

The brain might not create consciousness after all

What if consciousness isn't created by the brain — but is actually built into the universe?

Date: April 6, 2026

Source: BIAL Foundation

Summary: Is consciousness something the brain produces, or is it woven into the fabric of reality itself? Renowned neuroscientist Christof Koch is challenging long-held scientific assumptions by confronting the “hard problem” of consciousness — why and how subjective experience exists at all. He highlights growing tensions between neuroscience, physics, and unexplained phenomena like near-death experiences and sudden moments of clarity before death.

FULL STORY



Scientists still can't explain how consciousness arises from the brain. New ideas suggest it may actually be a fundamental part of reality. Credit: Shutterstock

Is consciousness simply created by the brain, or could it be a deeper feature of reality itself? That question is at the center of a presentation by Christof Koch, a leading figure in modern neuroscience, at the 15th "Behind and Beyond the Brain" Symposium organized by the Bial Foundation, taking place April 8 to 11 in Porto.

Materialism still dominates scientific thinking, but Koch highlights important gaps in this perspective. Even with major advances in neuroscience, scientists have yet to explain how subjective experience arises from physical brain processes. This unresolved issue is known as the "hard problem" of consciousness.

Three Key Challenges in Understanding Consciousness

Koch's talk focuses on three major areas where current explanations fall short. First is the difficulty of fully reducing conscious experience to physical brain mechanisms. Second are questions raised by modern physics about what can truly be considered "real." Third is the persistence of unusual experiences, such as near-death experiences, mystical states, or episodes of terminal lucidity, which do not fit neatly into existing scientific frameworks.

Rethinking Consciousness as Fundamental

Based on these challenges, Koch suggests it may be necessary to revisit older philosophical ideas like idealism or panpsychism. These perspectives treat consciousness as a basic component of reality rather than something produced solely by the brain. He supports Integrated Information Theory, which proposes that any system with a sufficiently high level of integrated information has some form of subjective experience, offering a scientific interpretation of panpsychism.

A Leading Voice in Consciousness Research

Koch, who works at the Allen Institute for Brain Science and previously taught at MIT and Caltech, has played a major role in advancing the study of consciousness. His research includes developing new ways to identify signs of awareness in patients who appear unresponsive, helping to push the boundaries of how scientists detect and understand conscious states.

Story Source:

Materials provided by **BIAL Foundation**. *Note: Content may be edited for style and length.*

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