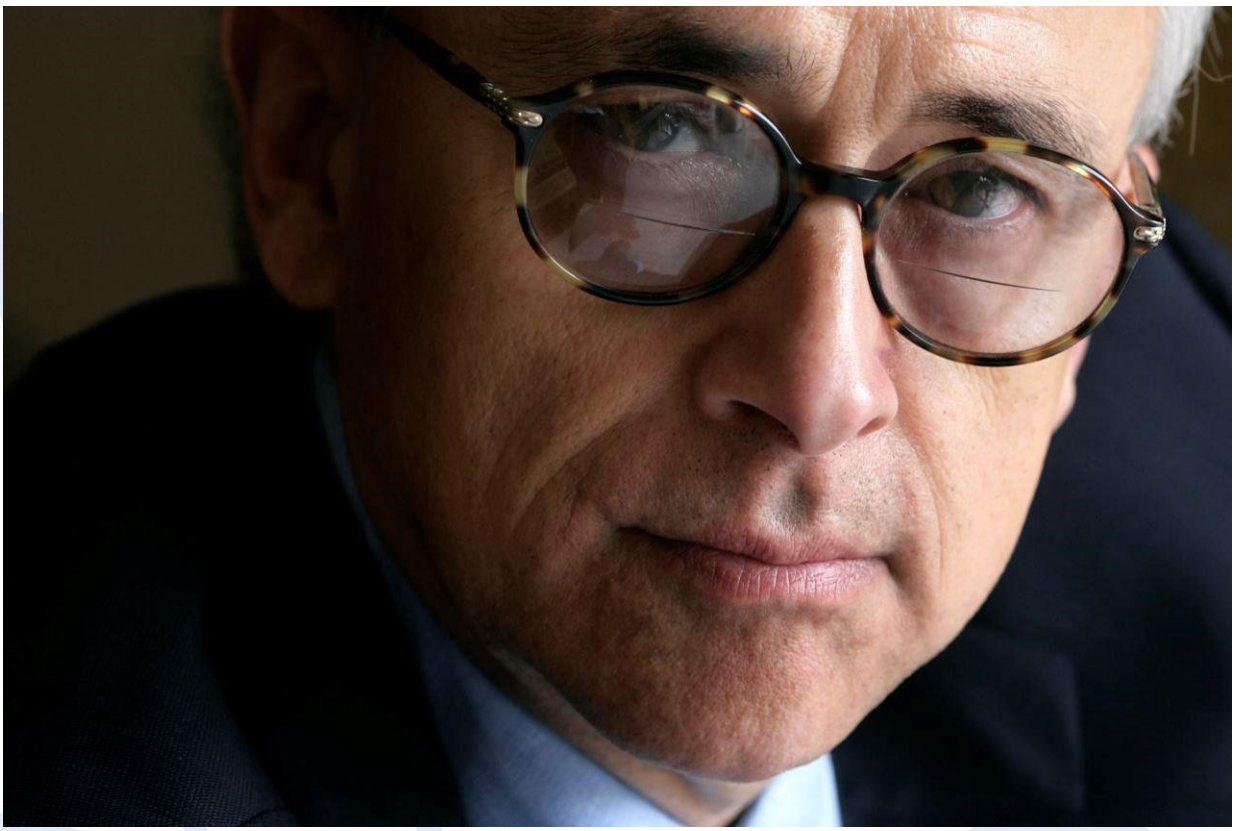
PRESS RELEASE

The biological origin of the conscious mind



SISSA celebrates the profound integrated vision of consciousness of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio awarding him the PhD *honoris causa*

31 January 2017, 10 am
SISSA, "P. Budinich" Main Lecture Hall
Via Bonomea, 265
Trieste

25 January 2017

Consciousness is a grand symphonic piece that makes sense of the world. This analogy summarizes one of the highest achievements of **Antonio Damasio, one of the world's leading neuroscientists, who will be awarded the PhD *honoris causa* by SISSA, Trieste, on 31 January 2017.** In his *Lectio magistralis*, entitled "Body and mind: homeostasis, feeling and cultures", the Portuguese-American scientist will present some of the groundbreaking results of his career, an

amazing endeavor both for the density and relevance of his achievements and for giving a proper scientific legitimacy to topics which have been long considered purview of philosophers. It is not by chance that the articulate conceptual framework developed through decades of research involves emotions, feelings, reason, decision-making, body and mind, offering a vision of consciousness which is in contrast with the ideas of Hume and Descartes, two giants of Western philosophy. The ceremony will take place in the "P. Budinich" Main Lecture Hall of SISSA at 10 am.

Antonio Damasio is a neurologist and neuroscientist, a leader in understanding brain processes underlying emotions, feelings, decision-making and consciousness. He argues that feelings arise as the brain interprets emotions, which are instead an automatic and unconscious reaction of the body to external stimuli. According to him, emotions and feelings play a key role in our survival, in decision making and in social cognition. They are also crucial to our self-image and even shape our cultural accomplishments. As Damasio explained in several occasion, our consciousness, much like our feelings, is based on a representation of the body and how it changes when reacting to certain stimuli. He thinks humans have developed a self-image mainly to establish a homeostatic organism: the brain constantly needs up-to-date information on the body's state to regulate all the processes that keep it alive. This is the only way an organism can survive in an ever changing environment. Emotions alone — without conscious feelings—would not be enough.
The neuroscientist has long investigated the biological origin of consciousness. According to him, investigating where and how consciousness is formed is important not only for intellectual curiosity, but also for understanding society and culture and for treating disorders such as depression, Alzheimer's disease, drug addiction.

Damasio is Professor of Neuroscience and Director of the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California. He studied medicine at the University of Lisbon Medical School, where he also did his neurological residency and completed his doctorate. Many of his results were achieved with the collaboration of his wife Hanna Damasio, neuroscientist, that allowed the study of brain lesions and diagnostic images through a combination of neuroanatomy, neuropsychology and neuroimaging techniques.
Damasio has described his discoveries in several books, translated and taught in universities worldwide. His 1994 book, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (Putnam), is translated in over 30 languages and in 2010 was named as one of the most influential books of the past two decades by the Magazine Sciences Humaines. In it Damasio challenges the traditional ideas about the connection between emotions and rationality and argues that Descartes' "error" was the dualist separation of mind and body, rationality and emotion. In his latest book *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (Vintage, 2012) he suggests that the self is the key to conscious minds and that feelings are basic elements in its construction.

«Damasio has been a pioneer in the use of new imaging technologies like PET (positron emission tomography) or magnetic resonance to study the mind, correlating behavioral and cognitive deficits with brain lesions in brain-damaged patients» explains Raffaella Rumiati, Professor of neuroscience at SISSA and leader of the Neuroscience and society laboratory, who will give the *Laudatio* speech during the ceremony. She continues: «His approach is very close to the one used by neuropsychologists in SISSA: studying neurological patients to understand how mind works through a deep interaction between neurology and cognitive neuroscience.» Rumiati concludes: «With his books, Damasio has also done an amazing job in conveying to the general public many relevant and complex issues in cognitive neuroscience.»

The Director of SISSA, Stefano Ruffo, emphasizes the many successes of the Portuguese-American neuroscientist: «Antonio Damasio has made seminal contributions in understanding the role of emotions in high level cognitive processes and he is well known worldwide for his commitment to science communication. The PhD *honoris causa* that SISSA awards him comes after many international prizes and, in Italy, after the Nonino Prize (2003) and the Bauer Ca' Foscari prize (2012).»

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