

**Ask A Genius 86 – Life and Death (1)**  
**Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Rick Rosner**  
**February 11, 2017**

*\*This session has been edited for clarity and readability.\**

**Scott: Death is a profound topic. It raises profound feelings, and questions (Markman, 2008; Murphy, 2015; Alper, 2015). It raises exceptional circumstances for people, especially their own ending.**

Rick: To talk about death, we have to talk about life.

**Scott: Okay, let's talk about life *and* death.**

Rick: One reason death is so scary is that if you don't believe in an afterlife then you lose everything when you die because conscious being is the frame in which you hold everything. There's no you to remember after death.

That's summed up with the saying, "You can't take it with you." If there's no framework for you to experience what you own or any other aspect of life, then you've lost everything. To take a step back, we can talk about some reasonable substitutes for life.

Some substitutes for life are enduring fame. That you create a work of art that lives on after you. That you create descendants that live after you. That you ascribe to values that live on after you. That you lived a full life and accomplished what people, or at least you, acknowledge to be a life well-spent.

None of those are very satisfying in the minds of most people compared to losing everything, but they are among the few things that you get to keep if you don't believe in an afterlife. You don't really get to keep them, but you've been keeping score as to whether you've been living a good life or not.

That's part of your framework as to why it is a good thing to die or not, but it's not very satisfying in most people's minds. I don't know about animals. Salmon swim upstream to their deaths after spawning (Reference, 2017). Are they okay with that? Who knows? Evolution is not respectful of our feelings once our feelings don't increase the likelihood that we'll reproduce.

Evolution doesn't care what we think unless what we think influences our reproductive capabilities. Evolution doesn't care. Say there's no afterlife, but a few tens of billions of people have earnestly believed in an afterlife, an evolutionary universe doesn't particularly care that so many people have been so cruelly deceived (Palermo, 2015; PEW Research Center, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Origins of Religion. How Supernatural Beliefs Evolved* (2015) states:

*There are many theories as to how religious thought originated. But two of the most widely cited ideas have to do with how early humans interacted with their natural environment...*

In fact, evolution cannot approve or disapprove anything, but there might be an evolutionary advantage in people wrongfully believing in an afterlife if that belief helps people to live long enough to make babies.

But if you believe in evolution, and if you believe in the current scientific framework, then just because billions of people have believed in an afterlife does not obligate the universe to conform to that belief.

So, we are on the cusp of more satisfying substitutes for life. What we want most of all with regard to life is more life, most people, or a lot of people, with bravado say, “I don’t want to live past 100.”

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*Picture this: You're a human being living many thousands of years ago. You're out on the plains of the Serengeti, sitting around, waiting for an antelope to walk by so you can kill it for dinner. All of a sudden, you see the grasses in front of you rustling. What do you do? Do you stop and think about what might be causing the rustling (the wind or a lion, for example), or do you immediately take some kind of action?*

*...Humans who survived to procreate were those who had developed what evolutionary scientists call a hypersensitive agency-detecting device, or HADD, he said.*

*In short, HADD is the mechanism that lets humans perceive that many things have "agency," or the ability to act of their own accord. This understanding of how the world worked facilitated the rapid decision-making process that humans had to go through when they heard a rustling in the grass. (Lions act of their own accord. Better run.)*

*...HADD may have planted the seeds for religious thought. In addition to attributing agency to lions, for example, humans started attributing agency to things that really didn't have agency at all...*

*...Acting for a purpose is the basis for what evolutionary scientists call the Theory of Mind (ToM) — another idea that's often cited in discussions about the origins of religion. By attributing intention or purpose to the actions of beings that did have agency, like other people, humans stopped simply reacting as quickly as possible to the world around them — they started anticipating what other beings' actions might be and planning their own actions accordingly. (Being able to sort of get into the mind of another purposeful being is what Theory of Mind is all about.)*

*ToM was very helpful to early humans. It enabled them to discern other people's positive and negative intentions (e.g., "Does that person want to mate with me or kill me and steal my food?"), thereby increasing their own chances of survival.*

*But when people started attributing purpose to the actions of nonactors, like raindrops, ToM took a turn toward the supernatural...*

*...This tendency to explain the natural world through the existence of beings with supernatural powers — things like gods, ancestral spirits, goblins and fairies — formed the basis for religious beliefs, according to many cognitive scientists. Collectively, some scientists refer to HADD and ToM as the "god faculty,"...*

Palermo, E. (2015, October 5). The Origins of Religion. How Supernatural Beliefs Evolved. Retrieved from <http://www.livescience.com/52364-origins-supernatural-religious-beliefs.html>.

In that, there's the idea that at 100 then you're pretty fucked up physically and mentally. You wouldn't want to live that way anyway. But you can say, "What if you could live with the body and the brain of a 35-year-old?"

A lot of people will say with a certain amount of bravado, "Yea, I still wouldn't want that!" There's a little bit of not wanting what you can't have. There's ingrained social structures in that. But if you really pressed, especially as we move into the future, "If you could live indefinitely or for 200 years in the body of a 35-year-old or a 50-year-old, would you want at least another 200 years?"

Most people without thinking about it will still say, "No, there's a place and time for everybody. My time will be over after 100 years." But more and more people want extended life if that life can be good.

Medicine and technology are increasingly able to give us little bits of that. 100 years ago, people on average, which is weird when you talk about people who lived 100 years ago because infant and maternal mortality were really high and dragged average lifespan into the 40s, might expect to live into their 40s, 50s, and 60s.

I would suspect in the 1910s and 1920s people in their 60s were not anywhere near as healthy as anyone in their 60s now. People don't tend to think in those terms, so people don't realize medicine and technology have been giving us increased longevity. It is not something people think about a lot.

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**Author(s)**



Scott Douglas Jacobsen  
Editor-in-Chief, In-Sight Publishing  
[Scott.D.Jacobsen@Gmail.Com](mailto:Scott.D.Jacobsen@Gmail.Com)  
In-Sight Publishing



Rick Rosner  
American Television Writer  
[RickRosner@Hotmail.Com](mailto:RickRosner@Hotmail.Com)  
Rick Rosner

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