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Mouthpiece

Keeping an open mind

DO we have free will or is our behaviour controlled by our biological brains? Should we just be considered as biological robots who cannot be held responsible for our actions?

In the 2002 Hollywood film *Minority Report*, scientists were able to predict what people would do in the future, with the police arresting individuals before they had even committed a crime. Potential perpetrators were then convicted for thought crimes because the police knew that they had been prevented from doing so by their timely arrest.

Obviously *Minority Report* is only a film but the idea raises some fundamental ethical questions.

In the last century, neuroscience has made great advances in understanding the human brain. According to scientific determinism, all our decisions must be pre-determined by a prior cause.

If it becomes possible to predict every decision a person makes, what would this mean for human responsibility and our legal systems?

In legal and moral matters, total freedom may of course not exist in making

Are we robots or are our decisions made with free will? asks Calum MacKellar

a free-will decision since all actions are conditioned to some extent by both biology and the environment. But at the same time, juries or judges are usually capable of distinguishing between attenuating circumstances and degrees of responsibility.

It is interesting to notice how troubled and offended humans often become when they are compared with zombies, biological robots or puppets. This is noteworthy because it emphasises how much human beings seek value in being able to make free-will decisions without being determined by, or reduced to, factors such as neurobiology. Free will defines them for who they are.

The 2012 Film Festival on Neuroethics at the Filmhouse this weekend is offering challenging films and discussion on this issue, with experts in bioethics, law, philosophy and politics.

■ *Dr Calum MacKellar is director of research at the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics.*