

The Light from Our Eyes

In which Max is horrified that 50% of American college students think their eyes illuminate the world. Orin thinks they may be on to something. Meanwhile, Freya is entranced by an expensive array of colored circles.

Stephen J Brewer, March 2015*

(An edited version of this work has been published in [Philosophy Now](#))

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Scene: Max, Freya and Orin are in the café of a downtown contemporary art gallery. Freya is sipping a glass of Oolong tea and gazing at a print composed of brightly colored circles by somebody called ‘Terry Frost RA’. Max is reading the newspaper, drinking his black filter coffee and eating a chocolate muffin. He looks over his paper and winces as Orin drops three teaspoonfuls of sugar into his espresso coffee and gives it a vigorous stir.

Freya: Just look at that, even this print that is number 16 of 25 still costs \$2,500. God knows what the original is worth. Perhaps he was the first to ever think of painting circles on a canvas. I wish I took an art degree. Still it’s so fascinating you just have to look at it.

Max: Instead of being fascinated by some colored blobs, you college professors should be horrified by this report. It says that 50% of American college students think you only see that picture because a light shines out of your eyes! How dumb is that!

Orin: That is interesting because they are supporting the ancient extramission theory of perception. It is good to hear that our brightest and best students are still reaching the same conclusions as the ancient Greek philosophers and the middle age scholastics.

Max: What nonsense! It’s listening to you and this philosophy you teach that causes these college students to have such crazy ideas. How can they be so dumb and ignore all the scientific progress over the past three centuries. It’s as if the enlightenment never occurred and they still live in the dark ages. The disproof is so obvious that even the dumbest student can test it, simply close your eyes and you won’t see anything.

Orin: Well color and even taste emanate from us, so perhaps in that sense both our eyes and tongues *do* in fact illuminate the world about us.

Max: What utter nonsense you talk!

Freya: Wait Max; before you dismiss this off hand, you should listen to what Orin has to say. Orin, in what sense do you think our eyes and tongues illuminate the world?

Orin: Well Max you tell me; does light have color and is sugar itself actually sweet?

Max: No, visible light is just electromagnetic radiation of different wavelengths. That red circle over there is reflecting light with a wavelength of about 650nm, but of course, the light itself isn’t red. And sugar is just a small chemical with a lot of readily released food energy, but it’s not in itself sweet of course. Its “sweetness” is just the way we react to it.



Orin: This means that we produce the color red and the sweet taste in our minds.

Max: How do we do that then?

Freya: To know that would mean solving one of the biggest mysteries of consciousness.

Orin: And for the sake of this argument, it does not really matter. All that matters is that somehow these qualities emerge from the highly complex operations of the mind.

Max: So by some unknown mechanism this light produce a particular color-experience that floats around in the mind.

Orin: But Max, do they 'float around' as you say? When you see a red color, or taste sweetness, where is that color or taste located?

Max: Well the sweetness is on the tongue of course.

Orin: But when you scientists say sweetness is a property of the sugar, it is not really is it?



Instead, it is a property generated by the mind when your tongue is in contact with sugar. It requires your brain doing some pretty sophisticated processing of the sensations coming from the interaction of your taste buds with molecules of sugar.

Freya: That's interesting because that red circle, although it is produced by my mind, is on the picture over there. It's sort of pasted back onto the canvas, just as those circles were

originally put on the canvas by the artist.

Max: I see your point Orin, but it's not actually out there is it? It's in our minds. So, it has the appearance of it being outside us, but let's face it its not. It's an illusion.

Freya: But a pretty damn good one at that.

Orin: Quite right, somehow the mind projects these qualities back onto the source of the stimulus. Sweetness goes into my cup of coffee and red onto that circle over there. Take the picture or the coffee away and the experience disappears.

You should see our minds at the intersection of all these sources of energy, light and chemicals, then adding value to them by generating these sorts of mental experiences. These generated values are then projected back onto the source of the stimulation. Without these valuations, the world would only consist of boring forms of physical energy. It is only our minds that make the world full of color and taste. It is by adding such properties to all these different sources of energy that the world becomes full of objects with different properties.

Freya: I see, it's no longer an alien place inhabited by various impersonal forms of energy, but filled with objects that now have value to us.

Orin: And these valuations are not projected onto a screen inside our minds but onto the world itself.

Max: So, now you are saying we have invented this world. What nonsense!

Orin: No, our division of the world into objects is not an invention because it requires there to be real sources of the various forms of energy. Now, whether these mental qualities themselves are invented by our minds or discovered is the big philosophical question.

Max: But all the same, attaching these mental qualities to things is not the same as projecting

light from our eyes for Gods sake!

Orin: Nevertheless we are illuminating the world in much the same way as a manuscript is illuminated by the artist adding color and form to the plain text.

Freya: I see what you mean; and it also has the effect of making the world a more beautiful and interesting place. It makes it fascinating to us so we want to explore it. Without this illumination, there would be no reason to grasp and enjoy the world.

Max: But these college students don't see it that way and you're only going to confuse the issue even more with this sort of talk.

Orin: On the contrary, it is you scientists confusing them by claiming that the world is full of inert objects neatly placed in time and space with us as some disconnected observer. The world you maintain is the real one has no art or poetry in it, no reason for us to act on it. That artist is the one capturing the real world full of beauty color and passion, and obviously, it is the taste of sugar, not physics, causing you to down that muffin.

With a noisy rustle, Max turns the paper's page and licking the tips of his index finger attaches the crumbs from the plate and transfers them to his tongue. Freya, gazing at the picture gets up, crosses the room and begins to trace out the shapes with a hovering finger. Orin with a loud grunt adds another spoon full of sugar to his untouched and by now cold coffee. With much rattling and clinking he gives it a vigorous stir, but Max makes no response.



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Reference: Fundamentally Misunderstanding Visual Perception: Adults' Belief in Visual Emissions; by Gerald A. Winer and Jane E. Cottrell, Virginia Gregg, Jody S. Fournier and Lori A. Bica. *American Psychologist* Vol. 57, No. 6/7, 417–424
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