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R. C. SPROUL

How Should I Think?

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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## Chapter One

# What Is the Mind?

One day I was eating a meal, and I had some watermelon on my plate. I was thinking deeply about the significance of this watermelon because I happened to be on a diet program that seeks to balance proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. I was thinking, “This is a carbohydrate.” I used to just think of it as a fruit, but now I understood it was a carbohydrate, and I had to determine whether it was a favorable carbohydrate or an unfavorable carbohydrate. I



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discovered it was a favorable carbohydrate, whose substance would be converted into fructose in the bloodstream. As I was doing all this analysis of the value of watermelon, I wondered what the piece of watermelon was thinking as it was about to be devoured. Of course, we laugh at that because we make the initial assumption that watermelons can't think. They're not animals; they're plants. And there are few, if any, people who would imagine that this piece of watermelon could contemplate its eater.

In the history of philosophy, however, not everyone has agreed with the assumption that watermelons can't think. For example, the rationalist philosopher Gottfried Leibniz developed an intricate system called monadology. He believed that all forms of matter had some capacity for what we call "thinking," even if this thinking would be reduced to what he called "petite perceptions." For the most part, his theory of petite perceptions did not make that much of an impact on the intellectual world. And as I said, few, if any, people since have considered the possibility of plants thinking.

So how do we really know whether plants can think? How do we know if animals can think? When I say something to my dog, his customary response is to cock his head

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to one side and look at me with a puzzled look on his face. Sometimes it seems that our pets and other animals have some kind of ability to think; however, the typical assessment of the scientific world is that these animals don't actually think. They simply respond to external stimuli by a force that is somewhat loosely called instinct.

So what is the difference between instinct and thought? That question has been probed by researchers, and people have come to various conclusions. On the one hand, some say that when we say that what animals do is "mere instinct" and not "thought," that reflects a certain arrogance of the human species; we assume that we are the only creature that has the ability or capacity for discursive thinking. On the other hand, some argue that animals do have the ability to think, though perhaps not at the same advanced level that human beings have.

Then there are those who say that what we call "thinking" as human beings is nothing more than instinct, that it is nothing more than a biochemical reaction to stimuli. This raises one of the oldest philosophical questions that thinkers have considered: What is the mind?

One theologian would play a word game in seeking to answer that question. He would ask, "What is the mind?"

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And he would reply, “No matter.” And then when somebody said, “Well, what is matter?” he said, “Never mind.” He was trying to communicate that though we recognize that the mind is inseparably related to something material and physical such as the brain, what we call the “mind” cannot be absolutely equated with the brain. The brain may be the seat of the mind, and it may be the organ that the body uses to think, but there is a difference between the physical organ that does the thinking and the thinking itself.

And so we ask the questions: What is thought? Is thought merely a biochemical electrical impulse that can be measured in pure physical categories, or is there something spiritual and nonphysical about this thing that is so basic to our existence as human beings? We know we are people who think and who have ideas in what we call our minds. We have a tendency to locate the source of that thinking in our heads. We also know that physical injuries to the brain can alter patterns of thought, as can chemical imbalances in the brain.

We make distinctions with respect to what is called mental illness, where people lose the capacity to think in a rational manner. And yet, people who are deemed to be

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perfectly healthy mentally also at times think in an irrational manner, and so we often wonder where that line is between mental illness and mental soundness, between sanity and insanity. It's often been said that there's a thin line between genius and insanity, between those who think at extraordinary depths and those who somehow cross the border into madness. We've seen an unusually high rate of insanity among some of the most celebrated thinkers of world history. That thin line between genius and insanity is one that we sometimes see people skating back and forth over.

What is the mind? It's not a simple question to answer. When we are awake, is there ever a time when we're not thinking? We may not be thinking in a deep logical order or analysis. We may be daydreaming, but even while we're daydreaming, we're having thoughts. We're having ideas that we're aware of. We're in a state of consciousness. But then we also experience the phenomenon of thinking when we're asleep, when sometimes the train of thought or the stream of consciousness takes some wild and bizarre turns. We've all experienced what we call a nightmare, where the thinking in the midst of our sleep frightens us.

These experiences multiply the difficulty of sorting out

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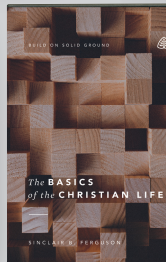
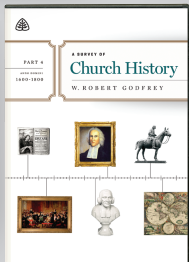
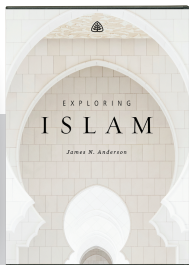
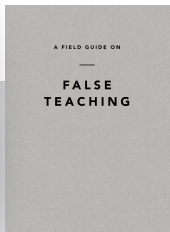
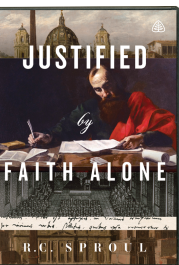
exactly what it means to have a mind and to think. Now, for our consideration as Christians, we have to understand that the bottom line is that the Scriptures assume that inherent in our humanity is the ability to think. And the claim of sacred Scripture is that we are moral beings.

To be a moral being, one has to have the ability to behave in a way that is in correspondence with or opposition to some moral standard. And the standard in Scripture is the law of God. The God of the Bible is a God who holds us accountable for our obedience or disobedience to His law. To be a creature who is responsible for one's behavior morally is to be a moral being.

What else is required to be a moral being? We've thought that through in the history of the church again and again. We conclude that a necessary condition for being a moral being is to have a will. That is, moral creatures must be volitional creatures. They must have the power, ability, and capacity to make choices, to make decisions. We are creatures who possess a will.

Then we ask the even more problematic question, What is the will? Jonathan Edwards, who I believe wrote the most important book dealing with this question of the

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# Is there a right way to think?

Whether you realize it or not, you're always thinking. Every word you speak and every choice you make comes from the mind that God has given you. Like all God's gifts, this one brings responsibility.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul shows that how we think is foundational to the way we live. The same Creator who gave us our minds has revealed His own mind in the Bible, calling us to know God and think according to His Word.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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