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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



## How Should I Think?

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

## What Is the Mind?

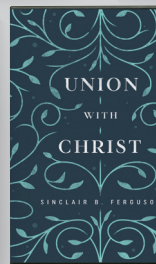
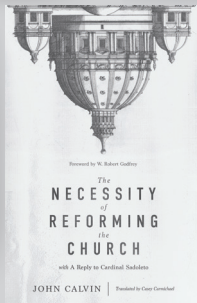
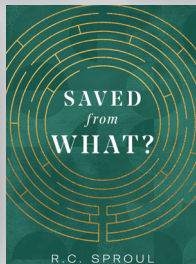
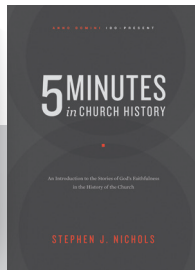
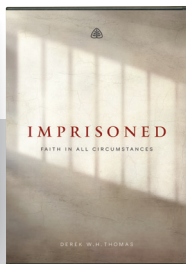
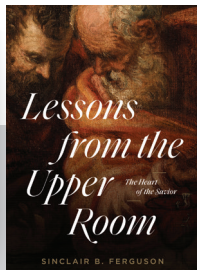
to one side and look at me with a puzzled look on his face. Sometimes it seems that our pets and other animals have some kind of ability to think; however, the typical assessment of the scientific world is that these animals don't actually think. They simply respond to external stimuli by a force that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