



# A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness: From Impostor Poodles to Purple Numbers

By V. S. Ramachandran

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## A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness: From Impostor Poodles to Purple Numbers By V. S. Ramachandran

How can some people come to believe that their poodle is an impostor? Or see colors in numbers? Internationally acclaimed neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran now shares his unique insight into human consciousness in an entertaining, inspiring, and intellectually dazzling brief tour of the ultimate frontier—the thoughts in our heads.

*A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness* is made up of five investigations of the greatest mysteries of the brain, including:

- how amputees feel pain in limbs they no longer have, which introduces the great revolution of our age: neuroscience
- the way what we see determines our thoughts, and the counterintuitive point that believing is in fact seeing
- why, the world over, cultures have fundamentally similar notions of what is attractive
- the bizarre world of synesthetes, people who see colors in numbers, textures in smells, sounds in sights, and flavors in sounds
- the implications of the revolution in our understanding of consciousness, to make a fascinating argument about our essential sense of self and its distributed nature

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

What does an amputee who still feels a phantom limb have in common with an avant-garde artist, or a schizophrenic who claims to be controlled by alien implants, or an autistic child who can draw a hyper-realistic horse? According to neuroscientist Ramachandran (coauthor, *Phantoms in the Brain*), named by *Newsweek* one of the 100 people to watch in the 21st century, the answer lies deep in the physical structures of the brain, and his new book offers a thought-provoking survey of his area of research. Through examples, anecdotes and conjecture, Ramachandran aims "to make neuroscience... more accessible to a broad audience." In this he succeeds admirably, explaining how the roots of both psychological disorders and aesthetic accomplishment can be located in the various regions of the brain and the connections (or lack thereof) between them. The text is engaging and readable, feeling as though Ramachandran had sat down for an afternoon to explain his research over tea (no surprise, as the book grew out of the author's 2003 BBC Reith lectures). Though the topic of neuroscience might initially seem daunting, readers who enjoy science popularization in the vein of Oliver Sacks, Richard Dawkins (both of whom enthusiastically blurb this book) and Stephen Jay Gould will find much to appreciate here.

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From Scientific American

Patient X declares that his mother is an impostor. The diagnosis? Freud might say the patient has a troubled Oedipus complex. But the same patient thinks his poodle is a fraud, too. Ramachandran offers a more rigorous neurological explanation in *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness*. Examining the cause for patient X's behavior is just one stop on the writer's journey through the neural pathways of the brain. As the tour guide, Ramachandran, a neuroscientist at the University of California at San Diego, leads readers through a collection of his experiments and theories, championing the idea that charting the brain on a neurological level will provide us with a robust understanding of everything from politics to love. Case studies of patients with obscure syndromes help the author solve the brain-mind puzzle piece by piece. In the case of patient X, communication between regions responsible for visual recognition and the production of emotional responses has been impaired. Because the patient recognizes his mother's face but feels no corresponding emotion, he deduces that she is simply a look-alike. Parts of the book are fascinating and accessible, especially Ramachandran's work with phantom limbs and synesthesia—in which patients seem to transpose the processing of senses, such as sensing the note "middle C" as the color green. Ramachandran presents a convincing argument relating the syndrome to the enhancement of an ability we all possess: drawing connections between objects and events. In a noticeable departure from the empirical explanations of the early sections, Ramachandran later explores possible psychological underpinnings for the evolution of human language and a universal definition of art. The final chapter, an abstract, philosophical foray into free will and the human sense of self, is even more speculative. At times a captivating presentation of facts and anecdotes and at other times an assortment of theories, the book is more of a tour of Ramachandran's opinions and experiences than the concise introduction one expects from the title. In the end, the book succeeds in delivering an entertaining and thought-provoking look at how and why we should think about thought.

*Lisa DeKeukelaere*

Review

"V. S. Ramachandran is one of our most gifted physicians and expositors, and in this new book he

illuminates everything he touches—whether it is phantom limbs and how they can be ‘cured’; or how the brain can generate illusions and delusions; or synesthesia and its relation to metaphor, creativity and art; or the ultimate questions of how brain relates to mind. *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness* belongs to that rare category of scientific book, one as accessible as it is deep.”—**Oliver Sacks, M.D., bestselling author of *Gratitude and On the Move***

“Packed with ideas that are bold, irreverent, original, and ingenious. A breath of fresh air.”—**David Hubel, Nobel Laureate, Harvard University**

“An extraordinary book by a remarkable scientist!... the modern Paul Broca.”—**Eric R. Kandel, M.D., Nobel Laureate, Columbia University**

"An engaging book featuring a remarkable degree of insight, originality, and erudition."—***Neurology Today***

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