

Platform

Calum MacKellar examines a cyber future where virtual reality could become actual reality



HOW far can human beings go, when replacing their body parts with that of machines, before they become cyborgs? With the development of an increasing interface between machines and humans these questions are certain to become ever more relevant for the future. Already, many people wear hearing aids, pacemakers and a number of other devices, making them the first individuals on the road to 'cyborgisation'.

Maybe it would also be possible, in the not too distant future, for people to wear memory chips on the sides of their heads. But would this modify their identity? Would people who have always been considered as average suddenly be seen as very bright? These are questions that society will soon have to face.

A direct interface between a computer and a human brain is also something that is on the horizon. Already many people in society seem captivated for many hours every day by their smartphones, laptops and tablets. Sometimes, one even wonders whether these individuals would not prefer to exist in cyberspace and escape the real world.

In the future, it may actually be possible for individuals to download their minds into their computer hard disks in order to exist in cyberspace. This is actually something to look forward to, according to futurologist Ray Kurzweil. Such "software-based humans," he predicts, "will be vastly extended beyond the severe limitations of humans as we know them today. They will live out on the web, projecting bodies whenever they need or want them, including virtual bodies in diverse realms of virtual reality."

But is this something to which one should look forward to? May it not also be a kind of cyber-prison? Living online in cyberspace may enable people to live forever. But what kind of life would this be?

Individuals would have direct access to all the information on the web but would they be able to fall in love or even taste their favourite wines? Will humanity eventually become obsolete? Is humanity such a bad thing? There is also the risk that cyber-persons may eventually get tired of their virtual existence and want to return to the real world.

From even this brief survey, it should be evident that the topic of cyborg ethics raises a mountain of important ethical dilemmas. It is vital that Scottish society is aware of these issues and that it has tools for addressing them.

The 2013 Film Festival on Cyborg Ethics aims to do just that. It will be offering challenging films and engaging discussions between November 22-24 at the Filmhouse. At the end of each screening, a discussion will take place between the audience and experts in bioethics, law, philosophy and politics.

For more information, see www.filmhousecinema.com/seasons/cyborg-ethics-film-festival/

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