

Ask A Genius 74 – The Soul and Consciousness (5)
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Scott: What are some common mistakes in attempts to define consciousness?

Rick: Every time somebody tries to pin down consciousness, they are defining it and mistakes get built in. One mistake that I might include is that you have to be aware of yourself as conscious. You have to be aware of yourself as a being in the world. That one test for consciousness is whether you can recognize yourself in the mirror.

Other mistaken necessary ingredients for consciousness can be language and toolmaking. All of which can help indicate consciousness, but don't necessarily mean consciousness. We can throw in the Arthur C. Clarke quote that is so overused it is a cliché: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

That's the natural world that our ancestors lived in, full of magic or divine ingredients because other tough things were not easily able to be understood. Over the past 400 years, we've explained a lot of previously unexplained stuff, and are able to take over a lot of the functions that were previously assigned to the divine.

With some functions on the medium horizon as being able to be done technologically, that would previously be assigned to God, e.g. resurrection.

Scott: We have species chauvinism tied to the idea of the soul. On the one hand, we see animals as soulless and, therefore, as machines. On the other hand, we see people as having souls and, therefore, as something partially machine-like, but something different like spiritual machines.

Some natural mechanism transcending nature, in part. Those thoughts have been rattling around in people's heads for a long time.

Rick: Those dichotomies have been subject to contradiction, confusion, and, to some extent, not wanting to think about it. Even more so now because we have an understanding of some of the mechanics that underlie consciousness, it has always been a problem, at least for some people.

That we're friendly with some animals and slaughter other animals for meat. Sometimes, it is both. Somebody raises a 4 age cow as a project and as a cow friend, but the end of that process can be selling that cow to be turned into meat.

If you grow up on a farm, I assume that's part of being tough about farm life.

Scott: There's also the sense of essentialism there. Someone raises that cow to around four-years-old, slaughters it, then begins to use the meat. They have an attachment to the meat. There's a transfer of the essential concern and likingness of the cow when it was alive to its meat that can make one reluctant to eat it.

One can see this play out in things like overgeneralization, where people with dietary regimens, and therefore restrictions, will not eat something that is not only an animal but an animal product, e.g. dairy, or even as far as the end product simply coming from something with the face of an animal at one point.

Rick: This is an area where I think nobody has completely consistent beliefs. Everybody's a little bit confused. Hunters will say it is cool to hunt if you use the animal that you hunt. They have contempt for people who criticize them as hunters saying, "Every time you go to the store and buy a package of hamburger. You are participating in slaughter, but just don't see it. You are simply presented with a hygienically wrapped product. So, you're a baby."

The Trump kids who have gone on safaris. There are different degrees of contemptibleness of safaris in the minds of some people. One Trump kid is seen as contemptible because there is a picture of him with an elephant's tail.

For an elephant he shot, it was part of a hunt. It was probably canned and choreographed. Some of these hunts take old animals that couldn't survive in the wild, and then shoot them.

There was the dentist that shot a famous lion as part of a canned hunt. It garnered the world's contempt for a month. The more we know about the mechanics of thoughts, biology, and chemistry. The harder it is to differentiate or draw a line between humans and non-human animals in terms of us having some divine spark, or divine difference, which leads to further contradictory belief systems.

These probably won't start getting cleaner even if we live in ways that reduce slaughter. Slaughter is at crazy levels now. I am probably going to be off by billions here, but something like 40 billion chickens slaughtered in the United States every year.

It is in the order of several billion. I assume that means millions of pigs, certainly over a million cows. That's a lot of killing. Most people don't have a problem with that because "they are chickens and should be killed fast. Even if they are chickens, we don't have to see the process."

In the future, there will be less slaughter for a couple of reasons. The main one being raising meat is hugely expensive in terms of natural resources – raising a pound of meat uses up so many gallons of water. The world would run out of food if the rest of the world ate as much meat per capita as the United States does.

Scientists are working on developing artificial meat. Eventually, they will have decent product, which will mean less natural cow. Another force in the reduction of slaughtering is the uneasy feeling people have with slaughter, but, regardless of the level of slaughter, issues about slaughter are going to be not much closer to be resolved.

Whether it matters how much a chicken suffers for several reasons including that "well, yea, the chickens suffered, but we end up with nice chicken to eat." Where people don't really know how

much philosophical weight to assign to slaughter, the general feeling is you don't want to make things too difficult for meat animals.

Not just so we aren't assholes in general, but that there isn't a really easy way to keep score to how bad it is for an animal to raise it for meat and then slaughter it. Whether you get any more goodness points for a free range chicken or a farmed chicken with an amputated beak, there's a good way to keep score.

If you're an informationist, every living being, once that being is dead, all memory of suffering is eradicated, except through technological resurrection, which is kind of a long shot at this point. If suffering ultimately doesn't matter because the memory or suffering is eradicated along with the brain that holds that memory and information, then you have to evaluate life, especially human life, in terms of whether that life was able to achieve goals other than suffering or not.

There are other ways to keep score. Was the human able to reproduce? Was the human able to live a full life and pass their values onto the next generation? If you look at the Holocaust, it scores badly for suffering.

But if you take suffering out because everybody dies and the suffering is not remembered, then you have to score it other ways as to whether a culture was destroyed, whether wealth was stolen, whether the Nazis were basically a giant criminal enterprise for the transfer of wealth from the people they, or it, was killing, whether victims of the Holocaust were not able to create the next generation, whether there was cultural destruction.

Even the damage to humanity's image of itself, there are many ways to keep score. All of them, on all of those scales, you have to be really fucked up to give Nazi-ism a really good score for anything. In terms of scoring experience, there's no good way to do that, or it's tough. It is tough to do on a philosophical level because the default mechanism, which we don't really have anything better than it, is the Golden Rule.

We know how it feels when good and bad things happen to us. To exercise the Golden Rule is to understand people have those same feelings and to want to maximise their good feelings in the same way we would want them to maximise our good feelings, but still no ultimate framework.

If there is no ultimate framework for humans, then there are a lot of persuasive frameworks, but there are fewer of those for animals. We want our pets to live good lives, but many people who have looked at PETA, for instance, have had the experience of seeing some of the things they say and deciding that it goes too far.

They are just a dog or just a cat. Or PETA aside, the decision on your dog with a tumor, and it will cause \$5,500 to remove the tumor and do chemo. This may buy your dog another year. It doesn't seem like an illegitimate question, especially if you're only earning \$60,000 per year.

Is it worth spending 10% of your annual income to save your dog another year? It is really hard to keep score around the quality of life of animals.

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