

Week 2 Tuesday Seminar Questions on Sacks and Ramachandran

Form groups of 4 or 5. Each member of the small groups should briefly indicate what they found most striking in the readings and video, then discuss Q1 to Q5

Q1 What does Sacks (Luria) seem to mean by “romantic science”—he also calls it “personalistic,” or “experiential”? (See especially handout p. 2.) He also discusses the nature of self (and loss of self) in *The Lost Mariner* tale by relating it to David Hume’s account of the self (see handout p. 13, and p 17 just before the Postscript). How do his comments in these passages relate to your idea of what science (of the human mind) is or ought to be?

Q2 Discuss the following neurological conditions found in the reading and the video: phantom limbs, chronic regional pain (including pain in phantom limbs), visual hemineglect, blindsight and the Capgras delusion. What does Ramachandran see as the implications of each of these explanations for the understanding of human consciousness? What problems, if any, do you see with his suggestions?

Q3 Ramachandran states that his “overall strategy has been the intensive investigation of neurological syndromes that have been regarded as “oddities” in the past” (p. 118 endnote 7). Compare or contrast his approach in the video and the book to that of Sacks.

Q4 In chapter 3 and the endnotes that accompany it, Ramachandran examines the biological underpinnings for at least some types of art—in particular the 10% driven by aesthetic “universals” (p. 41). Do you find his account plausible? He attempts to deflect the criticism that discussion of mental functions in terms of brain activities is “reductionism.” Does his counter-argument make the case?

Q5 What is Ramachandran’s explanation of various synesthesias? How does he use this account as a basis for explaining creativity broadly considered and how does he relate it to the evolution of language (p. 75 ff)? Are you persuaded by his appeal to evolutionary arguments in this context? Why or why not?

Q6 In the final chapter of the reading, Ramachandran speculates that “what sets us apart from other mammals, including other primates, is not any single structure...but a set of circuits that includes the temporo-parieto-occipital junction (especially the angular and supramarginal gyri), the Wernicke’s area (concerned with semantics) and the anterior cingulate with its limbic connections ... These structures are for consciousness what chromosomes and DNA were for heredity.” (p 112) How does he see this as a solution to what philosopher David Chalmers called the “hard problem” of neuroscience, i.e. why we have qualia or conscious mental states rather than act like “zombies”?

Last small group task: the group as a whole should ultimately formulate a question for full seminar and write it on the board before the full group session.