

**Ask A Genius 72 – The Soul and Consciousness (3)**  
**Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Rick Rosner**  
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**Scott: Is the soul a religious assumption?**

Rick: Not entirely, as time goes on, we become less religious as we find explanations that don't require religion, but, even during the most religious times in history, there were still philosophers who would try to think about the soul without necessarily resorting to religion.

So, the soul is mostly seen showing up in religious contexts, but it is still an idea or set of ideas – because definitions vary – that exists outside of religious contexts. Regardless of religious context or not, the soul is the 'human spark.'

It is the thing that makes us us, which is not anything beyond the material. It is this ineffable, hard-to-define, nebulous, non-specific, magic thing that is us when all of the specifics are removed. It is the general usness of us.

Whether it is a general humanness minus the specifics of any human existence or if it's the general characteristics of somebody's personality, the soul is the least specific aspect of humanness. It is what is left when you strip away all of the information and all of the specifics.

Hair color, how rich or poor you are, how old you are, all of those should feed into what the soul is, but if you're a materialist, as I am, or an informationist, I think there's nothing once you strip the information away.

I think there are more deep aspects to personality and attitudes to the world, feelings towards the world, such as arguing Einstein's feeling for the beauty of creation, or the idea that there is a divine order found in beauty, would be closer to his soul than the business of life, of not wearing socks because he didn't like how socks got holes in them or how they were uncomfortable when your toes poke things.

Or hooking up, when he became famous as the smartest guy in the world, he would have affairs. His deep feelings about what makes a good physical law or physical theory are closer to his soul than the business of when and where he was hooking up with somebody.

Just because something is more nebulous or more ineffable, it is still characterizable via information. Once you remove all information, there's no room for a soul. I think religious people who naturally assume everybody has a soul don't spend a lot of time thinking about what a soul may or may not be.

They assume it is the human spark that makes us human as opposed to animals or rocks. That circular definition avoids the need to think specifically what a soul might be. When you get into religion, you can think of the soul as a moral underpinning - like your lungs get by living in a polluted city, where everyone is born with a pure soul.

You try to protect this innocent magic about the world, but the affairs of the world sully it. It still doesn't help in determining what a soul might be, except that it is a wish list from God or Jesus about how you might want to be. A gift from them that you honor by being good. The gift is life and thought and the feeling of being human.

But again, I don't even think religious people spend a lot of time thinking about what it is. They think that if they transgress then they are scuffing it up. This innocent thing that exists apart from some ideas, which exists independent of the world but can still be dirtied up by bad deeds in the world – by being dishonored. Since humans have souls, and animals don't, then we're different from animals.

There's one thing. I think we are more educated about the mechanics of information processing than people of the past, so we don't need to resort to the soul as a patch for any areas where we don't understand how we work. But we don't have a deep understanding of how we work, it does seem to be coming.

Thing two is since we understand how we work materially - that is, the ways thought comes from material processes in the world - then we don't need that soul to explain thought to ourselves, which means we might be more open to looking at animals, if we live closely with animals, as having similar mental processes to us, but crappier because their brains are smaller.

I look at my dog. I see my dog having similar drives. Things the dog wants. Things the dog likes. Things the dog doesn't like. The dog feeling good. The dog feeling bad. But on a much smaller scale, and on a mental landscape with less variety of emotion, it has less mental objects in it because she's a dog.

She's got a limited repertoire of likes, dislikes, emotions, because her brain could fit in a pill bottle. The dog's brain is maybe the size of two ping-pong balls taped together. She will be living in a scaled down existence compared to a human with a head that weighs 8 pounds and a brain that weighs 2 or 3 pounds, but we still have a lot of mental characteristics in common that don't need to be differentiated between via the idea that I have a magic thing called a soul.

It is more based on brain size and lifespan. I think people who are pro-life – I don't think people put much thought into their positions of pro-life vs. pro-choice, but if they'd been taught about it they'd say your soul is attached to you at conception.

Otherwise, why get so upset over what happens to a tiny glob of cells that isn't anywhere near what we think of as human? One way of arguing for pro-life is the soul gets stuck to you once you're conceived. Another way of arguing is the potential is there.

Once a fetus or a human is conceived, if everything goes well for that fetus, that fetus will develop into a baby and you shouldn't deny that potential. Although, you can argue against that in a variety of ways. What about those that are stillborn?

But we're talking about the soul, not so much about anti-abortion, but the deal is that pro-choice vs. pro-life hasn't really lessened much in vehemence since *Roe v. Wade* indicates that we're

going to enter into a landscape of further controversy and confusion, even when we start to have mathematical definitions of consciousness.

People are going to hold onto their attitudes about humans being special versus animals. If you think about being a meat eater, there are assumptions about specialness, or you have to live with the idea that you're killing conscious beings because you like meat.

So, you have all of those confusions, even when we have the math of consciousness pinned down. When we have the index, the consciousness index, the amount of information being exchanged consciously in a human might be assigned at a base number of 100.

In a dog, it might be 12 or 14. In a pig, it might be 20. The amount of information being processed in that animal's consciousness moment-to-moment or on average according to some index.

Further problems will arise when we have artificial but conscious information processors, AIs that process information consciously, which is broadband information sharing, real-time, among specialist sub-systems with, to some extent, value judgments and emotions being associated with the information.

One way to think of value judgments and emotion is informationally. That emotions set up a framework for thinking about the information that you're processing. Information links the being's goals and drives to the information it is receiving by evaluating the information relative to goals and drives, and feeling good if the information reflects the fulfillment of the goals and drives, or feeling bad at the thwarting of those goals and drives.

Emotions and values are the scorekeepers for information. It seems reasonable that some AIs will operate in ways that can be considered emotional. Wanting things, feeling good when they are closer to achieving goals, emotions aren't just a magical overlay to add flavor to life. They are helpful interpreters of information.

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