Print only: Faith Perspectives 11/30 - St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) - November 30, 2013 - page A16
November 30, 2013 | St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) | Faith Perspectives • Mike Tsichlis By Faith Perspectives > By Mike Tsichlis | Page A16

While recently scanning the Internet for the latest science news, I came across an incredible story headlined "Mind Reading Robots Coming Ever Closer."

The article reported on the latest in brain-computer interface research out of the University of Cincinnati, where human brain signals are being harnessed to send messages to devices, including robots, with merely a thought.

For those who have lost limb function, this may lead to new prosthetic devices that integrate and move more naturally with their bodies. The article goes on to speculate that the more profoundly disabled might be helped by a personal robotic assistant that responds to what a patient is thinking.

This would have been fantastic enough if not for a more mind-blowing story that Duke University researchers have successfully taught monkeys to control the arms of an monkey avatar on a computer screen with merely their brain activity.

Some truly amazing things are happening. Science fiction is rapidly becoming science fact.

Indeed, if you follow the trajectory of current research, propelled by ever faster computer processing speed, as the years unfold we will witness a string of astonishing scientific advances in fields such as nanotechnology, genetics and robotics.

What's more, progress in these fields will overlap one another, creating a synergistic burst of scientific and technological innovation unthinkable a generation ago. 3D printable body parts? Done that. Invisibility cloaks and robotic soldiers? Prototypes are under development. Brain-embedded microchips that link us directly to the Web? Some suggest we'll be there by 2020.

I've followed such trends closely ever since I read Ray Kurzweil's "The Age of Spiritual Machines" 14 years ago. Kurzweil, who was hired on as chief engineer at Google a year ago, is an inventor and futurist, and one of a group of scientists who have embraced a notion known as the Singularity, a point in the future when artificial intelligence will exceed that of humans. Kurzweil believes this will occur by mid-century.

If we are to keep up with our creations, Kurzweil claims we will need to become more like them, first by making physical alterations and enhancements to our declining bodies through cyborg replacement parts and the injection of molecular-sized robots ("nanobots") to repair aging, damaged and diseased cells.

Eventually, he speculates, we may even leave our natural bodies for more "immortal" synthetic ones, a project known as transhumanism (I'm not joking).

Some may think Kurzweil and others like him are crazy, but the fact is that he and other likeminded colleagues hold key positions in industry and higher education. They see their pursuit as noble and necessary if humanity is to outgrow its fragile state of existence, where life remains brutish and short.

St. Athanasius, the great 4th-century Christian theologian, once wrote: "God became man so that man may become God."

This doesn't mean that people literally become God, but rather that because of God's incarnation through his son Jesus, God's image is restored in us through the work of the Holy Spirit. We may therefore become "partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (2 Pet. 1:4).

Orthodox Christians as well as Roman Catholics refer to this process of turning away from sin and seeking holiness in union with God as divinization or "theosis." Other post-Reformation Christians stress that we become sanctified by acknowledging our sinfulness and receiving God's grace in our lives. In any event, god-

likeness or godliness must be grounded in, well, God.

However, Kurzweil and others take the notion of becoming god-like in a quite literal, materialistic way. Popular physicist Michio Kaku has even written in his 2011 book “Physics of the Future” that by the end of this century our superhuman bodies and minds will place us on a level of the gods of ancient mythology. This is a bold endeavor, to say the least. Some may see a new order of Nietzschean “supermen” in the making.

Clearly, scientific breakthroughs that allow humans to live longer, healthier lives ought to be pursued and welcomed.

But if we accept the fact that humans are also creatures who must struggle with aspects of their baser nature — desire, jealousy, greed and hate — to name a few, the pesky problem remains that if we don’t require a loving, redemptive God who has called us to walk in his path of virtue, righteousness, love, and compassion, who will be the arbiter when conflict arises among the gods? Congress? The Supreme Court? A super-computer that surpasses human intelligence?

At times I wonder if in our rapid race to develop The Next Big Thing we are far outpacing the level of spiritual maturity we will need in order to process and cope with it.

No one should require an enhanced brain to understand that.

Tsichlis is director of the St. Irenaeus Orthodox Theological Institute. He is a contributor to Belief St. Louis on STLtoday.com, where this column first appeared.