by turning to recent work in ethics of care by Christina Mörtberg (2021).

In her keynote address "Work, Place, Mobility and Embodiment: 'Recovery' or Repairment in a Covid and Eventually Post-Covid World?" Mörtberg foregrounds a "more than human" ethics of care that is initially rooted in the care ethics of Joan Tronto (1993). Especially as developed by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 2017), care is extended beyond the human-centric approaches first articulated in Gilligan (1982), Sara Ruddick (1980) and Nel Noddings (1984). Puig de la Bellacasa specifically expands notions of human-centric care (and virtue) ethics to encompass the larger domains of robots, technologies, and the larger natural (and, for some, "supernatural") worlds. This issues in a decentered ethics of care that understands "the circulation of care as everyday maintenance of the more than human web of life, conceived as a decentered form of vibrant ethicality, as an ethos rooted in obligations made necessary to specific relations …" one that further emphasizes "care as a doing," not simply a moral intention (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 219; in Mörtberg 2021). Mörtberg further connects this decentered ethic with "repairment":

> "it is … a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." (Fisher/Tronto 1991: 40 in Tronto 1993: 103; Mörtberg 2021)

Mörtberg further draws on Haraway's understanding of situated knowledges (1988): reflecting both developments within natural science such as relativity theories and Quantum Mechanics, which emphasize (following Kant, in fact) that knowledge is relative to and dependent upon the observer, Haraway further invokes feminist critiques arguing that knowledge is always partial, local / located, and thereby situated. This is by no means epistemological relativism – but rather issues in a knowledge *pluralism* that argues for a multiplicity of ways of knowing that may be different but complimentary to one another.

Last but not least: Shannon Vallor has extensively explored how care – specifically in the context of carebots – is a *virtue*, that means, a capacity or ability that must be fostered, "…an activity of personally meeting another's need, one that, if properly habituated and refined into a practice, can also become a manifestation of personal excellence" (2016: 221). Care is thus often simple hard work: "We must *learn* [practice] how to care in the right ways, at the right times and places, and for the right people" (*ibid*). The promise of carebots is so compelling in part as we can thereby offload the burdens of care to the machines. But whatever advantages such offloading might offer, to hand over care entirely would mean what Vallor elsewhere discusses as de-skilling, as the loss of critical virtues. That is, such offloading would thereby reduce or eliminate the need for and contexts in which we practice care as a virtue – such that our capabilities for caring improve and become more habitual. In this case, "…people who care for others *well* are among those examples of human excellence that we recognize and respect most readily" (*ibid*). While not all of us will emerge as such exemplars (*phronemoi*) of care, our acquiring and cultivating care is manifestly central to our pursuing good lives of flourishing, as co-relational human beings in (close) relationships with (a few) Others in these "more than human" webs of relationships.

5 Virtues, Robots and Good Lives: Who Cares?

We now come around full circle, returning to the figure of Antigone: we can now see that her *care* and duties of care to her brother Polynices exemplify care as a virtue – one that is further dependent on *phronēsis* for determining within the cauldron of deeply conflicting norms and desires (to obey Creon and save her life, or to care for her brother in ways that *in this context* will result in her death) what choice she finally makes. Antigone is in this way a moral exemplar – a *phronemos* whose specific acts and choices stand as specific examples, helping to illustrate what a good person *judges* is the right thing to do under specific circumstances vis-à-vis multiple possibilities.

Antigone's care is manifestly directed first to her brother: but we've also seen that care – along with human agency and autonomy – by no means must be restricted solely to other humans or perhaps sentient beings more generally. On the contrary, any number of classical and contemporary frameworks help us move beyond a human-centric ethics to a "more than human" ethics of care: one that at the same time, at least via conceptions of relational autonomy, help us take on board several decades' worth of vital criticisms of excessively human-centric (if not simply masculinist and patriarchal) conceptions – but without throwing out human agency and autonomy as the root of still central emphases on equality, respect, and emancipation. Especially where emancipation in the modern and contemporary worlds has required the *courage* of conscientious objection and the modern right to dissent, contest, and disobey (Hildebrandt 2015: 10) – Antigone remains a primal exemplar indeed.[12]

We move beyond the human-centric precisely as we extend care to the more than human – recognizing a default, intrinsic worth or minimal goodness of all about us. This move beyond high modern conceptions is at once, however, a recovery of pre-modern sensibilities and understanding, including relationality and non-dualistic ontologies that counter the modern Cartesian

12 Clive Hartfield (2021) offers an exceptionally careful analysis of Edward Snowden's actions and decisions vis-à-vis three of Shannon Vallor's technomoral virtues – including «courage, with its related virtues of hope, perseverance, and fortitude» (379), arguing that these decisions and actions manifest these virtues. Hartfield does not use the notion of conscientious objection per se, but I see this analysis as strongly supporting an understanding of Snowden as a conscientious objector in the traditions begun with Antigone.

divorce between mind and matter. Whether we do so via traditional Buddhism, Western* philosophical naturalism, Reform Jewish interpretations of *tikkun olam*, and/or a care ethics oriented towards sustaining and cultivating the complex webs of life surrounding us – the message is that pursuing good lives of flourishing entails positive obligations and actions that will take care of and *repair* the world.[13]

Specifically with regard to social robots, this broad framework endorses minimal attitudes of respect and care – whether or not these devices approach some form of autonomy, much less *phronēsis*, as modernist bases for moral status and equality. Such a framework would meet some of the important critiques of sexbots, e.g., as reinforcing the objectification of women, young girls, even children (Richardson 2015) and help foster instead a posture of care and respect that would ideally avoid rendering the machine purely into a means for the human's own ends – i.e., a slave. In this way – and likely others to be developed as the machines themselves develop – sex with a robot could count as good sex, in Ruddick's term.

While sexbots remain an exotic technology still under development, AI / ML in conjunction with biometric devices are rapidly expanding dimensions of our contemporary socio-technical infrastructure. This turn towards a more than human ethics of care has in fact been taken up in a contemporary research project exploring the ethical and especially existential challenges and their possible resolutions (Lagerkvist et al. forthcoming). While this work is still preliminary, it suggests specific and vital directions for applying such a comprehensive ethics of care alongside more familiar frameworks of VE and deontology.

At least if we care to.

13 *Tikkun olam*, "repairing the world," is understood in Reform Judaism as an impulse towards, e.g., social and environmental justice. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tikkun_olam. As we have further explored, Scandinavian Creation Theologies likewise endorse an intrinsic goodness to Creation – which, we and others (Foerst 2020) would extend to robots and AI / ML systems: for more specific consequences of these approaches, see Balle and Ess (forthcoming).

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