

Ask A Genius 70 – The Soul and Consciousness (1)
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Scott: In general, what is the difference between the soul and consciousness, to you?

Rick: Before we get to me, we should get to how those terms are really nebulous and have been subject to dozens of different interpretations over the histories of their use. To me, the soul has more of a religious connotation and is some characteristic of being that may or may not be bestowed by God.

A magic extra ingredient that exists in terms of being, which transcends the body, at least according to a bunch of definitions of the soul. It is something that can exist after the body and has lived before the body, but, in modern interpretations of that including hokey things like ‘going to heaven and coming back to Earth’ movies, there seems to be with the soul an erasing of almost all experience.

That even when you're reincarnated according to the rules of a bunch of movies. Maybe not *Heaven Can Wait*, but other movies that have to do with heavenly reincarnation, you can start over as a, more or less, blank slate. Of course, we shouldn't necessarily trust Hollywood producers and screenwriters to have deep thoughts about the afterlife.

Scott: What about purported autobiographies by children, sometimes, and adults, other times?

Rick: I don't place a lot of weight on that stuff. Some of that stuff was big with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. Anyway, you die and go towards the light. If you're lucky enough to almost die and then come back, you come back with stories about having seen the light. All of that stuff can tend to be explained away by neural events associated with your brain shutting down.

I don't buy that trip to heaven stuff from 6-year-olds. My view of the soul: once you remove all information from the putative soul, then it seems like you have nothing left. Now, you could argue, but I haven't heard anybody argue, that you could remove all information from the soul and still have innate biases that if somebody is lovingly gruff. If an old person, then they come back as a lovingly gruff baby. I haven't heard arguments about that. Arguments that are about the soul existing in a state without information. I don't buy that. What's left? Not anything.

Scott: Would you hold to the position of absolute finality? With the death of the body and the brain, the death of the "soul."

Rick: No, that's a separate issue. The issues I'm talking about now is if you can have a soul that moves on if you have no information that moves on. In terms of "is death the end?", there's Pascal's Wager, which says that if there's any deal you could make with possible higher beings before you die then make that deal on the off chance that they exist. I agree with that up to a reasonable point.

Then there's the idea of various forms of technical resurrection. For instance, if we exist as a *Matrix*-type simulation, which I don't think we do, then there's no reason that upon death to think that the information that you're made of in the simulation can't be remade. If we're in the *Matrix*, there's no reason that you can't be re-embodied because we're part of an information-based simulation that is being administered in some external entity.

That entity can pretty much, as long as it has the information from which we are comprised then it, can resurrect us, but I don't think that we live in the *Matrix*. We have the potential with the technology in the medium- to long-term future to engage in some *Matrix*-type hocus pocus. Where, eventually, we'll be able to codify and turn into usable information the information that exists in individual brains - be able to get in there somehow and be able to map the information, maybe even map the information to a certain reasonable extent without even sending a bunch of nanobots to crawl along your dendrites to see what neural network you have.

Eventually, we'll be able to codify and record the state of information in your head in increasingly strong ways with increasing fidelity and accuracy. Right now, we could resurrect - in fact, there's an episode of *Black Mirror* that resurrects - somebody based on the social media trace that person left in a zillion Twitter and Facebook posts that can lead to a replication of that person, at least to the extent that that person interacts with their girlfriend based on the plot of this thing.

It is not unreasonable to think this. People have tried to build Shakespeare simulators based on the plays that he left behind. Many modern people end up leaving behind almost as many words as Shakespeare, maybe even more. You can simulate people's ways of being that way. In the future, we'll take that stuff. We'll take genetic information. It will probably take some brain mapping to build simulations of people or as people get built-in bio-circuitry. That bio-circuitry will have information about the organic circuitry that it is interacting with, the organic circuitry.

There will be increasing ways to bring out more and more information about what informationally makes a person that individual person, and making increasingly accurate resurrections or simulations of those people.

Scott: How does that relate to the relationship between consciousness and the soul?

Rick: If the soul isn't anything that transcends information, if the soul is the feeling you have of being a person, a unique person alive in the world, that magic feeling I would more associate with consciousness, then the magical uniqueness that makes you you via your mental picture of the world, then the soul isn't anything that transcends information. I'd argue that the soul and consciousness are pretty much the same thing.

Scott: An emergence from the broadband processing of mutually shared information among sub-processors in a larger system.

Rick: Yes and no. Let me take back a little bit of what I said about the soul and consciousness being the same thing. Backtracking from saying consciousness and the soul are the same thing, thinking more about it, I think not. As an old guy, I have terrible toenails. When I am tending to

them, I am focusing on my horrible toenails. Nobody, or a few, people would argue that that says anything about my soul, by focusing on my toenails. Although, I could make that argument.

Anyway, the minutiae of moment-to-moment attention might be your consciousness, but it isn't your soul. Your soul is your deep strokes of your personality, the deep aspects of your personality and attitudes that constitute you after a lifetime of being you. In terms of some picture of information-space, say, we don't know what information-space looks like exactly, but you've got to figure that frequently used processes, nexuses, or heuristics, or subroutines that are constantly used, for instance, like words.

Whatever heuristics generate the words that pop up in your consciousness and/or pop out of your mouth, those structures in information-space are large and almost always on when you're awake. You're going to have words available to you to describe what's going on with you. There are big verbal structures. There are big visual-processing structures. Similarly, there should be large well-developed attitudinal structures, philosophical structures. Structures that pertain to your deepest personality characteristics and attitudes about the world.

Maybe, e.g. charitableness, a belief in justice, a sense of irony, a tendency to make bad jokes and puns, cynicism, giving people the benefit of the doubt, all of those things that people think of you as you if people were to eulogize you. Those things might be thought of as your basic personality characteristics. When you think of different people, like Trump, today is Trump's Inauguration Day. Trump's soul might be belief in individual enterprise, egotism, easily takes offense, tends to exploit whatever is financially exploitable in a given situation, a deep seated belief in America as a place for enterprise. If you ask a hundred people what makes Trump, you would get some basic personality traits of Trump.

Scott: Those would be vices in Trump in general as aspects of the soul as deep characteristics of the individual.

Rick: Well, vices, liberals see Trump's deepest characteristics as being a sort of a huckster, a showman, an exploiter of financial schemes, but conservatives - people have been going out on the street during the last week leading up to the inauguration and asking Trump supporters what they think - find the plain spokenness and his telling-it-like-it-is preferable. It annoys non-Trump supporters because he seems to be a bullshitter to non-Trump supporters. Trump seems to have some recognizable basic personality traits.

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