

# Our brains trick us into thinking consciousness can reside outside the body, research argues

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Psychology professor Iris Berent says perceiving minds and bodies as separate has evolutionary roots. Credit: Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

The origins of consciousness have been debated by philosophers for

centuries. Each conscious person has a sense of "being me," which invariably gives rise to the question of where that sense originated—from within or outside the body, says Northeastern University psychology professor Iris Berent.

"How do [human brains](#) give rise to this experience? That's the big mystery, right?" she says.

Influential philosopher David Chalmers famously won a bet in 2023 for claiming consciousness exists beyond the merely physical, Berent says.

But she says the question of where consciousness exists is a false one—and she has a new paper that presents her position.

In an [article](#) published in the *Neuroscience of Consciousness*, she argues that the debate stems from the delusional—albeit natural—biases in the way humans think about the separation, or lack thereof, between body and mind.

"One of the biases is dualism, intuitive dualism—the fact that we perceive minds as separate from our bodies."

"The extent to which we look at consciousness and think that it is this really mysterious thing could very well arise from how we see it rather from what consciousness really is," Berent says.

"Consciousness isn't hard. Psychology is," she says.

## **Mary and the zombie**

Berent points to an experiment in perception she conducted in her lab that used the well-known Mary and the zombie hypothetical exercise, but with a twist.

According to the experiment, when people are asked to think of a zombie twin of themselves, they describe a creature with their physical features but without their thoughts or feelings.

"They intuit that the mind, consciousness included, is really separate from the physical," Berent says.

In the other [thought experiment](#), Mary is a neuroscientist who knows everything about color and how the brain perceives color, even though she lives in a black-and-white world.

When Mary sees a red rose for the first time, people participating in the experiment say she learns something outside the bounds of physical, scientific explanation.

Berent says she decided to challenge these conclusions with two additional questions.

"The first question is kind of a reality check question, which is do they think Mary's case is significant? Is it transformative? And everybody said, 'Sure, it's super transformative,'" Berent says.

"We also asked how likely is it that this experience will actually show up in her brain? If we scan her brain, will it light up? And it turns out that that's exactly what people said. It will significantly register in the brain."

"The point being, in the condition of the zombie people say, 'no,' (consciousness) is not physical," Berent says. "And in Mary's condition, people say it's physical."

"If people change their mind in this way, it can't possibly be that in reality consciousness has changed. It must be that there is something within the human psyche that colors how we see consciousness."

"For me, this means that we need to be really careful before we assume that there is any real mystery going on."

## The evolutionary roots of dualism

Berent blames what she calls "delusional attitudes about bodies and minds" to "the same old psychological biases that I've been studying in my lab for years."

She calls the separation of mind and body dualism Previous research by Berent shows that [autistic people](#) are less dualistic than neurotypical people and that males are less dualistic than females.

Evolution is responsible for the fact people hold two different systems of perception in their mind, Berent says.

"Animals have an [evolutionary advantage](#) to be able to perceive objects, say, the bodies of their mothers," she says.

It's also important to be able to perceive objects that have agency as separate from other objects, Berent says. "You want to follow the mother and not a body that is inanimate" to receive nurturance and protection.

This type of dualism, she says, "primes us to think about people and their minds and bodies as separate from each other. That's one reason we think about consciousness as this ethereal thing separate from the body."

"The point is that our perception of consciousness changes depending on the situation. And if that's the case, there's no way that we can trust it to reflect what our consciousness really is. It must be that our brain plays tricks on us."

## An intimate understanding of who we are

"Every psychology student that has ever come into my class asks if we're going to talk about consciousness," Berent says.

"This is considered to be super important. This is our intimate understanding of who we are."

Berent says the thought experiment outlined in her paper provides "the smoking gun" that intuitions about [consciousness](#) existing outside the body are manufactured by humans' dualistically inclined brains.

Consciousness likely comes down to electrochemical functions in the brain, she says. "It's hard for psychological reasons."

**More information:** Iris Berent, Consciousness isn't "hard"—it's human psychology that makes it so!, *Neuroscience of Consciousness* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/nc/niae016](https://doi.org/10.1093/nc/niae016)

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