

Ask A Genius 73 – The Soul and Consciousness (4)
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Scott: As a materialist and an informationist, as defined earlier, nothing transcendent of space and time exists which could be called the soul. Rather, it is bound to the natural world. It is bound to the material world and the information processing ongoing in it.

Rick: Mostly yes, but there are little escapes from that, escape number one, which I don't believe it, but has implications for the world. Let's say we're part of a simulation *Matrix*-style, the only thing you need to take from a *Matrix*-style simulation is that it is possible to encode the information that we think, or is, encoded in our brains and have that encoding survive external to our brains, which is something you can imagine happening in the future.

We'll be able to do brain scans and turn our brains into code, and reproduce those codes in some other framework and have systems that way. That process can be applied to the past less effectively, where you want to make Abraham Lincoln again.

So, you track down his genes by finding his descendants, then come up with a most probable genetic profile and use that profile to develop a model of what his brain was probably like – or you straight out clone him based on most probable genetics.

Then you try to shape his brain based on everything that Lincoln ever wrote, said, and likely experienced. You end up with something that thinks it's Lincoln, feels that it's Lincoln, and is, maybe, 80% accurate as a version of Lincoln according to some scale.

Eventually, there will be numbers you can assign to something like this. I don't know how that will work. We are, from day-to-day and month-to-month, slightly inaccurate reproductions of what we were before.

We change. We forget things. We learn new attitudes. Our brains and consciousnesses change incrementally. We're okay with that because we've evolved to be okay with that. We feel there is, and there is, continuity among ourselves.

We evolved that way. If we didn't have that, we wouldn't be able to keep up with the world. There will be means of carrying on, external to the natural processes that carry us on day-to-day, in the future.

They will start out fairly crappy, low fidelity, in the area of wild guesses, but they will get better and better. You can be a materialist and an informationist, and still see the possibility for transcendence beyond our encased consciousness in space and time inside our heads once the technology exists to pull what's in our heads and reproduce it elsewhere.

If you want, you could call certain deep structures to who we are the soul. You could have some technical resurrection based on some deep parameters. If you want to get creepy and science-

fictionery about it, say there's a revered ancestor, the grandma who lived to 88 and passes away in 2112.

To honor that grandma and by the time we're good at brain scans, we don't want to resurrect grandma, but honor her by taking the flavor of her soul, the patterns of her thought, and mold that into your gestating kid.

So, the kid comes out with a hint of grandma. As the kid comes out, they may have some of the same stubbornness, or willingness to stand up for the little guy, or a gruffness that hides a heart of gold, or a deep skepticism.

They'd be able to translate some of that stuff over. People will do all sorts of other stuff. People of the future, if they're having offspring, will make sure their offspring will have the greatest chances for success.

We tweak our offspring by trying to pass on our values. There may be genetic, brain architecture, and brain chemistry ways to do that later. The creepy people of the future will take advantage of those things. Some of those means you can circle back to this whole idea of the soul.

Scott: Does the consistency over time amount to what some would term the “human spark”? That is, a relative deep consistency over the long haul in someone's thoughts, behaviours, and general forms of information processing.

The idea of the human spark is a mistaken idea to an informationist because it is a thing to explain why we feel the way we feel as conscious beings. It gets to justify all sorts of differences being essential differences to give us dominion over the world.

We have language. We have art. We have consciousness of ourselves. We are aware of ourselves as conscious beings in the world. All of these different things have been argued to differentiate humans from animals.

Even in the 1930s with behaviorism, there was this idea that animals are collections of behaviors and reflections, and, to some extent, so are we. In the 1930s, it was fairly late to have this completely mechanistic, consciousness-denying, black box model of our experience of the world.

Which still leaves room for this superimposition of the human spark, the human spark is mostly, I think, a mistake, but you can look at mathematical ideas with regards to the ways we process information that we see as most analogous to that idea of the soul.

It would be to the deepest personality traits that are the least mutable over time. That is making excuse for the soul. We are calling these deep personality traits the soul, when it's just another form of information.

Scott: A lot of historical figures – Augustine, Aquinas, or Anselm, for examples – wrote books referencing the soul. I haven't read them in a while. They wrote many books. They mentioned the soul. When I did read them, the descriptions of the soul were akin to those

with religious or transcendental sentiments and experiences with something as simple as mass.

If someone goes to a Catholic Mass or a Gnostic Mass, they have transcendent feelings and experiences. In the Catholic case, they might be called the “Holy Ghost” or the “Holy Spirit” in terms of the frame of reference that they can conceptualize that feeling, but we have the same genetics of people a couple thousand years ago or a couple, or a few, centuries ago.

To me, that indicates a universality in what people are associating it with a lot of the time. It was associated, in more modern terms, with transcendent experiences, or just emotions and feelings that are rarer and rarefied.

So, how do we and how do people in the past justify talking about the, without a concrete definition and a technical definition of the, soul?

Rick: In olden times, there was a lot of stuff that wasn't readily explained. If you wanted an explanation, you had to go with a magical explanation or had to default to God. We live in a time where we have an explanation of just about everything including the shape of the universe.

The one area that remains hard to define in people's minds is consciousness and the soul. Looking at the things that are part of our regular experience have various levels of explanatory complicatedness, gravitation was pretty much solved by Newton in the 1600s.

The shape of the universe, at least as we understand it now for the purposes of contextualizing most observational results, has arisen in the past 100 years. Genetics has been solved in the past 100, 150, years.

Most things have been solved at least in terms of having a superficial understanding. The one thing that remains easy to understand is consciousness and the related idea of the soul. It is a holdover from the magical and God-filled times of 1,000s of years ago.

Because most of the aspects were not understandable or understood, it was relatively common place to talk about things without precise definitions of them. A further definition of the soul, imprecise, is the phenomena it describes is not easily characterized.

Not only is it hard to understand what it might be, it is hard to characterize, but you have to be able to talk about this stuff. The experience of consciousness is common to just about everyone who doesn't have some weird brain damage.

You have to be able to talk about it even if you can't exactly define it. Although, by talking about it, you're making an attempt to define it, which can often end up codifying or building in misconceptions.

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