



Roy Waidler

Back in 2005 I got the 'bug' about consciousness research and began buying and reading a lot of books on the subject. After wading through a lot of material by Daniel Dennett, Ray Kurzweil and others, I latched onto Professor Susan Blackmore's *Conversations on Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2006). It was a delight to read her interviews with many of the people at the leading edge of research into just *what* consciousness is or might be. It was shortly after that I'd found her website (link below) and then was born the idea of someday interviewing her. Someday is now; when I contacted her recently to propose this interview she responded quickly and graciously and what follows are her replies to our questions.

*We've included a 2018 post-script in which Professor Blackmore enlarged upon Question 5, concerning which drugs merited, in her attention, serious scientific research into their therapeutic qualities. This will be below the end of the original interview.*

Our standard disclaimer goes here: *Dr. Susan Blackmore does not endorse the Outlands Community, our beliefs and practices.*

And now! On with the show! Here are *10 Quick Questions for Sue Blackmore!*

[1] In your estimation, what percentage of "New Age" groups and/or individuals are in it only for the money?

Not many. In my long years of investigating psychics, clairvoyants, tarot readers etc. I found that the vast majority were completely convinced of their own psychic powers and genuinely believed they were doing good. I met some cynical money-makers and one horrendous fraud – Doris Stokes. The harm she did is appalling but I believe people like that are rare.

[2] Your presentations in various media about memes and temes are critically important for everyone to understand to survive the years to come as technology increasingly dominates our lives. How can the rest of us help spread this information?

(I call them 'tremes' now to try to avoid the confusion over spelling!)

By making catchy Internet memes about them? My attempt is a new video (link at end of interview) based on the idea that the phones, computers and servers we are building are becoming interconnected like neurons in a brain. But this treme machine has no eyes. Or does it? With the advent of drones we may have found the eye of the tremes.

I was struck by this scary drone because I found myself wanting to communicate with it as though it were sentient. And I also guess lots of people will want to get one! We are willingly creating this new world in which our own role may be a lot less free than we would like.

[3] Any thoughts about Ray Kurzweil?

He's contributed a lot to the debates about AI but I fundamentally disagree with him about the singularity. I think the driving power in the progress of technology has been the replicator power of memes and is now shifting to the replicator power of memes. AI will not appear in a single machine that we have control over but in distributed systems that we cannot control and that are propagating in their own interest. I also don't share his enthusiasm for staying alive until the singularity, though I can appreciate the attraction!

[4] There is a gross misconception afoot which, thanks to sensationalist media, portray atheists as unspiritual ghouls. I'm personally aghast at this because I've read things by Richard Dawkins, John Horgan and others which I find profoundly moving. Can you nut-shell what makes a spiritual dimension in our lives?

I absolutely agree with you! But what a difficult question. I could say 'searching for something more'. I could say 'yearning for the transcendent'. I could say 'trying to be good' but I'll try this... Non-separation. This comes in many forms. One is the growth of empathy and compassion – the realisation that we are all connected and all similar. Another is non-duality – the understanding that mind and matter are not different things, that me, my experiences, and the world that seems to be external to me are, in fact, all one. And another concerns self. Spiritual inquiry often begins with asking 'Who am I?' 'Why am I here?'. A spiritual path can then weaken the sense of a separate self – even leading to its entire dissolution. Then self and other are one.

[5] There is increasing research into the use of psychedelics, empathogens and cannabis that is finally escaping the "dark ages" of the subject; is there any one substance which you feel deserves much wider recognition as a legitimate candidate for therapeutic uses?

MDMA

[6] Here now in 2014: what is Dr. Susan Blackmore's definition of consciousness?

If I had a definition I'd be thrilled, and if it was any good I'd be famous! If you want one, the best is probably 'what it's like to be ...'. But if you are asking about my views on consciousness then I'd say it is an illusion arising out of the way our brains separate off self from other. With a firm self-model we can say that 'I' am conscious of this or that and not of other things. From this comes the illusion that some parts of the brain, or processes in the brain, are conscious while others are unconscious. This separation gives rise to the hunt (doomed in my opinion) for the neural correlates of consciousness and to the idea that consciousness has powers and must have evolved for a reason. I would say the illusion arose for a reason but there is no separate thing to be called 'consciousness' that has properties or functions or effects. There is only our attribution, after the fact, that we were or were not conscious of something. I say this based partly on neuroscience and partly on 30 years of meditation.

[7] In your Conversations on Consciousness you present a quietly moving interview with Sir Francis Crick shortly before he died (Readers should know that this is the last interview he ever gave). Is there anything you'd like to say about having tea with

the Cricks that day?

My husband, Adam, came with me and was slightly miffed when Francis opened the door and quickly sent Adam off to the kitchen to be entertained by his wife, Odile, while we got on with the serious stuff!

Francis, despite his advanced age and serious ill-health, was quick, alert and seriously challenging. I think you can tell that from the interview. He was fiercely opposed to philosophical thinking and even more so to anything like meditation or spirituality, yet he kept asking the deepest questions about life and mind. I got the impression that he was terribly disappointed not to have solved the mystery of consciousness the way he had managed to help solve the mystery of DNA.

All I can say otherwise is – what a treat that day was! We had breakfast with Pat and Paul Churchland, lunch with the Cricks, and then got straight back to the conference in Tucson for the poetry slam and larking about on stage with Dan Dennett. Ah – those were the days!

[8] In your practice of Zen, are you a part of a *sangha*?

I have practiced with the Western Chan Fellowship since going on my first retreat with John Crook in 1981. However, I am not a member of the Fellowship because I have not taken any vows or precepts and do not intend to. I have also practiced with Dancing Mountains whose teacher is Reb Anderson. I have learnt so much from these and other Zen masters but I do not call myself a Buddhist because I do not want to be expected to believe in any doctrines.

[9] What kind of music do you like?

I play in a samba band but I'm not sure you'd call that music. I have sung in choirs all my life and enjoy the great choral works but I prefer making music to listening to it. I have no music in my house, none in my car, none in my phone or computer or laptop or anywhere else. I avoid music whenever I can.

[10] Do you like to dance?

Yes – love it!

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Dr. Blackmore's website:

<http://www.susanblackmore.co.uk/>

That new 2 minute video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30x6oor0Khs>

A post-script added on 02/14/2018, in which Professor Blackmore enlarges on her answer to Question 5. This was sent in private communication:

"If I were asked now about psychedelics now I'd certainly add 'Ayahuasca, the shamanic brew containing DMT which I've been lucky enough to drink several times, for several revealing, scary, mind-distorting, insight exploring sessions. During many of them I vowed - never again! but afterwards I so appreciated their effects that I returned, with some trepidation, for more. This is not conventional therapy in the sense that some psychedelics can provide but a drug that penetrates to the core and can teach and heal in ways I think we scientists have hardly an inkling of as yet."