

At the Frontier between Science & Spirituality: Do Auras Exist?



MindfulBiology grew out of a desire to reconcile my understandings of science and spirituality, a yearning that began in adolescence. During a solo [John Muir Trail](#) hike at age sixteen, I felt dwarfed by granite spires looming above meadows sparkling with wildflowers. Geology, biology, and mysticism appeared inseparable. My upbringing and education had taught me to reify science and ridicule spirituality, but in the mountains it felt wrong to divide the two, and even more wrong to value them differently.

Another time I'll write out more of MindfulBiology's history. Today I want to focus on one problem faced by those who honor both scientific and spiritual worldviews. How to respond when they seem to contradict one another?

People of strong mystical sensibility feel convinced of phenomena science rejects as imaginary or delusional. Consider auras. New age enthusiasts feel comfortable talking about them as if they are objectively real, but skeptics will tell you there is no evidence for their existence.

From a scientific standpoint, data consistent with the physical existence of auras are scanty. Faint electrical signals coming from the heart can be detected around a human body, but it seems doubtful that these account for the play of colors described by those who see auras. For one thing, human eyes lack detectors for electromagnetic waves in the frequency range of those emanating from the heart.

At the same time, it seems clear that people who describe auras truly see something. Some weeks ago my friend [Richard Bernstein](#) read my aura. Although he has written a book entitled, *The Language of the Aura*, Richard is cautious and has only rarely done formal readings. After watching me walk away from him and back again a few times, he used pastel chalk to demonstrate the hues he saw. As he offered interpretations, I was struck by how he picked up trends in my current situation that went beyond our verbal exchanges: the colors seemed to reveal core shifts we hadn't discussed. Since Richard is one of the most honest and sincere people I know, this demanded more more than a skeptic's assumption that I was being manipulated.

One could declare that auras are supernatural, beyond the reach of measurement and rational explanation. But if that's the case, there's little more to say about them, since nothing can be proven, and skeptics can hardly be blamed for doubting their existence.

What seems more promising is to recognize that the problem isn't that auras can't be measured, but that they can't be seen except by those who see them. In other words, they are subjective, not objective. Science can work with subjective states; psychologists do so all the time. They employ many methods but generally begin by using first-person reports to develop testable hypotheses.

Such a hypothesis occurred to me after my time with Richard. What if people who see auras have a form of synesthesia, so that what they sense emotionally appears to them visually? A Google search showed me this isn't a new idea; it has even been investigated in a [scientific article](#), though one of limited scope and method.

People with synesthesia experience crosstalk between senses. For example, there have been musicians for whom specific notes evoked specific colors, and mathematicians for whom different numbers appeared in different hues. Synesthesia has had the sort of history you'd expect of a rare form of perception that strikes 'ordinary' people as impossible. Early on, psychologists felt fascinated by it, but for much of the twentieth century its occurrence was doubted because it seemed to contradict neurology. Nowadays, even the most sober scientists acknowledge that some people experience synesthesia, and functional brain imaging has demonstrated atypical firing patterns when it occurs.

If some people perceive colors in association with numbers or musical tones, why couldn't others see them in association with affective states? Facial expressions, body postures, vocal intonations, and so on are all detectable by emotional regions of the brain and could?in synesthetes of this type?generate characteristic hues. The hypothesis is both plausible and testable: it could be assessed with functional brain imaging.

It seems to me that auras have many of the same characteristics as the colors seen by synesthetes, in particular the way they enrich experience: [Richard Bernstein](#) doesn't just see auras, he feels informed by them. He seems able to make productive use of the hues he sees, as have many of the famous synesthetes throughout history.

Here's what I believe to be the key point: if auras were proven to be synesthetic, their power would not be diminished. The intuitions of those who perceive them would lose none of their accuracy.

The value of scientific hypotheses when applied to mystical experiences isn't that they make understandable what was once mysterious. Since mystery fuels awe, it is one of our main sources of meaning, and programs to eradicate it are unhealthy. (Fortunately, after every explanation a new mystery appears, so such programs are also doomed.) The value of hypotheses is that they help bring spiritual and scientific perspectives into closer alignment and begin to heal the rift between the two.

This should be our guiding light as we try to reconcile spiritual experience with scientific understanding. Mystically inclined people need not fear rational explanations, and rationalists need not fear mystical experience. Both ways of knowing are important human capacities. They can be brought into healthful coherence only to the extent we respect them equally. Our aim should be to seek explanations while appreciating that reality is?at heart?mysterious and awe-inspiring.