

# QUARTZ

## Do cyborgs need their own legal rights?

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In today's future-facing era, phenomena once relegated to the world of science fiction are starting to edge their way into reality.

We have scientists growing brains from stem cells in petri dishes; robots are being granted national citizenship; virtual intelligences experience and express anger.

For the past 50 years, the microprocessor—the chip that processes information in a computer—has doubled in capacity at least every year to two years. Experts predict that machine intelligence will be “smarter” than humans by 2030.

So here's my question: When the machines we've created possess an intelligence that equals ours, will they deserve our protection?

Will they desire it? Maybe even demand it?

This should be your question, too. Because in a little longer than a decade's time, we'll need answers if we want to avert moral and civil rights mishaps.

Futurists and technologists have been working to prepare the world for radical new sapient technologies and intelligences with publications such as the Cyborg Bill of Rights V1.0 which advocates “equality for mutants.”

Beyond the microprocessor, instrumental in catapulting machine intelligence to new levels through its ever-increasing speed for calculations, we've seen accelerating advances in genetic editing, stem-cell research, and 3D bioprinting, each which will help to create entities that have both consciousness and intelligence. This year 3D bioprinting has come so far that a team of Israeli scientists were able to successfully print part of a human heart.

Netflix released a popular four-part documentary series called Unnatural Selection on the topic.

Scientists are already wading into murky waters when it comes to the rights of these new intelligent organisms that we create. At Yale University brains from deceased pigs are being stimulated in a vat, which has prompted controversy in the animal rights world.

Do the brains of these animals, once dead, now represent live animals? And if so, do they receive the same legal rights that have informed laws that protect animals against harmful animal testing and animal cruelty?

**Wild wild west of the cyborg age**

As a result of these emerging ethical issues, we're seeing more debates about new terms of futurist-oriented rights.

But the fact remains that there are few, if any, actual rules for most of our new scientific realities.

This is largely what inspired me to come up with the Transhumanist Bill of Rights, which *Wired* published in full in 2018. The document recently underwent its third rendition via crowdsourcing.

### **When the machines we've created possess an intelligence that equals ours, will they deserve our protection?**

Like many of the cyborg bills that exist—there are about half a dozen significant ones floating around the internet—this bill includes legal protections for thinking robots, gender explanations for virtual intelligences, laws for genetically engineered sapient creatures, defense of freedoms allowing biohackers to modify their bodies, and many other protections. It even includes policies to fight off environmental destruction and planetary existential threats such as asteroids, plagues, nuclear war, and global warming.

In 2015, I walked up to the US Capitol building holding a single-page print out of the document I had written. The machine gun-toting police standing guard just feet away from me threatened arrest, but there was little need; the taped-on page quickly fell off the building, fluttered off the wall in the wind.

I wasn't arrested. The police and journalists surrounding me chuckled at the bungled ceremonial moment.

I recall that I couldn't help but smile myself at the idea of getting a futurist bill of rights to become a fixed part of US governing policy at the time.

But four years later, with machines showing ever increasing sophistication—humans are even marrying robots in some parts of the world—a bill of rights is not as wild as it once sounded. We could easily say the same for genetically-modified babies being born, which happened for the first time in China last year.

In my work, I meet with people around the world who are interested in answering not *if* we need a futurist bill of rights, but *when* we will need it, from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government to the Cato Institute to the World Economic Forum to European ministries.

### **Where do cyborg rights fit into the future?**

If you look through the various cyborg-inspired bills of rights already out there, you'll find that a major goal is to include cyborg and transhumanist rights in the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights one day.

The ideas of personhood, a right to education, and freedom of speech were once considered unattainable in some countries. Now these basic human rights are common, and at least some of this change is due to the powerful legal influence of the UN's universal bill, often seen as a blueprint for governments and laws around the globe.

Interestingly, one of the challenges of getting a transhumanist bill of rights taken seriously comes from minorities groups, when it's perceived that futurist rights will undermine movements of historically marginalized peoples. While plenty of transhumanists are members of the LGBTQ community, the community has been reluctant to wander into futurist LGBTQ issues, such as nongender roleplaying as different species in virtual environments.

LGBTQ friends of mine—while often sympathetic to transhumanist goals—have told me that they believe that after their historic quest for rights in America especially, they still need to focus on progress for their own movement and its goals. They perceive a futurist bill of rights as a distraction.

I respect and agree with this. Minorities in the US and around the world face social discrimination and violations of rights that warrant our attention. But it won't slow down the trajectory of radical technologies, which is spurring a growing futurist community to call for its own set of rights, rules, and protections.

I understand that at times it seems preposterous to believe the world will need to consider whether super intelligent robots can vote, or whether human heads can be transplanted to waiting tech-engineered bodies, or if four years of college education can be downloaded into human brains.

But these realities are likely to occur long before the century is out.

If society doesn't accept that new sapient lifeforms—whether it's an autonomous digital avatar living in a supercomputer, or a biological creature with human-level intelligence that genetic editing created—also need rights, or that new forms of engineered conscious intelligences will walk among humans on Earth as a result of scientific progress, society will undergo another wave of civil strife as we scramble to play catch-up to what's fair and moral.

At the very least, societies and governments need more comprehensive plans to formally deal with these new realities. That begins with a Congressional dialogue and forming preliminary legal documents outlining potential rights for the evolving future.

Ultimately, it comes down to how humans believe new intelligent life deserves to be treated.