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# **How Do We Know the Soul Exists? And, What If We Would Never Know?**

## **A Reflection on John Horgan's "We Have Souls, and So Do Crows."**

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### **Introduction**

From the days of Hippocrates and Plato to modern philosophers, the quest on whether a spiritual soul exists has always been one of the hottest debates. Today, the concept of consciousness is no longer exclusive to humans but animals as well. In an article titled "We Have Souls, and So Do Crows" published on *Scientific American* last year, John Horgan explores the essence of soul and animal consciousness. His article has drawn me into reflecting upon (I) do I have a soul? And (II) how do I know if others have a soul as well? Further pondering had also led to the limitations of science and its relationship with choices and beliefs. I am convinced that while truth to whether the soul exists is yet to be discovered; faith is compulsory to fill the gaps of science; it is also my personal belief that humans possess an immaterial and enduring soul.

## Does My “Soul” Exist? Views Across the Spectrum and My Position

Due to the ever-shifting of one’s identities and the brain’s property of neuroplasticity, Horgan wondered perhaps the “self is an illusion”. From the monism point of view, the notion that “souls cannot possibly exist” is reasonable. James Watson had once made the famous assertion that “life was just a matter of physics and chemistry” (139). A majority of modern times philosophers agree that consciousness is derived from the physical brain instead of the spiritual nature of the soul (Kandel 182). Many hold the view that humans are fully mechanical; even our emotions, which we consider as evidence of our “self” being fully alive, could be illusions caused by chemicals and limbic system activities. To those who believe that truth can only be approached scientifically by physical evidence, the concept of non-material souls seems unacceptable.

Others take John Searle and Thomas Nagel’s middle position that our self/consciousness is a superbly complex biological structure accessible to analysis once our technologies have advanced sufficiently (Kandel 182). To these people, there is no “ghost in the machine”, but a sophisticated machine. Neuroscientist Sebastian Seung share this position. His TED talk, “I am my connectome”, suggests that our self-identity: our memories, personalities, intellects...etc. are stored in our unique connectome, which is the intricate manner our 100 billion neurons connect with one another (Seung). After dozen years of tedious labor, Seung and his team have succeeded in mapping a complete connectome of a 300 neurons-worm and a limited part of a rat’s brain. Researchers humbly admit the goal of mapping a human connectome is still distant due to the human mind’s complexity and

the colossal information stored within. Therefore, despite the assertiveness suggested by the title, the notion that “we are our connectomes” still remains a hypothesis. Although our science has advanced far since the days of Searle and Nagel, our current technology and cognitive capacities are still unable to tell us what we are—a dual of a body and an immortal soul? Or a system composed of physics, chemistry and biology? I foresee that the struggle between dualism and monism will continue in coming decades.

If there is no scientific truth to this question of soul so far, I suspect that we are granted the opportunity to decide which position to take on the spectrum. My stance is in sync with Horgan's. Horgan quoted the story of Lonni Sue and his friend to show that an enduring essence which can be regarded as soul exists, and I am convinced. Besides, my memories, feelings, and reflective thoughts appear to me adequately vivid and true, which propels me to believe in the reality of my soul. What is more, wouldn't life be gloomy and meaningless if we reduce ourselves into mere packs of neurons and neuro-activities? Believing in a free spirit makes life brighter and more stimulating. I may be making an irrational and feeling-driven choice, but nobody can assuredly deem me wrong for the truth is yet to be revealed.

## **What About the Others?**

Horgan not only believes that humans have a soul, but animals do too; and that all animals, being unique and conscious creatures, deserve ethical considerations. If Horgan's argument is true, our society should undergo a reformative shift as the grazing of livestock, keeping of pets, spraying of pesticides, will all be brutal and immoral acts. The problem is: proving that

animals have souls is even harder than convincing ourselves that we have souls as one does not experience life as a crow nor can we ask the worm if it is its mapped connectome. Therefore, I propose that up to now, one can only arrive at his/her own answer to this question through these three steps: observing evidence, interpreting what they infer, and choosing what to believe.

As each person holds different standards of interpretations and beliefs, there is no universal answer to whether animals have souls. To animal lovers like Suzie, through observing the appearing individuality or character each of her animal displays, she could be convinced that animals have a soul. On the contrary, to those who holds no special affection towards animals, or to whom his/her limited encounters with animals are with annoying and unwanted tiny insects, he/she could easily be prompted to think that these filthy creatures are soulless and therefore deserve no considerations and respect. However, people from the other extreme might exist. MIT researcher Sherry Turkle interviewed several robot owners in 2010 in which some respondents expressed preference to interacting with artificial doglike robots AIBO over real living canines (Turkle). Persuaded by the sophisticated soul-like responses AIBO exhibit, at certain moments, people might believe that these machines are living and soulful. These examples hint that each person interprets the reality of souls with different yardsticks, and that these personal approaches could sufficiently shift one's attitudes and behaviors towards other living or even non-living beings.

However, if we push the line a little bit further, perhaps the reality of soul in any human-being other than I can be questionable too. Are we fooled by the apparent behaviors that other individuals demonstrate? Is it possible that after all these times of "heart-to-heart connections" and intellectual discussions, our interaction is merely a reaction between two

packs of neurons or two complicated connectomes, instead of two souls enriching one another in a cherished and profound manner? The Chinese Room Experiment suggests that we could be easily fooled by programs into believing that we are being understood whereas we might only be communicating with a spiritless system. John Searle proposed that if he was in a closed room where a native Chinese speaker would send him written Chinese messages through a slot in the door, provided with a set of English instructions which teaches him how to respond to each message, he could produce sensible answers in Chinese which are so convincing that the Chinese speaker outside would have no idea that Searle did not understand a single Chinese word at all (Searle). Searle's argument hinted that it is not peculiar to doubt the reality of souls in other humans—perhaps we are only figments of others' imagination?

However, this does not mean that everything is a delusion, but the above argument is raised to suggest that uncovering the reality of the soul is like traveling through a foggy forest where a clear and absolute way out is not present, and that different voices and indications could be delusional. If we want to break free from this obscure forest, we have to make a choice as in which path to take, or even create our own paths. When absolute answers and truth are not provided, one's interpretations of observations and choices of beliefs are what decide our directions. I bet Suzie and Horgan had never seen nor touched a crow's soul, but their observation-based judgements told them that animals have souls and they put their trust into such notion. Nor have I seen my soul and my body function independently; but as monism has not been proved right and dualism has not been proved false faith, I choose to adhere to the Bible's teachings that the soul is the breath of God onto men therefore it is from a non-material entity and divine origin (Gen. 2:7). Besides, I consider it torturing if we are to ask, "is anything

real?” each day and distrust every individual we have an interaction with—believing that these people are real souls seems appealing. A personal stance is a combination of evidence and beliefs; it might be time for faith to speak louder when science reaches its limitations.

## **So, Truth Depends on Beliefs?**

Nonetheless, it is also false notion to assert that the reality of the soul *depends* on one’s interpretation. A common opinion of soul is a representation of nonmaterial entity, or even from a superior spiritual being; I believe that matters from the supernatural realm do not change according to our interpretations and beliefs—for is truth “truth” if its certainty changes according to one’s judgement? We are all constrained by gravitational force regardless of whether we believe it or not—nothing can challenge truth’s integrity and absoluteness. However, back to the reality of the soul, this truth is yet to be revealed. I am uncertain if this truth can ever be reached scientifically, but I am certain that we can all reach a personal answer through how we interpret the world and what we choose to believe in. The ball is still in our court to find a way out from the forest. As long as we keep our minds open to absorb new ideas from across the spectrum and adjust our positions from time to time, we will be closer to truth. Science and faith are never each other’s rivals, but companions to fill each other’s gaps.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of history, scientists and philosophers are dispersed onto different positions on the spectrum as in whether the soul exists or not.

Despite rapid scientific breakthroughs and on-going researches, the human race is still unable to prove the reality of the soul. While the discovery continues, it is under our decision to look into the issue through different perspectives and take our stance. The discussion on souls reflects the limitations of science and suggests that sometimes, faith is our necessity.

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## Teacher’s comment:

Lok Yee in her paper reveals various views on the scientific interpretation of souls such as connectome, the Chinese room argument, and then tries to integrate and answer to the big question about “do we have souls” or more precisely, “How do we know the soul exists?” Science has yet to provide an unarguable answer and therefore beliefs inevitably emerge. This paper provides resourceful analysis and insightful aspects relevant to the thesis and demonstrates good interrelations among them. Yet, further elaboration on scaffolding her belief is advisable when arguing the existence of souls. (Pang Kam Moon)