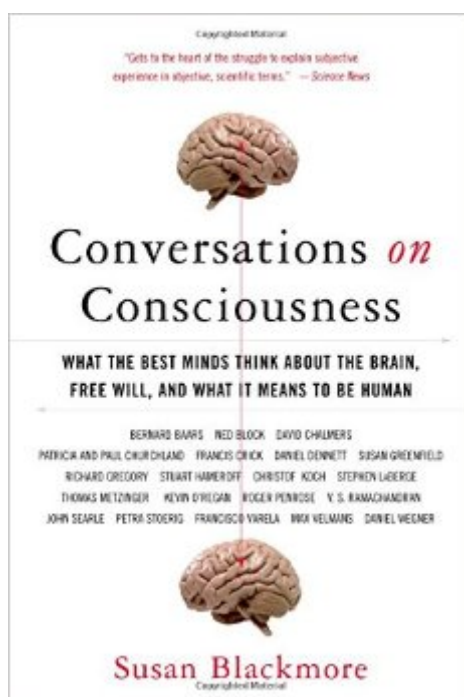


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Conversations On Consciousness: What The Best Minds Think About The Brain, Free Will, And What It Means To Be Human



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

That was a brilliant idea of Sue Blackmore, and the results are quite impressive. This book does what it was designed to do - it involves anyone (I believe) who reads it in the "hard problem of consciousness", that is in reflection on explanations of the fact of subjective experience arising from

neural structures (there are a few other themes debated here like the problem of free will, but they are marginal - with an exception of zombie-problem, which, however, is closely connected with "hard problem"). We see different approaches to the "hard problem" and a clash of philosophers, like Dennett, with scientists, like Crick or Koch. It became clear, however, that scientists are in need of philosophers these days. By the way, most elaborate responses in these conversations came from philosophers - Chalmers, Dennett, Velmans etc. So far - OK. Why only 4 stars then? Because the book is imbalanced, and Sue knows that. First of all, among her 20 "best minds" there are no Chomskian philosophers - Chomsky would probably refuse to respond - Fodor, McGinn, Pinker. Then where are Identity theorists - Armstrong or Smart? Why Edelman is not included in the list? Where is Kim? And so on. Of course, it is not easy to achieve balance in such projects. But still it is possible - I myself did something like that, collecting more than 100 opinions of Kant scholars in 2004 - so called "International Kant Interview". So Sue Blackmore did not do her best - but she did much. Her book helps to feel the progress in consciousness studies.

This book is a collection of "conversations" with scientists working on the problem of consciousness, and I was hoping that it would provide a readable and interesting introduction to these scientists and their various hypotheses. However, I found this book unsuitable for this purpose. The author does not try to organize the material--the "conversations" are presented in alphabetical order of the interviewees' last names because the author could not conceive of a meaningful order. There is virtually no editing of the material--the author wanted to "let the people speak for themselves" and "make the editing very light". There is only a minimal introduction to the book, and only biographical introductions to the scientists. While there may be some merit in the approach of "light editing," overall I had to wonder what value was added by the author. Additionally, in the book introduction the author generally refers to her interviewees by their first name. Perhaps she is trying to show that she is on a first-name basis with all these scientists, but since scientists are more typically known by their last names, this was distracting at best and made it even more difficult to follow the minimal introduction (who is "Dave"? ... presumably Chalmers). Overall, this book seems intended for somebody who is already familiar with the study of consciousness, not for a reader relatively new to the subject. I had previously read the author's book "Consciousness: A Very Short Introduction," and I didn't feel that prepared me for "Conversations on Consciousness." So what value does this book provide? If you are already familiar with the subject of consciousness, you may find the interviews with your favorite researchers to be of interest.

What is the problem of consciousness? Are zombies (creatures that look and act like humans but who have no consciousness) theoretically possible? Does consciousness survive death? Is there such a thing as free will? These are the types of questions Susan Blackmore poses to twenty-one experts, who come from neuroscience, philosophy and psychology, and who are all involved in the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies. Each interview also includes specific questions about the subject's work and theories. The cumulative effect of reading them is that you walk away with a good sense of the frequently conflicting perspectives within the field and an idea of which ones you might want to explore further. As other reviewers have pointed out, the sequence of the interviews is alphabetical - an arbitrary choice but not one your reading of the book has to be restricted by. My preference was to dip into different sections till I'd read the whole book. As I'd read one interview, the subject would make reference to other interviewees and their ideas and if something struck me as being particularly interesting, I'd read the interview with that person next, sort of the way you might surf the net. In some ways it was a very liberating experience and I almost felt like I was creating the book that suited my level of understanding. Some of the material presented here is undoubtedly very challenging but I didn't feel overwhelmed even if I didn't "get" everything. The only other book I'd read on the subject was V.S. Ramachandran's "A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness," which I found interesting but too brief. I also found that the conversation format in Blackmore's book made the topic more engaging and easier to penetrate. The fact that she is a scientist herself is actually a strength because she uses her intimate knowledge of the field to not only reflect back complex ideas in easy to understand language but also asks the right questions to lead the subjects to deepen their explanations of their work. She clearly has her biases but rather than detracting from the discussions I thought her disagreements with the interviewees brought more life to the material. I had to keep asking myself what I think and had an idea of what I need to learn more about to help make up my mind. The back of the book has a helpful glossary to assist with learning some of the key terms that are used and also links to a couple of great websites that I'm sure I'll be spending time browsing through. If you're willing to actively engage with it, this is a great book to start your explorations into a fascinating field.

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