# Researchers debate ethical risks as AI consciousness claims intensify



The exploration of artificial intelligence (AI) and its potential for consciousness has surged to the forefront of scientific inquiry, mirroring a longstanding fascination often depicted in science fiction. Recent research, like that conducted at Sussex University's Centre for Consciousness Science, exemplifies this deepening engagement with the question of what it means to be conscious. The research involves the “Dreamachine,” a device that uses strobe lighting and sound to provoke visual experiences, aimed at unlocking fundamental aspects of human consciousness. As participants report vivid geometric patterns and a feeling of transcendence, researchers are attempting to decode the intricate workings of the human brain as it experiences the world.

Consciousness—the awareness of oneself and one's surroundings—remains an elusive concept. Despite centuries of philosophical debate, consensus on its nature is still out of reach. Prof Anil Seth, a leader in the field, cautions against the assumption that advanced AI systems might inevitably become conscious simply due to their complexity. He argues, “We associate consciousness with intelligence and language because they go together in humans. But just because they go together in us, it doesn't mean they go together in general.” This perspective reflects a broader skepticism among researchers who urge care and consideration regarding the race to develop AI, echoing sentiments voiced in an open letter signed by 157 experts, advocating accelerated research into consciousness and ethical implications as AI technology advances.

The rapid evolution of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Gemini has intensified discussions around machine consciousness. These models exhibit an ability to generate human-like conversation that surpasses previous expectations, prompting some to speculate about the emergence of a form of consciousness. However, many experts, including Prof Murray Shanahan from Google DeepMind, express concern over the lack of understanding regarding how these systems operate internally. He advises that a comprehensive grasp of their mechanisms is vital to ensure their safe development.

In exploring the potential for AI to achieve consciousness, competing theories surface. Some researchers argue that consciousness is an inevitable outcome of increasingly sophisticated systems equipped with sensory awareness through inputs like vision and sound. Profs Lenore and Manuel Blum postulate that integrating sensory data into AI could pave the way for a revolution in machine consciousness, potentially marking the next stage of human evolution. Contrastingly, thinkers like Prof Seth emphasise the fundamental differences between living brains and computational systems, suggesting that consciousness may intrinsically require a biological substrate.

A looming consideration is the impact of perceived machine consciousness on human relationships and societal values. As humanoid robots and emotionally responsive AI become more commonplace, there are fears that people may project feelings and empathy onto these systems, leading to moral quandaries. Prof Seth warns of a phenomenon he describes as “moral corrosion,” where society’s resources could be misallocated towards caring for non-sentient entities at the expense of human relationships and needs. This new landscape of AI integration in everyday life challenges not only our understanding of consciousness but also our ethical frameworks. The differentiation between real and artificial emotional connections blurs, leading to unprecedented implications for our social fabric.

The ongoing discourse surrounding AI consciousness rests on the intersection of cutting-edge technology, ethical considerations, and the age-old quest for understanding one of humanity's greatest mysteries: consciousness itself. As societies grapple with these developments, the consensus is that proactive engagement with the ethical, philosophical, and scientific ramifications of AI will be pivotal in shaping a future where the line between human and machine may become increasingly indistinct.

## Reference Map:

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* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0k3700zljjo), [[3]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/andreamorris/2023/06/01/ai-spurs-scientists-calling-to-fast-track-consciousness-research/), [[5]](https://www.news18.com/viral/scientists-call-for-studying-machine-consciousness-8715046.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0k3700zljjo), [[3]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/andreamorris/2023/06/01/ai-spurs-scientists-calling-to-fast-track-consciousness-research/), [[4]](https://www.science.org/content/article/if-ai-becomes-conscious-how-will-we-know/), [[7]](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-65401783)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0k3700zljjo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0k3700zljjo> - An article discussing the possibility of AI achieving consciousness, highlighting research projects like the 'Dreamachine' at Sussex University's Centre for Consciousness Science, which aims to understand human consciousness. The piece explores debates among experts about AI's potential for consciousness, referencing science fiction films and recent developments in large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT. It also touches on ethical considerations and the need for further research in the field.
3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andreamorris/2023/06/01/ai-spurs-scientists-calling-to-fast-track-consciousness-research/> - An article reporting on an open letter signed by 157 mathematical consciousness scientists urging for accelerated research into consciousness science in light of rapid AI developments. The letter emphasizes the need to take seriously the potential for AI systems to possess consciousness and the implications this has for society.
4. <https://www.science.org/content/article/if-ai-becomes-conscious-how-will-we-know/> - An article discussing how scientists and philosophers are proposing a checklist based on theories of human consciousness to determine if AI systems are conscious. The piece highlights the challenges in assessing AI consciousness and the development of a systematic methodology for evaluation.
5. <https://www.news18.com/viral/scientists-call-for-studying-machine-consciousness-8715046.html> - An article highlighting concerns raised by consciousness scientists affiliated with the Association for Mathematical Consciousness Science (AMCS) about the underfunding of consciousness research in AI. The piece discusses the ethical, legal, and safety implications of AI systems potentially attaining consciousness and the need for increased funding in this area.
6. <https://www.nyu.edu/centerforbioethics/event/ai-consciousness-report-a-roundtable-discussion/> - An announcement for a roundtable discussion featuring authors of a report on AI consciousness, including Patrick Butlin, Robert Long, Yoshua Bengio, and Grace Lindsay. The event focuses on assessing existing AI systems in light of neuroscientific theories of consciousness and discusses the potential for AI systems to satisfy indicators of consciousness.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-65401783> - An article reporting on an open letter signed by dozens of academics calling on AI developers to study consciousness as AI systems become more advanced. The letter emphasizes that imagining AI systems having feelings and human-level consciousness is no longer in the realm of science fiction and urges for more research in this area.