



# Conversations on Consciousness: What the Best Minds Think about the Brain, Free Will, and What It Means to Be Human

By Susan Blackmore

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In *Conversations on Consciousness*, Susan Blackmore interviews some of the great minds of our time, a who's who of eminent thinkers, all of whom have devoted much of their lives to understanding the concept of consciousness. The interviewees, ranging from major philosophers to renowned scientists, talk candidly with Blackmore about some of the key philosophical issues confronting us in a series of conversations that are revealing, insightful, and stimulating. They ruminate on the nature of consciousness (is it something apart from the brain?) and discuss if it is even possible to understand the human mind. Some of these thinkers say no, but most believe that we will pierce the mystery surrounding consciousness, and that neuroscience will provide the key. Blackmore goes beyond the issue of consciousness to ask other intriguing questions: Is there free will? (A question which yields many conflicted replies, with most saying yes and no.) If not, how does this effect the way you live your life; and more broadly, how has your work changed the way you live? Paired with an introduction and extensive glossary that provide helpful background information, these provocative conversations illuminate how some of the greatest minds tackle some of the most difficult questions about human nature.

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## **Conversations on Consciousness: What the Best Minds Think about the Brain, Free Will, and What It Means to Be Human** By Susan Blackmore **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Blackmore (*The Meme Machine*) began conducting interviews with leading figures in the study of consciousness for a proposed (but never realized) radio series. In book form, especially organized alphabetically, 20 transcripts with scientists and philosophers from the late Francis Crick to Daniel Dennett and Roger Penrose don't add up to a coherent presentation. The q&a format leaves Blackmore eternally circling around a handful of key issues. She's particularly fond of the philosopher's theoretical zombie, a creature that displays all the outward behavior of human consciousness but has none. She asks just about everybody if they believe it could exist, leading the exasperated Francisco Varela to blur, "It's just a problem you create by inventing problematic situations. So what?" Other questions, like how studying consciousness affects one's conception of free will, would benefit from stronger thematic unity, a tighter narrative format like that of John Horgan's *Rational Mysticism* (which profiles Blackmore in her capacity as a research psychologist). These conversations are fascinating raw material, but make for a frustrating guide to a highly complex subject. 22 illus.

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From Scientific American

The question What is consciousness? provokes all kinds of responses, ranging from jokes about psychedelic drugs to brow-furrowing discourses on life's meaning. Nearly everyone has an opinion, despite the lack of meaningful data explaining the phenomenon. Susan Blackmore posed this question to 21 leading scientists and philosophers who study consciousness for a living, compiling their responses into lively, though slightly repetitive, Q&A interviews. In each case, Blackmore asks, What's the problem with consciousness? Why does it differ from other targets of scientific inquiry? Several thinkers insist that it does not and that researchers will fare better when they treat consciousness like anything else in nature. Others assert that consciousness is fundamentally different, constituting something extra beyond the ordinary physical world. Says David Chalmers, an Australian mathematician- turned-philosopher: The heart of the science of consciousness is trying to understand the first-person perspective-- to explain subjective experiences objectively. In grappling with what neuroscientists call the hard problem--the struggle to explain how neural processes create subjective experiences--the experts are long on theories but short on answers. Nearly all agree that classical dualism doesn't work--that the mind and brain cannot be made of distinct substances. Many refer instead to the neural correlates of consciousness, the neural activity present during a person's conscious experience. Blackmore queries the thinkers on such issues as life after death, the self and free will. Most say they do not believe in extracorporeal survival, in contrast with 55 percent of U.S. residents. Most also agree that scientific evidence does not support the notion of free will, despite the gripping feeling that it exists. And because the search for the source of a conscious I in the brain has turned up empty, the existence of a distinct self seems remote, although subjective awareness suggests each person needs a self to experience consciousness. Blackmore also asks the researchers why they chose to study consciousness and how doing so has affected their lives. Several refer to a fascination with altered states of consciousness prompted by drugs, meditation, dreams or anesthesia. Many abandoned fruitful research careers in other areas to pursue the Holy C. Perhaps the most extreme case is that of Francis Crick, a physicist who won the Nobel Prize by decoding DNA's structure and then at age 60 turned his attention to consciousness work for a quarter of a century. Crick's interview by Blackmore was his last; he died shortly thereafter, in July 2004.

Richard Lipkin

## Review

"Consciousness. Where does it come from? Is it somehow separate from the human brain? Can the brain itself comprehend it? Blackmore, a lecturer in psychology at the University of the West of England, poses these and other intriguing questions to some of the top thinkers in philosophy and brain studies. In each interview, the author gets to the heart of the struggle to explain subjective experience in objective, scientific terms. Francis Crick, Daniel Dennett, John Searle, David Chalmers, and others describe the fundamental ideas behind the study of consciousness, including free will, the separation of mind and body, artificial intelligence, and conscious versus unconscious experience."--*Science News*

"Succeeds in providing a very brief survey of the multitude of positions occupied by thinkers in this area.... The often quirky personalities and mannerisms of the interviewees shine through the text.... Blackmore herself comes across as spunky and clever, and the probing follow-up questions she occasionally asks prevent the interviews from seeming too repetitive and boring."--*Nature*

"Susan Blackmore posed the question "What is consciousness?" to 21 leading scientists and philosophers who study consciousness for a living. It provokes all kinds of responses, ranging from jokes about psychedelic drugs to brow-furrowing discourses on life's meaning."-- Richard Lipkin, *Scientific American*

"Are some scientists zombies? That is among the thoughts raised by this diverting collection of interviews with neurobiologists, philosophers and others engaged in the study of the mind...a very efficient overview of contemporary strands of thinking about its subject."--Steven Poole, *Guardian Unlimited*

"Blackmore interrogates 20 mind-body experts--philosophers, neuroscientists, psychologists, and various hybrids. She doesn't stand on ceremony, is persistent, probing, honest about her puzzlements, and happy to defend her own views if the occasion arises, which once or twice creates a bit of friction."-- Tom Clark, Naturalism.org

"One remarkable aspect of the consciousness research field is the lack of agreement on what the key subject matter should be. What is the phenomenon for which we need an explanation? Susan Blackmore begins with these questions in *Conversations on Consciousness*, a collection of interviews with 21 prominent scientists and philosophers. Their answers introduce the reader to some of the concepts and puzzles at the centre of this field. *Conversations on Consciousness* provides a casual and accessible introduction to the topic. Few topics are specifically detailed, but the empirical and philosophical work summarized in the book is fascinating and easy to read."--Ephraim Glick, *EMBO Reports* (a publication of the European Molecular Biology Organization)

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#### **Joan Ortega:**

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