

Ask A Genius 92 – Life and Death (7)
Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Rick Rosner
February 17, 2017

Footnotes in the interview & bibliography after the interview.
This session edited for clarity and readability.

Rick: The people who might have the greatest intuitive understanding of the legal aspects of this stuff are the people who watch David E. Kelly shows (IMDb, 2017a).¹ *Boston Legal*, which hasn't been on in a few years, or *The Good Wife*, which is not a David E. Kelly show (IMDb, 2017b; IMDb, 2017c). *The Good Wife*, and some of these other shows, have controversial cases of the week with shorter story arcs than the normal long ones. They have new, controversial issues. It is a great way to present the controversies to people. *Law & Order* does that with controversial murder cases (IMDb, 2017d). It is not unreasonable to think that these issues of technically avoided brain death will, in some of their aspects, be played out legally. Again, that underscores that we'll need a mathematical model of consciousness to figure out what is or isn't legitimate brain life, or official brain life.

Scott: Some super-controversial far future problems will come when culture and legality clash. When we can replicate someone sufficiently completely, digitally, and that person's flesh-body is doing okay, and they're trying to update their will after 20 or 30 years, where they're 110, who writes the will? [Laughing]

Who decides - the digital them or the flesh them? By culture, people will default to the flesh person – what you call the “meat brain,” but the digital person is, technically, the same, in a way.

R: Assuming the technology exists, and it might, people might want to put their meat body on cryonic suspension for 10 years and may only want to exist as a digital entity plus living in portable or rentable bodies as needed. All of this stuff is 80 years away, but not infinitely away. There are some aspects of science fiction that will never come to be. You're fighting too much physics, e.g. time travel. However, there will be plenty of virtual time travel such as a *Westworld*, where you can travel to any time (IMDb, 2017e). It will be possible to simulate possible futures to decide on possible courses of action. Anyway, all of this stuff with regard to mental computation, I think, within the next 80 to 120 years will be sussed out and, more or less,

¹ David E. Kelly (2017) states:

David Kelley might be described as living the American Dream, 1990s' style: write a screenplay, move to Hollywood, make millions and marry a movie star. A former Boston lawyer, in the last decade, he switched careers to become a successful television producer whose shows are recognized for their quality as well as receiving top ratings. David Kelley was born in 1956 and is originally from Maine. He attended Princeton University and Boston University Law School. He married actress Michelle Pfeiffer in November 1993. They have two children: Claudia Rose Kelley, born in March 1993, who was adopted by Ms. Pfeiffer eight months before their marriage, and John Henry, born in August 1994.

IMDb. (2017a). David E. Kelly. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005082/>.

completely solved, which will give the augmented people and post-people a great deal of flexibility in how they want to live their physical and mental lives.

As people become more and more at home with that flexibility, the ways people want to live will be weirder and weirder, where you'll have people wanting to think in tandem. Two people wanting to do a literal marriage of the minds. If you read any science fiction, or think in any science fiction way, all of this becomes something that you can become fairly well-versed in imagining. All of the flavors people might want to be conscious. Ownership of self and other assets will have to be figured out. Religion impinges on it. I am reading a book by Tom Wolfe (Wolfe, 2017; Ritchie, 2016; Collison, 2016; McWhorter, 2016).² In the book, it talks about the 19th century and evolution (Amazon, 2017; King, 2016). Tom Wolfe has a book talking about the history of the trouble people have with integrating language into theories of evolution (Wolfe, 2016; Coyne, 2016; Poole, 2016). Human language is so great in its sophistication and so different in its abilities from animals that it is hard to come up with a convincing argument for it as an evolved ability (Kirby, 2005). In other words, if you wanted to continue to debunk evolution, language would be one place where you might want to stake your flag, plant your flag.

S: Have you heard of the Mysterians or the New Mysterians (Lamb, 2013)?³

² *About Tom Wolfe* (2017) states:

Tom Wolfe was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia. He was educated at Washington and Lee (B.A., 1951) and Yale (Ph.D., American Studies, 1957) universities. In December 1956, he took a job as a reporter on the Springfield (Massachusetts) Union. This was the beginning of a ten-year newspaper career, most of it spent as a general assignment reporter. For six months in 1960 he served as The Washington Post's Latin American correspondent and won the Washington Newspaper Guild's foreign news prize for his coverage of Cuba.

In 1962 he became a reporter for the New York Herald-Tribune and, in addition, one of the two staff writers (Jimmy Breslin was the other) of New York magazine, which began as the Herald-Tribune's Sunday supplement. While still a daily reporter for the Herald-Tribune, he completed his first book, a collection of articles about the flamboyant Sixties written for New York and Esquire and published in 1965 by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux as The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby. The book became a bestseller and established Wolfe as a leading figure in the literary experiments in nonfiction that became known as New Journalism.

Wolfe, T. (2017). About Tom Wolfe. Retrieved from <http://www.tomwolfe.com/bio.html>.

³ *New Mysterianism and the Riddle of Consciousness* (n.d.) states:

Let's refresh. You have an organic brain, which neuroscientist Christof Koch calls the most complex object in the known universe. That brain manifests what we call the mind. We study the brain. We study the mind. And then we struggle to comprehend the psycho-physical nexus. And this is where we get the mind body problem.

Neuroscientists, psychologists, philosophers and theologians all struggle to understand consciousness within their respective disciplines. They work toward an answer, but the New Mysterian philosophers argue we might simply be incapable of solving the riddle.

The most prominent of the New Mysterians is Colin McGinn, who recently outlined this philosophy in an excellent panel (watch it here) at the 2013 World Science Festival. The brain itself cannot conceive the natural coexistence of mind and brain. It's not that we're dumb, but we only evolved to carry out certain

R: No, they sound like a 1960s rock group.

[Laughing]

Wait! *Question Mark and the Mysterians* is the name (Question Mark and the Mysterians, n.d.). It was a 1960s rock group.

S: These folks comprise a set of high-ranking academics with good reputations. Some controversial; some not. They don't take an irreducible lane. It is a mystery. There are problems that are in our purview to understand in some near or far future. There's another class that are essential mysteries. Things that by their nature disallow us to comprehend their true nature. So we cannot come up with adequate explanations for them. In that sense, we come ill-equipped to perceive of things and conceive of things such as language in terms of how they came to be and that that will be some essentialist thing. They are Mysterians. These are absolute mysteries. They will be unknown into the indefinite future.

R: I disagree with that. Some things may be that, but I disagree language is that. I'm not through the book yet, but I would guess the explosion in the size of our brains and at the same time the development of language (Robson, 2011; Tuttle, 2015). Darwin had these principles like no sophisticated structure can evolve unless it has been propelled along that evolutionary path by utility, e.g. eyes (Desmond, 2016; Natural History Museum, n.d.; Phys.org, 2016).

S: The immune system (Humphrey & Purdue, 2016).⁴

cognitive feats: navigating a changing world, hunting, surviving within a society, etc. What's the evolutionary advantage of understanding the nature of consciousness?

This all involves some of the same concepts as Cognitive Closure: the philosophic idea that humans can only hope to understand certain aspects of universe and simply lack the brains to understand everything.

The exception to this, of course, is the steady accumulation and preservation of scientific data over the course of human history. So we kind of cheat a bit with science, this god-of-ideas that stands outside of us.

Yet all of this external accumulation can't overcome inner cognitive limits.

Lamb, B. (2013, July 2). New Mysterianism and the Riddle of Consciousness. Retrieved from <http://www.stufftoblowyourmind.com/blogs/mysterianism-riddle-consciousness.htm>.

⁴ The immune system (2016) states:

Virtually all organisms have at least one form of defense that helps repel disease-causing organisms. Advanced vertebrate animals, a group that includes humans, defend themselves against such microorganisms by means of a complex group of defense responses collectively called the immune system. This protective system evolved from simpler defense mechanisms, but the evolutionary twists and turns that led to its development are not entirely clear. To unravel the path that the vertebrate immune system followed in its evolution, investigators have studied the defense responses of various living organisms. They also have examined the genes of immune system proteins for clues to the genetic origins of immunity.

Humphrey & Purdue. (2016, October 28). Evolution of the Immune System. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/science/immune-system/Evolution-of-the-immune-system>.

R: They need to be propelled step-wise by showing an advantage at every step of development, or at every significant step. You can have little mutations that prove to be helpful a little later, but you can't have teleology (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015; Colin, 2009).⁵ Where we're going to evolve this stuff because once we get to the end-stage, it will be really helpful.

S: This is in the popular media, too, by the way.

R: How so?

S: People who don't have the background or the training, but have an interest. So I don't know how much they've read on it. People like Ridley Scott (IMDb, 2017f). He seems to be

⁵ *Teleological Notions in Biology* (2009) states:

Teleological terms such as "function" and "design" appear frequently in the biological sciences. Examples of teleological claims include:

- *A (biological) function of stotting by antelopes is to communicate to predators that they have been detected.*
- *Eagles' wings are (naturally) designed for soaring.*

Teleological notions were commonly associated with the pre-Darwinian view that the biological realm provides evidence of conscious design by a supernatural creator. Even after creationist viewpoints were rejected by most biologists there remained various grounds for concern about the role of teleology in biology, including whether such terms are:

1. *vitalistic (positing some special "life-force");*
2. *requiring backwards causation (because future outcomes explain present traits);*
3. *incompatible with mechanistic explanation (because of 1 and 2);*
4. *mentalistic (attributing the action of mind where there is none);*
5. *empirically untestable (for all the above reasons).*

Opinions divide over whether Darwin's theory of evolution provides a means of eliminating teleology from biology, or whether it provides a naturalistic account of the role of teleological notions in the science.

Teleological Notions in Biology. (2009). Teleological Notions in Biology. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/teleology-biology/>.

taking a teleological view within religious context (Roach, 2017; O’Connell, 2012).^{6,7} He seems to be taking that stance with recent movies like *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*

⁶ Interview: Ridley Scott on revisiting the Alien franchise with *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* (2017) states:

*Scott wanted to go back and really explore the origins of the xenomorphs, adding that, “We did **Prometheus** – that heaved it off the ground, and **Covenant** is a follow-through to **Prometheus**. We now know who created this, and why, and the next one’s a joining up of the storyline.” Scott told us that the story of **Alien: Covenant** “touches on mortality, immortality and the real question of who created us and why.”*

*Scott then went on to reveal that both **Prometheus** and **Covenant** are inspired by his personal beliefs about where we came from: “We’re not just a random biological accident, For you and I to be sitting here right now [by accident] would take trillions of correct decisions made randomly by nature, which of course is ridiculous. I think there’s some kind of decision being made. I believe in a higher force – if we want to call it God, then it’s God.”*

Roach, T. (2017, January 3). Interview: Ridley Scott on revisiting the Alien franchise with *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*. Retrieved from <https://www.flickeringmyth.com/2017/01/interview-ridley-scott-on-expanding-the-alien-franchise-with-prometheus-and-alien-covenant/>.

⁷ INTERVIEW: SIR RIDLEY SCOTT EXPLAINS 'PROMETHEUS,' EXPLORES OUR PAST, AND TEASES FUTURE 'ALIEN' STORIES (2012) states:

RS: Well, from the very beginning, I was working from a premise that lent itself to a sequel. I really don’t want to meet God in the first one. I want to leave it open to [Noomi Rapace’s character, Dr. Elizabeth Shaw] saying, “I don’t want to go back to where I came from. I want to go where they came from.”

Fandango: So that was always going to be the natural ending for this film?

*RS: Totally. And because they’re such aggressive f**kers ... and who wouldn’t describe them that way, considering their brilliance in making dreadful devices and weapons that would make our chemical warfare look ridiculous? So I always had it in there that the God-like creature that you will see actually is not so nice, and is certainly not God. As she says, “This is not what I thought it was going to be, and I think we should get the Hell out of here or there won’t be any place to go back to.”*

...Fandango: We’re not going to get a slow build in this second film, then. These guys are volatile from the start?

*RS: In a funny kind of way, if you look at the Engineers, they’re tall and elegant ... they are dark angels. If you look at [John Milton’s] *Paradise Lost*, the guys who have the best time in the story are the dark angels, not God. He goes to all the best nightclubs, he’s better looking, and he gets all of the birds. [Laughs]*

Fandango: So Milton was one of your influences for the Engineers?

*RS: That’s sounds incredibly pretentiously intellectual. But in a funny sort of way, yes. I started off with a title called *Paradise*. Either rightly or wrongly, we thought that was telling the audience too much. But then with *Prometheus* – which I thought was bloody well intellectual – that wasn’t my idea. It was Fox’s notion, It came from Tom Rothman, who’s a smart fellow. The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was a good idea. This is about someone who dares and is horribly punished. And besides, do you know something? A little bit of an education at the cinema isn’t such a bad thing.*

Fandango: Do you worry that you’ve lost the element of surprise that worked to your advantage with the original *Alien*? By now, we’ve seen numerous movies in the *Alien* universe, and like it or not, audiences are coming in with an expectation that deflates tension and suspense. Did you feel the need to pull the audience in to the story in a different fashion this time?

(IMDb, 2017g; IMDb, 2017h). I should clarify. Mysterianism or New Mysterianism in general, as far as I know, is about general mysteries, but has been more often associated with the hard problem of consciousness. It just can't be resolved by us.

RS: I was hoping I had with the fact that you have a sequence at the beginning of the film that is fundamentally creation. It's a donation, in the sense that the weight and the construction of the DNA of those aliens is way beyond what we can possibly imagine ...

Fandango: That is our planet, right?

RS: No, it doesn't have to be. That could be anywhere. That could be a planet anywhere. All he's doing is acting as a gardener in space. And the plant life, in fact, is the disintegration of himself.

If you parallel that idea with other sacrificial elements in history – which are clearly illustrated with the Mayans and the Incas – he would live for one year as a prince, and at the end of that year, he would be taken and donated to the gods in hopes of improving what might happen next year, be it with crops or weather, etcetera.

I always think about how often we attribute what has happened to either our invention or memory. A lot of ideas evolve from past histories, but when you look so far back, you wonder, Really? Is there really a connection there?"

Then when I jump back, and you put yourself in a situation of a cave painting, you see that someone 32,000 years ago is showing me a little man sitting in the darkness, using a candle light that is fat from a creature he killed and ate. And in the darkness are two or three other family members whose body heat is warming the cave. But he has discovered that from a piece of this black, burnt stick, he has discovered that he can draw pictures on the wall.

In essence, you have the first level of emotion and a demonstration of entertainment, right? Because he's drawing brilliantly on the God damn wall. Now, you put yourself into that context, it's 100-times bigger than Edison. And people don't go back to the basics and ask, "Holy shit, what gave him that knowledge, that jolt to not scribble on the wall but draw on it brilliantly?"

*If you go back and look, a completely underrated film is *Quest for Fire*. That was one of the most genius, simplistic but incredibly sophisticated notion of what it was. The evolution of that was just fantastic. And that got me sitting back on my ass thinking, "Damn! What a fundamentally massive idea."*

Fandango: You throw religion and spirituality into the equation for *Prometheus*, though, and it almost acts as a hand grenade. We had heard it was scripted that the Engineers were targeting our planet for destruction because we had crucified one of their representatives, and that Jesus Christ might have been an alien. Was that ever considered?

RS: We definitely did, and then we thought it was a little too on the nose. But if you look at it as an "our children are misbehaving down there" scenario, there are moments where it looks like we've gone out of control, running around with armor and skirts, which of course would be the Roman Empire. And they were given a long run. A thousand years before their disintegration actually started to happen. And you can say, "Let's send down one more of our emissaries to see if he can stop it. Guess what? They crucified him."

O'Connell, S. (2012, June 5). INTERVIEW: SIR RIDLEY SCOTT EXPLAINS 'PROMETHEUS,' EXPLORES OUR PAST, AND TEASES FUTURE 'ALIEN' STORIES. Retrieved from <http://www.fandango.com/movie-news/interview-sir-ridley-scott-explains-prometheus-explores-our-past-and-teases-future-alien-stories-716238>.

R: Well, I disagree. Evolution exerts a force. Evolution tends to take a lot of different paths. Any advantageous path it'll exploit. If there's a way for animals to survive, even if it is a half-assed way for an advantage to be had, organisms will often find it without regard to set principles. There are some general principles, but there are some weird, specific situations that may be perverse with regard to general principles. I would bet that big brain-ism and language – the economics of that – somehow genetically is cheap enough or advantageous enough that the rudiment. People pretty much argue that the size of infant brains reached a limit. Brains in babies can only be so big without killing the mom during childbirth. You can't have a giant head coming out of the vagina. I guess childbirth for humans is more dangerous for humans compared to other animals.

S: It was the size of the birth canal and flexibility co-evolving with brain size.

R: That's the limiting factor. I'm sure there are other limiting factors for the size of the mature brain because the brain eats a lot of energy. You can't have a brain that is twice the size in diameter and eight times the volume because you can't eat enough to keep up with it. Plus, you can't keep your head up because of the weight people would be breaking their necks.

[Laughing]

I'm sure the benefits of a larger mental arena are so significant that it is relatively cheap just to make bigger and bigger brains up to those hard limits.

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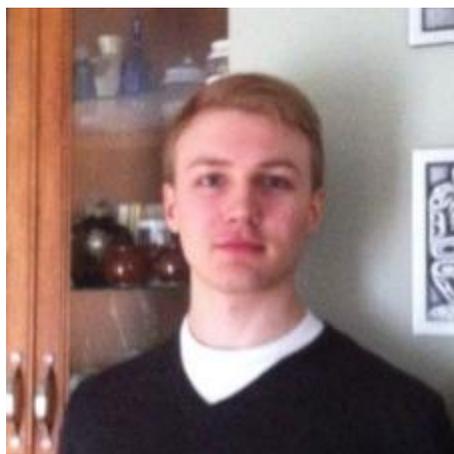
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