

Color Vision and Perception of the Sacred

Scott R. Parkin

I've always assumed that given equivalent access to the same facts, reasonable people will tend to come to similar conclusions—perhaps differing in details or approach, but not in core concept. All that's required is a desire to learn, a willingness to listen, and a modicum of goodwill. As such, I've watched with dismay as discussions of politics, public agencies, general priorities, and belief structures often seem devoid of that necessary goodwill. We're so busy justifying our own thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions against supposed antagonists that we often stop exercising curiosity about the origins of our personal perspective.

In other words, we often know *what* we believe, but seem less interested in exploring *why*. We stop considering the other person's perspective and stop challenging our own. Charity and respect for differing experiences can break down, and once the lines are drawn, we can't help but see others as enemies, rather than co-seekers after truth.

As I explored that idea, a series of my own experiences came together in my mind to cause me to consider perception in general, and perception of the sacred in particular.

Anomalous Trichromacy, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Deuteranomaly

At the age of ten, I was diagnosed with a mild form of color blindness called deuteranomaly, or green weakness, which is common to about 8 percent of males. I could see green just fine, but some of the subtler shades blended together for me and appeared as the same color. Back in

those days, they used something called the Ishihara test that featured colored dots of varying hues and sizes. The goal was to identify the one- or two-digit number presented amid the dots. My point of failure came on the dot-blob that allegedly contained the number 45. I could see neither shape, shade, nor shadow of a number. Just . . . dots.

At first, I was fascinated by the idea that there was a whole world hiding in plain view that I had never considered possible, and I took it as an opportunity to expand my ability to comprehend the world. So I went to the library and checked out the dot-book.¹ I would stare at those dot pattern tests for hours and will myself to see the hidden number. I analyzed dot size, shape, shade, and proximity to other dots with the hope that I might learn to see the color. I worked under incandescent and fluorescent lights, as well as sunlight. I was going to *teach* myself to see that 45 if it killed me.

Of course, I failed. The problem was not unwillingness to see—it was organic incapacity. My eyes could not physically perceive certain colors, and thus, my brain could not parse the absent signal and my mind could not interpret the missing result.

What followed was a sort of panic, a sense that *not* seeing 45 in the dots somehow meant that my perception of the world was inadequate. I sought people who could see it and asked them to trace the digits. I asked them to explain how they were seeing it and put that explanation in terms that made sense to my green-weak, color-blinded state.

Of course, that effort failed as well. They had no concept of what I could or couldn't see and no vocabulary to describe those nuances of color to someone who didn't have a comparative reference. There was no native guide who understood both my perception and their perception to translate the concept.

Even if there had been, it probably wouldn't have mattered—a clearer understanding of what I was not seeing still wouldn't give me the ability to see it. Ultimately, the best I could hope for was a set of clues to help me know when an image contained color information I could not comprehend. I was despondent. No act of will or study could cause my eyes to see the full diversity of those colors. I was inadequate. Substandard. Broken.

Despondency passed relatively quickly when I realized that my ability to function had not changed, and that expanded knowledge about color blindness had not suddenly removed something from my view. I had lost

1. S. Ishihara, *Tests for Colour-Blindness* (Kanehara Shuppan, 1972).

nothing; I had only gained recognition of a greater possibility: I became aware of the absolute fact of a real, yet unseen world that I could never have discovered on my own but that people all around me simply took for granted.

The realization left me necessarily sad but also more open to the idea that my inability to see certain hues did not in any way imply their nonexistence. Like infrared or ultraviolet, they were simply real spectra beyond my ken. My perception was demonstrably incomplete—a simple fact that carried no moral judgment.

The metaphor here to perception of the sacred is obvious, if necessarily incomplete. Perception of the sacred is not an organic trait, but I think for many of us the instruments for that perception either don't exist or they remain functionally undiscovered (to the same effect). This begs a question.

If I get along fine without a perception (of the sacred, hues of green, a political ideology, or any other thing), then why should I concern myself with it? The thing will remain functionally worthless to me no matter how much insight or entertainment it provides for other people. Shaking the thing in my face with a cry of "It's right there; why can't you *see* it?" is demeaning, and ultimately, fruitless. Other peoples' consistent insistence does not magically give me the tools to see or comprehend—no matter how real it may be. Their exasperation serves only to diminish my interest in the conversation and create a social and emotional divide, in addition to the perception gap.

Conversely, the fact that I cannot perceive a thing does not mean it doesn't exist and that those who do claim to see it are irrational, dupes of the establishment, or part of a conspiracy to mock me. The number 45 is in the dots (I tested against a reasonably large and diverse sample when I was ten years old). I just don't have the visual apparatus to perceive it.

I suppose that's the very definition of faith—accepting the reality of that which cannot be seen but is nevertheless true and directing my own actions based on the fact of that unseen thing.

Wow, that's hard. Those who can see 45 have no idea how difficult it can be for us deuteranomates to accept their word for it, no matter how many claim it's there in the dot pattern. Some days that claim is easier to take than others, and I often wonder what value there is in even talking about it when I see no reason (no pun intended) to believe that I will ever see that 45, or that, upon seeing it, my life will be vastly improved.

That's the thing—they see an ephemeral thing that I don't. They see an inability in me that I don't recognize as anything but an unprovable

assertion. Occam's Razor suggests that the simplest explanation is most likely, and it's much, much easier to believe that other people are imagining things. In any case, I quite literally don't know what I'm missing.

Discovering Fluorescents

On a hot summer day in 1981, when I was seventeen years old, a guy in a tent-pavilion booth, just past the cow pens at the Illinois State Fair, hawked a pair of glasses that he claimed would cure color blindness. Only one hundred dollars!

He had a reasonable explanation. One lens was tinted red (the other was clear; both were mirrored on the front to hide the difference) to counterbalance the green deficiency of deuteranomaly. Basically, it was the same theory as those red/blue glasses they used to supply for 3D movies: mask the color entering only one eye to force the brain to reinterpret or recalibrate the visual signal and restore effective color balance.

Okay . . . it couldn't cure deuteranomaly; rather, it would simply counteract the perceptual imbalance—less brightness, more contrast, same functional result.

When I tried them on, the effect was startling. As I looked up and down the rows of booths, I was especially aware of two things: green and red colors really did pop, and the orange price tags on merchandise absolutely leaped out at me. I was sold and happily plopped down the cash to buy them (after negotiating the price down to sixty dollars).

I spent the rest of the day with the glasses resting halfway down my nose so I could look through and look over the lenses to compare the different images. It was an exhilarating experience to feel my sense of limitation lifted. Though I had come to peace with green-deficient color blindness years earlier, that sense that I was physically substandard had been a passive weight on my ego the whole time—one more bit of background noise interfering with my concentration.

But the biggest surprise happened on the way home. It was twilight when I headed out for the forty-five-minute drive, just in that gap when all color seems to leech out the world and neither headlights nor streetlamps help. I noticed it first when I looked at the traffic signal on the way out of town; the color of the lit green lamp was deeper and more vivid than I had ever seen. I figured it was an effect of twilight and didn't think too much about it, though I thought it was kind of cool.

Night falls quickly in Illinois; when there's nothing but flat ground between you and the horizon, sunlight winks out very suddenly when the sun drops out of sight. I automatically pulled on my headlights, and

nearly drove off the road from surprise at all the lights that suddenly appeared in the new night.

It turns out that the lines painted on the street glow—or more accurately, they actively sparkle with reflected light from headlights. Same with the little reflectors on the top of the steel road markers, the numbers on the mile posts, and the white text on those green road signs. I had never known that. To me, they were just white or yellow paint, no different than house paint, if maybe a little more durable and slightly brighter—presumably because they were painted on metal.

I was seeing fluorescents for the first time in my life at the age of seventeen.

I knew about fluorescent colors but always assumed that meant colors that glowed under a black light. In normal room light, a fluorescent color was no different to me than any other. The idea that a paper price tag was actually an entirely different class of color had never occurred to me; the idea that reflector tape was more than a strip of highly contrasting color (and thus, white tape against a white background might still be visible) was new and startling.

When I hit the next traffic light (nearly thirty minutes later; the state fair was way out in the farm belt), I finally saw that the three colors were very distinct and different. From a distance, I had always seen them as essentially the same washed out color, differentiated primarily by the brightness of the lit lamp; for me, colors didn't appear until I got much, much closer to them.

For two weeks, I discovered colors and contrasts and brightness, and I reveled in it. Except for fluorescent color, none of the new colors had a meaningful impact on me, but it was fun to see shades I had never known. I discovered that I had always seen night shadows as greenish—or rather, dusty green and shadowed gray were the same color to me. Unfortunately, the mirroring on those glasses was cheaply painted on; it rubbed off after two weeks, leaving the red lens clearly visible within a frost-like rime of mirroring around the edges. I could not find anyone to paint new mirroring on, and I refused to walk around with one red and one clear lens. It looked really dumb. It also turns out that I still couldn't see 45 in the dots. Ultimately, all the “new” colors I was seeing were just tricks of contrast from the colored lens—much like BluBlockers or those yellow lenses that help you find white golf balls against green grass by filtering out certain wavelengths of light.

But I had honestly seen fluorescents. And strangest of all, I kept seeing them after I stopped wearing the glasses. To this day (more than forty

years later), I can still see the difference between fluorescents and mundane colors—perhaps not as vividly as during those first two weeks but more than at any time prior to wearing those glasses. In other words, with the glasses as a temporary aid, I learned to perceive something that I had always been capable of but had never found reason or inclination to exercise. Having learned that there was more to see, I was able to awaken a latent faculty that was already there.

Just as interestingly, I learned a conceptual vocabulary for describing the differences between my old and new perceptions. I could bridge the experience gap and explain a lack of fluorescent perception to those who could already see it. Sadly, the reverse was less true; those with more expansive vision could easily imagine paleness, but those without the apparatus to perceive fluorescents could only dimly imagine what it was like to see them. Ultimately, one needed some level of direct experience to truly understand.

Still, this analogue to full color vision boosted both my willingness and my ability to believe in things that had been previously invisible. I still had to take the existence of 45 on faith, but since I now had direct experience with discovering new ways of seeing, it became far easier to accept both the fact and the usefulness of seeing 45. My faith was more fully qualified than it had been before, and I became open to other possibilities as well.

Perhaps this is magical thinking (in the pejorative sense of irrational imagination). In my case, it's founded on an accidental discovery of a new way of perceiving that has continued to inform my approach to learning. I now firmly believe that anyone can learn anything if they can find the trick that reveals just enough of the new idea to draw them into a new perception where they learn to see and understand differently than before. Ultimately, the trick may be a temporary stepping stone or even a counterfeit of the real thing; but it can still be useful as a transition to new perception.

Again, the metaphor to perception of the sacred is obvious. Even when one is inherently capable of perceiving a thing, one may never find the hook, goad, or guide that draws them down the path to actual perception. This suggests that we ought to be less concerned about how that person over there perceives their world except as a guide to helping us perceive our own. There ought to be less moral judgment going on about who sees (or doesn't see) what, and more attempt to simply share the insights each of us gathers for the benefit of those willing to reach out with honest curiosity—a desire to learn and a willingness to listen.

That's why an expansive and diverse art and literature is so critical; it's a common ground where we come specifically in order to perceive the world through someone else's eyes, whether that world is familiar or new. In seeing others' perceptions of things sacred to them, in context of their own culture, history, or religious covenants, we gain that first glimpse into a new way of thinking, imagining, and resonating with useful and important ideas, which we might never have seen without a guiding hand.

Ultimately, our perception determines our frame of reference. Like color vision, perception of the sacred may be a gift that not all of us possess—not because of unwillingness but because we're not properly equipped at this time and in this place. Thus, the need for faith (acceptance of that which cannot be seen, but is still true), hope (a desire to pursue faith), and charity (willingness to grant that the other person isn't goofy for having faith and hope in the unseen—or for being unable to perceive the sacred as you do). It's the only way fundamentally incompatible perceptions can peacefully co-exist: I have faith that the 45 actually exists and you understand that I honestly can't see it, we both have the charity to accept that difference without judgment, and we hope that we can co-operate despite that fundamental difference to gain greater light and wisdom through shared curiosity on the topic.

Enduring in Hope

I wanted to believe that given access to the same set of facts people will tend to derive similar conclusions. But, even when shown the same view, some of us simply cannot see what others do, and as a result, we cannot easily or honestly come to the same (or even substantially similar) conclusions.

In this life, some of us will never see 45 in the dots, fluorescent orange price tags, or the intimate resonance with certain covenant practices. This means some conversations will always be somewhat confusing and some conclusions will always seem like leaps of logic.

At first, that realization made me very, very sad. I hate the idea of fundamental incompatibility, and I rage against the possibility that some arguments simply can't be won. But it turns out that there is literally no way to bridge the gap between opposite poles of perception. For example, either the sacred is real and worthy of reverence, or it's not and the whole idea is just a metaphor like any other. As our certainty of one of those poles increases, the ability to accommodate the other pole decreases in direct relation. Each side literally cannot accommodate the other. Thus,

as much as I hate the idea of fundamental incompatibilities, in this life, they are quite real.

This fact does not excuse us from trying to share with those who disagree or from showing charity to those who just don't share our perception. But it does take some of the fear and judgment out of one's own inability to perceive certain things. It's not the current perception itself that limits us; rather, it's our openness to new potentials that determines if and how we progress in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

I believe that the concept of eternal progression gives us time to learn how to perceive many things beyond our current abilities. Whether we make progress depends on whether we can discover and exercise the *willingness* or faith to pursue what is utterly alien to our current mode of understanding in the hope of gaining something valuable. To embrace faith and proceed as if the unseen is real and true, and choose to move forward in our pursuit of more complete understanding. When we eventually gain more perfect perception and can finally observe all things directly, how great will be our joy at seeing our faith made real. Ultimately, that kind of faith can be a choice we make now, despite our inability to perceive. Because we *all* see as through a glass, darkly (1 Cor. 13:12), until we face the one who can finally remove the scales from our eyes (Acts 9:18) and show us all the colors of creation in their true glory.

Scott R. Parkin is an award-winning author, essayist, and critic with more than sixty short story sales across a wide variety of genres, from slice of life to science fiction to romance to fantasy. A former AML Awards coordinator, he is currently at work on his first novel.