

ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF INTELLECTUALS. A STATEMENT

A few months ago, I was invited to give a keynote at the 4th *Love and Sex with Robots Conference* (LSR) on »Sex Robots – Ethical Issues and Feminist Challenges«. But my joy about the invitation was as short as it was intense. When I shared the event about three weeks ago on my social media channels, colleagues reacted with skepticism. They told me that one of the two Chairs of the LSR, Adrian Cheok, computer scientist and director of the Imagineering Institute (Malaysia), invited Steve Bannon as keynote speaker to the 15th *International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology* he hosted last year. The community reacted indignantly (#boycottACE), not least because Cheok, who by the way is running as a candidate for Member of Parliament in the South Australian Boothby for the far-right extremist Fraser Anning's Conservative National Party in the 2019 Australian Federal Election, tried to strengthen his position with disconcerting comments such as »Leftists are such weak sissies, and against free speech! They can't stand anyone not following leftist dogma and propaganda!« (9/4/18). This event also led to a boycott of the LSR, which was cancelled at the end of November 2018. This year the LSR will (presumably) take place on 1 and 2 July in Brussels. Adrian Cheok is still Chair, there was no distancing from his attitude on the part of the conference organization. For the last three weeks I have been thinking about whether I would still be willing to participate in the LSR as a keynote speaker.

There is also a lot to be said for it: On the one hand, philosophical conferences on robot ethics in general and on the ethical challenges accompanying current technological developments are on the increase. However, so far there are only a few academic events dedicated specifically to the pros and cons of sex robotics, which is one of my research areas. On the other hand, this event invites us to ask once again the question that is always topical about the responsibility of scientists: Isn't it part of our task to promote a critical discourse also and especially with unorthodox thinkers and to actively participate in it? My answer to this is without any doubt »Yes« – but not at all costs. The academic discourse must be well-founded and structured by certain criteria that guarantee its critical faculty, openness, and inclusion. We scientists are responsible for ensuring that these criteria are met. What exactly do I mean by that?

As an academic philosopher, I am not afraid of questions that are met with discomfort in public as taboo topics. The LSR will discuss, for instance, the extent to which the use of child sex robots as therapeutic assistance systems for paedophiles is ethically justifiable or what ethical arguments can be put forward for or against sex robots in general. As an »open-minded and unorthodox thinker by profession« I am absolutely committed to reassessing the ethical foundations of our society and the political, economic, and legal norms on which it is based for their ethical viability – also and especially where it »hurts« and where I have to be prepared to question my own intuitions again and again. To avoid such discourses would mean not fulfilling my role as an academic philosopher. Of course, there are also discussions about, for

instance, the values of democracy or whether and under what circumstances one should ›talk with rights‹. Such events should also be supported by all means.

But the case of the LSR with their Chair Cheok is different. For here it is not about a transparent and critically led academic discourse, but about the implicit and undiscussed norms underlying such a discourse, which one confirms if one enters the discursive space (in this case the LSR conference). As a keynote speaker at the LSR, I would implicitly accept and acknowledge these unspoken norms that make my lecture possible at all. I would adopt the attitude of the conference leadership and organization not to distance themselves from Cheok, not to comment on the events in 2018, in order to initiate a by this already framed discourse on the ethical and feminist issues associated with sex robots. For comparison, imagine setting up an ethics commission to negotiate the serial production of sex robots, which consists exclusively of white, heterosexual, male people. This would already shape and restrict the discourse in such a way that certain interests would presumably be promoted, while other voices would be excluded.

Thus, as scientists, we do not merely bear the responsibility to go where it ›hurts‹, i.e. to negotiate certain issues that are controversial at times. Rather, we are also responsible for the way in which we shape the discourse itself as well as for what norms we base it on. Hannah Arendt devoted a lecture in 1967 to the responsibility of intellectuals (this document can be viewed in the Library of Congress under the title »Intellectuals and Responsibility«). As experts, we always wear »two hats« in the public space, she says. Like all citizens, we are responsible for shaping the political space and the common world in which we live as human beings. As scientists, however, we also have a special knowledge that gives us additional power to influence the public space and the discourses in it.

This ›second hat‹, the ›hat‹ of the expert, if I may call it that with Arendt, turns out to be two ›hats‹ or two responsibilities on closer look. On the one hand, it is my responsibility as a representative of a particular discipline (as a philosopher, as a medical doctor, as a biologist, as a social scientist, etc.) not to avoid exhausting and controversial issues within my specific field of expertise. On the other hand, it is the responsibility as a scientist in general, independent of a specific discipline, to shape the discourse as transparent, inclusive, and critical as possible. For one thing, this means presenting facts in such a way and to use language in such a way that outsiders can participate and have a say. For another thing, it also addresses the normative foundation of the discourse itself, which I as a scientist have to shape and which is the prerequisite for conducting a discourse at all.

I could not have lived up to this responsibility, which I mentioned last, as keynote speaker for the LSR 2019. Because I neither helped shaping nor do I support the conditions under which the LSR takes place and opens up a discourse space. That's why I canceled my participation in the LSR 2019.