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The Beauty of Synesthesia

Have you ever seen numbers as colors? Have you ever heard sounds as color? Or smelled a sound? If so, you most likely have a rare condition commonly known as synesthesia.

Synesthesia is a condition in which stimulation of a certain sensation leads to an activation of another sensory pathway simultaneously. In other words, one of your senses activates another. It can occur between just about any combination of senses. In this essay, my goal is to explore the beauty of this condition.

Some forms of synesthesia activate more than two senses or experiences at a time. Every case is different, meaning no two people will experience these sensory connections in the exact same way. There are around 80 different types of synesthesia. The most common being grapheme-color. If you have ever heard of synesthesia, this is probably the one you are most familiar with. This is when an individual's perception of letters and/or numbers is identified with colors. So for example, one with grapheme-color may see the number 1 as blue, or the letter K as purple. This helps people with this condition remember names and number sequences, as it organizes color patterns associated with them in their brain.

Research has shown that around 2-4% of the general population has it, and about 40% of synesthetes develop the condition genetically. Typically, synesthesia gets passed down from generation to generation. However, some who are not born with this condition, can develop it after certain damage to the brain.

About a year ago, I took a trip to Denver, CO with a good friend of mine. We were researching different things to do in town, and ended up coming across this place called the International Church of Cannabis for a light show meditation. We were unsure about what we were getting ourselves into, but figured it would be an interesting experience regardless. We got

there and ended up having long conversations with the staff before and after the show. One man who worked there went into this story about how he developed synesthesia after a car accident. Prior to him, I had only met people who were born with it. He said he had no idea what was happening or how to explain it to anyone, until he met another person with the condition. After his accident, he was concussed for some time. And shortly after, he began seeing colors as people spoke, numbers as colors, even sounds as colors. He then explained that one of his hobbies is creating music, and it helped him a lot to be able to see all of the sounds as colors. I found this fascinating, and I had to know more about how this condition presents itself in humans.

A lot of musicians claim to have synesthesia. It's known to be great for artists because it helps organize music and art, and it's easier to remember things when you can associate senses with memories. Singer-songwriter Pharell has a type of synesthesia called chromesthesia. This is when you can see sounds as colors. In an interview with NPR, Pharell explained to the interviewer, "It's the only way that I can identify what something sounds like. I know when something is in key because it either matches the same color or it doesn't. Or it feels different and it doesn't feel right." He is essentially able to paint a song. The colors he sees with each sound paint a picture. I think this is truly beautiful.

For those who don't inherently possess this condition, it can sometimes occur through the use of psychedelic or hallucinogenic drugs. Since this is a perceptual experience, drugs such as LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline allow the brain to open up these neural pathways leading to these sensory connections. It allows the brain to process senses differently. Similar to synesthetes, although it probably won't be the exact same experience. Unfortunately, there haven't been any studies that show that those without the condition are able to truly experience it the same way those with the condition can. Even with hallucinogenic and psychedelic drugs, we are not able to create the exact same sensory perception as those with synesthesia.

As more research comes out, the more people with synesthesia are able to understand their condition. I'm sure that in the future, those without this condition will be able to experience something similar virtually or through some form of simulation. Only roughly around 4% of people have it, and I believe it is pretty clear why artists and musicians would benefit the most from it. Although it is believed that we can experience similar things while on psychedelic or hallucinogenic drugs, only those who have synesthesia will truly understand what it's like. Some call it a disease, others call it a condition. I think it is a super power.

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