

## Scientific American (SEP20)

### How to be a Mystical Skeptic



Psychologist Susan Blackmore stays grounded in science while exploring the outer reaches of consciousness.

Blackmore began her career as a parapsychologist, intent on finding evidence for astral projection and extrasensory perception. Her investigations transformed her into a materialist and Darwinian who doesn't believe in ESP, God or free will. And yet she is a mystic, too, who explores consciousness via meditation and psychedelics. In other words, Blackmore pulls off the trick of being both a hard-nosed skeptic and an open-minded adventurer.

John Horgan directs the Center for Science Writings at the Stevens Institute of Technology.

**Horgan:** Do you ever wish that you were less skeptical?

**Blackmore:** No, absolutely not. If by “skeptical” you mean curious, questioning, asking for evidence, and being willing to shift one's opinions, then that's how I aspire to be.

**Horgan:** What's your take on the recent popularity of panpsychism and other challenges to conventional materialism?

**Blackmore:** Materialism is hopeless because as soon as it confronts the problem of consciousness it becomes dualist. Dualism is hopeless because it cannot explain the close relationship between matter and experience. When neuroscientists go looking for the “neural correlates of consciousness,” they treat consciousness as though it is something created by or arising from the brain and become mired in the “hard problem.” Defined in terms of how subjective experience arises from objective brain activity, it's the wrong problem. It's insoluble because it starts from false premises.

At the other extreme are believers in “mind beyond the body,” “endless consciousness” and “consciousness first.” These are doomed in the opposite way; they cannot explain the brain/consciousness relationship either, nor can they explain how we seem to have a shared material world. The problem is deep and interesting. Materialism cannot account for consciousness; idealism cannot account for matter. We need a nondual understanding of the world and, as yet, we do not have that.

Panpsychism may, or may not, help but has certainly not proved itself yet. For me, traditional panpsychism (e.g., every atom, molecule, stone or house has experience) makes no sense. Philip Goff's interesting version does not seem to work either. Where I find panpsychism attractive is an idea I have often played with, and even wrote about in a conference paper back in the 1980s! In consciousness studies, we ask, “What is it like to be a bat?” I say that's the wrong question. There is nothing it is like to be the actual physical bat—there is only what it is like to be the bat's model of itself as a bat. “What it's like” for bats (or any creature) is whatever those representations say it's like. Simple!?

**Horgan:** Daniel Dennett's claim that consciousness is an “illusion” makes no sense to me. What am I missing?

**Blackmore:** Ha ha. You are indeed missing a lot!

I make that claim too, as do many people who study their own minds with deep perplexity. You are missing taking a good hard look at your own assumptions about consciousness—what you take for granted and

don't even question because it seems so obvious. You may be as deluded as most people are, but of course I do not know what you are assuming.

You might, for example, imagine that you are some kind of inner self that has consciousness and free will, that "you" can direct your consciousness to some things and not others, that some processes in your head are conscious ones and others are unconscious, that you need consciousness to do some things and not others, that consciousness has powers and effects, and that it must have evolved for a purpose. There are excellent reasons for rejecting every one of these very natural assumptions. In other words, consciousness, as normally imagined, is an illusion.

What does "illusion" mean? Take a dictionary (as I resorted to when people started telling me that I didn't believe in consciousness). An illusion is something that is not what it seems to be. And that fits our problem precisely. My claim is that we cannot even begin to build a viable theory of consciousness until we throw out all these false assumptions and start again.

**Horgan:** I suspect we will never find a single, completely satisfying solution to the **mind-body problem**. What do you think?

**Blackmore:** The solution seems to be right there in certain meditative or psychedelic states. Nonduality is obvious, everything is clearly one, experience needs no experiencer—no duality. Yet, for me at least, this clarity of insight disappears on returning to ordinary states and doesn't leave me saying "Aha — now I have the perfect, completely satisfying solution to dualism."

Will it ever? I like this question — would an enlightened person who studied neuroscience and philosophy get that complete solution? Would a neuroscientist/philosopher who had such deep insight get it? What do you think?

**Horgan:** I think the problem is unsolvable, even for a fully enlightened person with multiple Ph.Ds.



**Horgan:** I have a love-hate relationship with Buddhism. How would you describe your relationship?

**Blackmore:** Love the training in Zen practice that I've worked with since 1981; hate the way Buddhism as a religion is mired in doctrine, theory, rules, vows and ceremony. My special hate (I'm using that word only because you did!) is this: the Buddha taught that the self is illusory (not the continuing entity it seems to be) and yet many branches of Buddhism adopt the ever-popular belief in personal reincarnation. Bonkers!

This is one of many reasons why, despite 40 years of Zen practice, I am not a Buddhist and will not take those vows.

**Horgan:** What has meditation done for you? Or not done?

**Blackmore:** Oh, ha ha. How can I know? Maybe I would be just the same as I am now, merely through aging. There's no control group. But I can say what it seems to have done. I think I am happier, less caught up in stupid thoughts and worries, more flexible about life and (maybe and most importantly) less troublesome to other people.

The only certainty is that I can easily sit completely still for an hour or more, observing what goes on. I know my own messy mind better, and I can enter specific states of consciousness such as "silent illumination" or the jhanas, through decades of training attention. That's all meditation really is—training attention.

**Horgan:** Have psychedelics given you any enduring insights into the nature of existence?

**Blackmore:** Yes. The emptiness of self, the underlying nonduality or nonseparation, the wild and endless realms discoverable in a single mind, the ready availability of mystical experience through chemistry, and

the vacuity of the “consciousness beyond death” theories when psychedelics can provide all this through effects on a living brain.

**Horgan:** Do you believe in the state of permanent mystical awareness called enlightenment? Have you ever met someone who seems to be enlightened?

**Blackmore:** 1. No. As far as I have learnt, enlightenment is not a “state of permanent mystical awareness”; it’s not a state at all. Rather it is a loss of, or seeing through, or letting go of, the delusions of self and agency, and the acceptance of impermanence, suffering and nonself. It sounds like not being human at all, but I don’t think it is.

2. Yes, some Zen teachers. In this tradition the word “enlightenment” means many things; there are enlightenment experiences that happen along the way, and there are degrees of enlightenment as well as being an “enlightened one” or “fully liberated.” Whether these very impressive people were really “fully enlightened,” I have no idea, and they certainly would not say so, nor would others about them. So, I am not going to say any more.

**Horgan:** For a serious scholar, you seem to have lots of fun. Is my view of you accurate, and if so, how do you pull it off?

**Blackmore:** Hmmmm. I’ve never been a fun-seeker—though I’m happy if I appear to be having lots of fun. I remember when I was 18 my cousin saying, “Let’s go and have some fun!” and my replying, “I don’t like having fun,” and then feeling really embarrassed at what I’d said. But it’s true. Excitement yes, risk-taking yes, but fun—not sure. As a student I would spend evenings analyzing stats for my psychic experiments rather than go to parties or see friends. I still don’t like going out—if that’s supposed to be fun. It’s certainly fun playing in a samba band, but my main pleasures in life are rather calmer—writing and research, exploring my own mind through drugs, meditation or just thinking, gardening and playing with my grandchildren—now that is fun!

**Horgan:** What’s your utopia?

**Blackmore:** No idea. I fear human nature makes us incapable of utopia. We are good at dystopias though. As a woman, living in an Islamic state under sharia law is the very worst I know of. Let us not ever descend to such depths.

*Postscript: This column was originally published with the headline "How to Be a Mystical Materialist," but Blackmore says that she is NOT a materialist for reasons that she explains in the Q&A.*