# Will We Ever Understand Consciousness? Perspectives from Science, Philosophy, and the Quran

#### The Puzzle of Consciousness: Why It Matters

Consciousness – our inner awareness and subjective experience – remains one of the greatest enigmas in science and philosophy. Despite spectacular advances in neuroscience and technology, we still cannot fully explain how **physical** processes in the brain produce the **subjective** feeling of being alive and aware. This mystery matters profoundly: consciousness is the essence of who we are, underpinning our thoughts, emotions, and sense of self. It has been called the "final frontier" of scientific inquiry, an interface between the brain and perhaps something beyond the material world 1. Solving the puzzle of consciousness would not only revolutionize science – potentially enabling true artificial intelligence or new medical breakthroughs – but also touch on deep spiritual and existential questions about the human soul and the nature of reality.

Yet for all its importance, consciousness stubbornly defies complete understanding. We can map the neural activity in the brain and identify which regions light up when we feel pain or see a color, but **why** those brain signals are accompanied by an inner feeling (the sharp sting of pain or the vividness of red) is still unexplained. This gap between objective brains and subjective minds is so perplexing that philosopher David Chalmers famously dubbed it *"the hard problem of consciousness."* The hard problem asks: how and why do physical processes in the brain give rise to first-person experiences (often called *qualia*)? Even if we pinpoint every neuron's function, there remains a **profound explanatory gap** in understanding how those electrochemical signals translate into the rich tapestry of conscious life <sup>2</sup>.

## Scientists and Philosophers: Consciousness as an Unsolvable Mystery

A number of prominent scientists and philosophers have suggested that human consciousness may never be fully understood, at least not with our current concepts and methods. Over the years, their arguments have highlighted the unique, perhaps *irreducible*, nature of conscious experience:

• **Thomas Nagel's Perspective:** In 1974, philosopher Thomas Nagel wrote a famous essay titled "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Nagel pointed out that an organism's subjective experience is tied to its particular point of view – there is something it is like to be a bat, for example, that a human observer can never truly access 3. No matter how much we study a bat's brain or behavior, we as humans cannot feel what a bat feels. This highlighted consciousness's inherent **subjectivity**: it cannot be fully captured by the objective tools of science. Nagel argued that because subjective experience is so fundamental and unlike any physical description, our standard scientific frameworks might never

fully explain it 3. In other words, there may always be an aspect of mind that eludes an outside, third-person analysis.

- David Chalmers and the "Hard Problem": Philosopher David Chalmers has been one of the leading voices on the mysteries of consciousness. He coined the term "hard problem of consciousness" to draw attention to the unanswered question of *why* brain activity is accompanied by an inner life <sup>2</sup>. "Easy" problems of consciousness (which are not really easy at all) might include how the brain processes information or controls behavior. But even if those are solved, the hard problem remains: why do we have first-person experiences at all? Chalmers has argued that even a complete map of neural mechanisms would leave us wondering *why* those mechanisms feel like something from the inside <sup>2</sup>. This line of thought has led Chalmers and others to consider that explaining consciousness might require new fundamental principles. In fact, Chalmers has entertained ideas like *panpsychism* the notion that consciousness is a basic feature of the universe, present even at the level of elementary particles as a way to avoid the puzzle of how consciousness could magically emerge from totally unconscious matter <sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup>. Such proposals, while controversial, underscore how intractable the problem has seemed within orthodox science.
- Roger Penrose's Insights: Even some renowned scientists share the view that conventional science may be hitting a wall with consciousness. Sir Roger Penrose, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and mathematician, has openly stated that current physics and neuroscience might not be enough to explain the mind. Penrose is notable for proposing (along with anesthesiologist Stuart Hameroff) the Orch-OR theory - a highly unorthodox idea that consciousness arises from quantum processes in microtubules inside brain cells 6. Why turn to quantum physics to explain the mind? Penrose observed that standard brain physiology hasn't come close to explaining subjective awareness, so he speculated that perhaps some new physics (quantum gravity, in his view) is involved 6 . While the specifics of the Orch-OR theory are speculative and heavily debated (critics note the brain is likely too "warm and noisy" for delicate quantum states to persist) 7 , Penrose's willingness to look beyond classical science stems from humility about what we really understand. He believes something fundamentally different or deeper is needed to bridge the gap between matter and mind – an implicit acknowledgement that our knowledge might be inherently limited when it comes to consciousness. Penrose's intellectual humility is noteworthy; as Dr. Zia H Shah MD remarks, despite Penrose's brilliance and accolades, he remains open-minded and "humble" about the mysteries of quantum physics and human consciousness, which he calls "the two ultimate mysteries of our universe" 8.
- The New Mysterianism (McGinn, Chomsky, etc.): A group of thinkers has taken the "maybe we just can't get it" idea even further. Philosophers like Colin McGinn argue that the human mind might be "cognitively closed" to certain problems meaning our brains, as products of evolution, may simply lack the capacity to solve the consciousness puzzle <sup>9</sup>. This position is often called "new mysterianism." McGinn points out that just as a chimpanzee can't understand quantum mechanics, humans might have inherent mental limits that prevent us from grasping how mind and matter relate <sup>9</sup>. Even the eminent linguist Noam Chomsky has drawn a distinction between "problems" (which human intellect can eventually solve) and "mysteries" (which might forever elude us) suggesting consciousness could be one of those mysteries <sup>10</sup>. Similarly, philosopher Joseph Levine introduced the term "explanatory gap" to describe how even a complete scientific knowledge of the brain wouldn't explain subjective experience itself <sup>11</sup>. All these views converge on a humbling

idea: perhaps the nature of conscious awareness is **ultimately beyond what the human brain can fully decipher**.

Crucially, these scientists and philosophers are not asserting that we should stop studying the brain or that we can know nothing about consciousness. Rather, they highlight that despite learning a great deal about brain **correlates** of consciousness (what brain activity goes along with certain experiences), the inner subjective quality – the *soul* of consciousness, one might say – remains a **profound mystery**. Nagel's and Chalmers' arguments show how *unique* consciousness is compared to other scientific puzzles, and thinkers like McGinn and Penrose remind us that we might require fundamentally new approaches (or accept inherent limits) to ever crack this mystery. It's a perspective that breeds intellectual humility: the sense that human knowledge, as powerful as it is, has edges beyond which lies something we cannot yet fathom.

#### Quran 17:85 - A 7th-Century Statement on the Soul's Mystery

Interestingly, the sense of humility and limitation regarding knowledge of consciousness has an ancient echo. Over 1400 years ago, the **Quran** – the holy book of Islam – addressed a question about the nature of the human soul (*al-ruh* in Arabic) and delivered a strikingly modest answer. In chapter 17, verse 85, the Prophet Muhammad is told to respond to inquirers by saying:

"And they ask you concerning the soul. Say, 'The soul is of the affair of my Lord; and of the knowledge thereof you have been given but a little." – Quran 17:85

In essence, the Quran here asserts that the human *ruh* (often translated as soul or spirit) is a matter known ultimately to God alone, and that human beings have only a tiny amount of knowledge about it. This simple, profound statement establishes the **limits of human understanding** when it comes to the soul – which we can easily relate to what we today call consciousness. Dr. Zia H Shah MD, in his commentary on this verse, explicitly treats *soul* and *consciousness* as synonymous concepts, noting that the Quran's declaration of "knowledge... given but a little" "presents a striking parallel to contemporary scientific and philosophical challenges in explaining consciousness." <sup>12</sup> In other words, the Quran anticipated what modern thinkers are now coming to realize: the inner essence of our conscious self may elude complete scientific grasp.

This Quranic insight has long inspired **theological humility** in the Islamic tradition. Classic Muslim scholars, reflecting on 17:85, emphasized that certain metaphysical matters are ultimately veiled from us. For example, over a thousand years ago, the renowned commentator **Al-Tabari** highlighted that this verse indicates inherent human limitations in knowledge of the metaphysical realm <sup>13</sup>. Another influential scholar, **Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi**, concluded that the true nature of the ruh is known only to God, underscoring our intellectual limits in probing such mysteries <sup>14</sup>. Likewise, Al-Qurtubi noted that the verse serves as a reminder of human ignorance regarding the soul's reality <sup>14</sup>. In short, the **consistent message** in Islamic thought has been that the soul (or consciousness) is a **profound secret** of God's creation – one we can talk about and experience, but never fully comprehend in essence.

It's worth appreciating how *precise* the Quran's focus is here. As Dr. Zia Shah points out, the Quran encourages human beings to seek knowledge about the natural world in hundreds of verses – from studying the stars to examining our own biology <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup>. Islamic civilization historically embraced science, believing that studying creation can lead to greater understanding of the Creator. The Quran does *not* generally tell us that worldly knowledge is off-limits; quite the opposite, it urges reflection and inquiry. **Yet, there are only two areas where the Quran explicitly says human knowledge will remain limited:** one

is the knowledge of the soul (consciousness) and the other is the knowledge of what awaits us after death 17 . "No soul knows what joy is kept hidden in store for them as a reward for what they have done," says Quran 32:17 about the delights of the afterlife 18 . And Quran 17:85 about the soul likewise sets a boundary on human understanding. It's fascinating that out of all the mysteries in the universe, the Quran singles out our own consciousness and our ultimate fate as realms where "you have been given only a little" knowledge 17 . Dr. Shah observes that the Quran could have, hypothetically, made some other knowledge claim – for instance, it could have said "you will never understand the sun or the stars" – and such a statement would have been proven wrong by later scientific progress 19 . But the Quran did not do that. Instead, it identified the soul as a lasting mystery – and indeed, over fourteen centuries later, despite all our progress, human consciousness remains deeply puzzling, just as the Quran foretold 19 .

For believers, this convergence is highly meaningful. It suggests that the Quranic verse 17:85 was not closing the door to inquiry, but rather **setting expectations**. It was preparing humanity to approach the study of the soul/consciousness with humility. As one Quran commentary puts it, the verse's acknowledgment of limited knowledge "neither dismisses scientific inquiry nor demands a specific philosophical framework, but rather situates the question of consciousness within a larger cosmic context" <sup>20</sup>. In Islamic thought, it's accepted that we can know some things about the soul – for example, we can observe how consciousness is tied to the living human body, or how it affects our moral accountability – but its *true essence* (where it comes from, how it interfaces with the body, what it would be like outside the body) is ultimately a **divine secret**. This theological humility has a clear practical effect: it cautions us against arrogance. No matter how advanced our science becomes, there may always be aspects of ourselves that only the Creator fully understands. And if that's the case, approaching the study of the mind should be done with reverence and openness to mystery, not just with microscopes and equations.

### Insights from Dr. Zia H Shah MD: Bridging Science and Scripture

Dr. Zia H Shah MD – a writer and commentator who focuses on the harmony of Quranic wisdom and modern knowledge – has extensively discussed consciousness in light of verse 17:85. He treats the Quranic statement as a lens through which to view today's research and debates about the mind. Several of his insights help bridge the conversation between **scientific philosophy** and **Quranic theology**:

- Consciousness and Soul as One Concept: In Dr. Shah's commentary, he interprets the Quranic term al-ruh (spirit or soul) in 17:85 to essentially mean the human consciousness 12. By doing so, he creates a common ground for dialogue it lets us take all the modern findings about consciousness and see if they resonate with what the Quran already implied about the soul. This approach means that when neuroscientists struggle with the "hard problem" or when philosophers talk about qualia, we can view those as attempts to grapple with the very thing the Quran told us is "of the affair of my Lord." Remarkably, Dr. Shah notes that the Quranic verse almost prophetically mirrors the modern sentiment that there is an "explanatory gap" in consciousness research 12. The Quran says we've been given only a little knowledge about the soul, and today we find that, despite all our knowledge, the inner nature of conscious experience remains elusive. This parallel, he suggests, is not a coincidence but a sign of the Quran's insight into the human condition.
- **History of Science Vindicating the Quranic Insight:** Dr. Shah often points out that in the centuries since the Quran's revelation, science has illuminated countless natural phenomena, from the orbits of planets to the genetics of diseases. But when it comes to the **mind**, progress has been limited. He observes that "so far the history of science has been on [the Quran's] side" in that "a good"

understanding of human consciousness or even free will has evaded humanity, despite the last five glorious centuries of scientific enterprise." <sup>21</sup> In other words, while we've unraveled many puzzles, the conscious soul remains a tough nut that hasn't cracked. This fact reinforces for him the credibility of the Quran's statement. Dr. Shah candidly writes that he does **not** believe humans will ever be able to create a fully conscious artificial being, "based on the Quranic verse" of 17:85 <sup>21</sup>. If one day scientists did manage to *truly replicate* human consciousness in a machine, that would imply we have essentially **decoded** consciousness – an outcome that, as a believer, he thinks the Quranic revelation rules out <sup>22</sup>. His conviction serves as a provocative challenge: all our technological optimism aside, perhaps there really are limits we will not cross.

• **Epistemological Humility:** Echoing the scholars of the past, Dr. Zia Shah emphasizes *epistemological humility* as the common thread between the Quran and the honest voices in science. He highlights how the Quran's phrase *"of knowledge you have been given only a little"* aligns with the candid admissions of many contemporary experts that **we might never fully solve consciousness** <sup>23</sup>. He cites the concept of **philosophical mysterianism** – the idea that the human mind might be incapable of grasping its own workings (as put forth by Colin McGinn) – as well as scientists acknowledging the "hard problem," as modern reflections of the humble stance the Quran advocates <sup>24</sup>. This convergence, he notes, is striking: it suggests that when it comes to consciousness, *both* religion and cutting-edge science counsel a form of humility. Importantly, Dr. Shah does not see the Quranic view as *opposing* scientific exploration. On the contrary, he often celebrates scientific research (he has catalogued hundreds of Quranic verses that encourage studying nature <sup>15</sup>). In the case of consciousness, what the Quran provides is a **perspective** – it reminds researchers to be modest about what they may ultimately achieve. As he writes, recognizing our limits "creates space for dialogue" rather than shutting it down <sup>25</sup>. The Quran isn't telling us to abandon studying the mind; it is telling us not to be surprised if the mind retains some of its mystery in the end.

In summary, Dr. Zia H Shah MD's work illustrates a harmonious view where religious wisdom and scientific inquiry inform each other. He sees the mystery of consciousness as an opportunity for interdisciplinary understanding. The Quran's ancient message of humility doesn't hinder scientific progress – it ensures that progress is coupled with **wisdom** and an acceptance that not all truths will yield to human dissection. This outlook encourages scientists, philosophers, and theologians to converse openly. After all, if consciousness/ soul straddles the physical and metaphysical realms, as Dr. Shah suggests, then perhaps only a **combination** of approaches – scientific, philosophical, and spiritual – can inch us closer to understanding it

### Can Science Solve It All? Opposing Views and a Quranic Response

It is important to note that not everyone agrees with the idea that consciousness will forever remain beyond human comprehension. **Materialist** and **reductive** thinkers argue that consciousness, while certainly complex, is fully part of the natural world and will eventually be explained in naturalistic terms. Let's briefly consider their view and how a Quranic or theistic perspective would respond:

**The Optimistic Materialist View:** Many neuroscientists and philosophers maintain that consciousness is *not* a mystical enigma, but simply a very challenging problem that science will one day solve. They point out that we've already made significant strides: researchers have identified neural correlates of consciousness (specific brain patterns linked with conscious vs. unconscious states), and theories such as the **Global Workspace Theory** and **Integrated Information Theory** attempt to describe how brain activity might

create our awareness <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> . From this viewpoint, there is nothing supernatural about consciousness – it's an emergent property of the brain, akin to how a complex software emerges from electrical circuits. Some even take an extreme stance by claiming that what we call subjective experience is actually an *illusion*. For instance, philosopher **Daniel Dennett** and others in the "illusionist" camp suggest that our feeling of having a private inner life is a kind of trick our brain plays on us – a byproduct of neural processes rather than something fundamental <sup>29</sup> . According to this view, once we fully understand those neural processes, the so-called mystery of consciousness will dissipate. The illusionists argue that positing an ineffable soul or irreducible qualia only complicates matters; instead, they aim to show consciousness can be explained away as "just neurons firing". Even noted philosopher **John Searle**, who is otherwise critical of reducing mind to computation, has mused that if we can build artificial hearts, maybe one day we'll build an artificial brain sophisticated enough to be conscious <sup>21</sup> . In short, the opposing view expects that **there are no forbidden questions** – with enough research, humans *will* unravel consciousness just as we've unraveled other oncemysterious phenomena like lightning or disease.

The Quranic/Theistic Response: From a Quranic perspective, one would respond to reductive optimism with both respect for science and a gentle reminder of *humility*. A believer might say: it's certainly valuable to keep studying the brain and consciousness – indeed, the Quran encourages exploring Allah's creation – but one should be cautious about claims that "we'll explain it all." The verse 17:85 explicitly tempers such confidence by stating that the soul's reality is part of God's domain and that humans have "been given but little knowledge" of it 12. This doesn't mean science is futile, but it suggests that consciousness might have dimensions that transcend the purely material. If the soul or consciousness is "of the affair of my Lord", as the Quran says, then perhaps it involves aspects that lie outside the scope of laboratory measurement 12. The theistic view holds that consciousness could be a bridge between the material and the spiritual – a view echoed by many religious traditions, not just Islam. For example, religious thinkers often describe the soul or spirit as the breath of the divine in man. Thus, a purely material analysis might forever be like analyzing the architecture of a radio without ever hearing the music it receives; from the Quranic perspective, the "music" of consciousness ultimately comes from a divine source.

When materialists call consciousness an *illusion*, the Quranic-minded scholar might counter: **consciousness is very real**, even if intangible. (After all, the Quran treats the ruh as a real entity, not a mere trick.) In fact, one could argue that labeling consciousness an illusion is self-defeating – if *all* our experiences were illusions, we would not be able to trust our reasoning that led to that conclusion. As Dr. Zia Shah notes in his refutation of the illusionist view, denying the reality of consciousness is problematic because *"the very notion of an 'illusion' presupposes a conscious observer"* who is being fooled <sup>30</sup>. The Quranic perspective affirms that our inward experience is a genuine sign of God's design, even if we cannot dissect it under a microscope. So while a Muslim scientist might wholeheartedly work on mapping neurons and understanding cognitive functions (since the Quran does not discourage that), they would also keep in mind that **ultimate knowledge belongs to God**. This fosters a kind of intellectual humility. As the Quran says elsewhere, *"Above every knower is one who knows more"* (12:76), implying that no matter how much we learn, God's knowledge (and the wonders of His creation like the soul) will remain far greater.

It's interesting to note that this humility is not exclusive to religious people; many great scientists express it too. The difference is that a materialist might treat it as a temporary humility ("we don't understand it *yet*, but we will"), whereas the Quran suggests a **permanent humility** in certain domains ("humans will always have limits here"). Whether one is religious or not, the fact that consciousness research continues to encounter fundamental puzzles might itself encourage a bit more openness to *mystery*. The Quranic viewpoint doesn't deny that brain science will advance; it only cautions that even as we learn *how* the brain's

wiring produces correlates of thought, the **inner light** of awareness might remain, in essence, a gift from God that we marvel at rather than fully explain.

#### **Conclusion: Embracing Humility and Wonder**

After surveying these perspectives – from Nagel's philosophical puzzles to the Quran's ancient wisdom – we arrive at a sobering yet uplifting realization: **not everything about us may be knowable, and that's okay.** The mystery of consciousness, rather than diminishing our pursuit of knowledge, can inspire a sense of awe and humility that is valuable in its own right. If human consciousness truly "transcends complete human comprehension" <sup>31</sup>, as both some scientists and the Quranic verse 17:85 suggest, then accepting this fact can foster intellectual humility. We become more comfortable saying "I don't fully know" – a phrase at the heart of all true learning and wisdom.

In practical terms, accepting the limits of our knowledge reminds us not to become arrogant in the face of unsolved questions. It encourages cooperation: neuroscientists, philosophers, and theologians can each admit that *their* approach alone might not crack the enigma of consciousness, and thus they can learn from each other. The Quran's humility does not shut the door on science – it keeps the door open, with the light of wonder shining through. In one of Dr. Zia Shah's reflections, he writes that consciousness, or the soul, *"invites continued exploration while acknowledging that such exploration occurs within the context of limited human knowledge."* <sup>32</sup> In other words, we should keep probing, experimenting, and thinking deeply about the mind, but always with the awareness that we are touching something profound. This mindset can actually **enrich** science: it keeps us from dogmatically assuming we have it all figured out and makes us attentive to new, perhaps unconventional insights.

Embracing a bit of mystery also has a spiritual upside. It can make us more **open-minded** and **open-hearted**. When you recognize that something as intimate as your own consciousness isn't fully understood, it becomes easier to entertain spiritual possibilities – for instance, that consciousness might not be entirely extinguished at death (since, after all, we don't even know what it fundamentally is), or that our minds might connect with a higher reality (as religious experiences often suggest). Intellectual humility, as taught by Quran 17:85, can thus lead to **spiritual humility** – an openness to the transcendent. Rather than seeing ourselves as just biological machines, we might see ourselves as *mysterious beings with a foot in two worlds*, the physical and the spiritual. This view can foster a deep respect for all conscious beings (since each of us carries a touch of the unknown within) and a sense of gratitude and reverence toward the Creator, who "taught man what he knew not" (Quran 96:5) and indeed withholds some knowledge for our own good.

In conclusion, the journey to understand consciousness is ongoing, and we should celebrate every discovery along the way. But as we journey, it is wise to carry the message of Quran 17:85 in our hearts: some knowledge will remain with God, and we humans must walk with humility. Such humility is not a defeat; it is a beautiful recognition of our place in the vast scheme of existence. It unites us – scientists, philosophers, believers, and skeptics – in a shared sense of wonder. Whether one ultimately approaches the question of consciousness through a microscope, a thought experiment, or a verse of scripture, the honest response to this deep mystery is the same: **awe**. And perhaps, in that awe, we find not frustration, but a profound connection to something greater than ourselves – a reminder that being is a gift, and some gifts are meant more to be appreciated than analyzed. In the words of the Quran, "And of knowledge, you (mankind) have been given only a little." Accepting this can be the beginning of wisdom 12, and a bridge between our scientific ambition and our spiritual wonder, as we continue to explore the miracle of consciousness.

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- Quran 17:85 with classical Tafsir (exegesis) Shows historical Islamic scholarship understanding this verse as a reminder of human limitations in knowledge (13) (14).
- $\bullet$  Quran 32:17 Indicates human ignorance of the exact joys of the afterlife, paralleling the theme of limited knowledge (often cited alongside 17:85)  $^{18}$ .

These sources collectively illuminate the convergence of modern thought and ancient scripture on one point: the human mind contemplating itself finds mystery – a mystery the Quran acknowledges, and one that keeps us humble and curious in equal measure. 12 34



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