

Where Epistemology and Metaphysics Touch in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*

The veil of perception—the idea that there is a gap between appearance and reality—is a persistent theme in epistemology. Our access to reality, so the empiricists claim, is had through our experiences, including sense experience. But our perceptions are thoroughly fallible. Plato depreciated the value of perception in reaching reality, relegating it to the realm of mere opinion on his Divided Line in *The Republic*. René Descartes began his *Meditations* with the premise that sense perception was the easiest faculty to doubt, and thus could not be relied upon to establish a firm foundation for scientific knowledge. This tradition of devaluing the senses epistemologically leads rationalists to look for *a priori* knowledge and transcendentalists to find the necessary conditions that make possible the experiences we do in fact have. Such are the options for closing the gap, analogized by Randall Auxier as the river of doubt. We can build a bridge of experience across it, or we can dig a tunnel of existence under it. The former tactic is empirical, the latter is transcendental.¹

In Lois Lowry's dystopian young adult novel, *The Giver*, the veil of perception is woven into the community intentionally as a policy measure in the establishment of Sameness—the effort to insure a world without conflict, inequality, difference, pain, or freedom of choice. At puberty, members of the community take pills to suppress “The Stirrings.” Members of the community cannot see color. The community no longer experiences snow, hills, or season changes because of the institution of Climate Control. Love is entirely absent in the community.

A question lingers in the premise of the novel's community. Has the bridge of experience been sabotaged to render perception spurious, or has the tunnel of existence been blocked to alter reality itself? Put otherwise, has Committee of Elders in charge of maintaining Sameness, changed the ability of its community members to perceive an unchanged reality, or has the Committee altered what is really real? This paper investigates the evidence in the novel that offers inconsistent answers to this question. First, the paper investigates the epistemology/ perception thesis. Next, it looks into the metaphysical/reality thesis. Ultimately, it is argued that, while memory is where epistemology and metaphysics try to touch in the premise of *The Giver*, Lowry falls short of a consistent philosophical premise upon which to base the story.

If you have not read *The Giver*, think Plato's *Republic*, Orwell's *1984*, or Gary Ross's *Pleasantville*. The community in *The Giver* has in common with Plato's work a highly planned society where members' aptitudes are studied by Elders and dictate their vocations, the communal raising of infants, and the high value placed on Platonic, rather than erotic, relationships. It shares with Orwell's work the presence of a Speaker giving the community orders and the presence of a slow-moving bureaucracy of committees who study the possibility of changing the rules, but rarely do so. It shares with Ross's film the lack of both color and eroticism.

The Bridge of Experience: The Epistemological/Perception Thesis

¹ Hartshorne and Brightman on *God, Process, and Persons. The Correspondence, 1922-1945*, Ed. Randall E. Auxier and Mark Y.A. Davies, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), p. 115.

Ample evidence in the story points to the thesis that Sameness has been achieved by changing people's ability to perceive. Several characters, including the protagonist, Jonas, the Giver himself, and Gabriel, the one-year old Jonas ends up saving from a eugenic death, have pale eyes. The pale eyes represent a special ability to see what others cannot, color. Jonas notices the ephemeral color red in an apple and in his love interest, Fiona's, hair. Jonas has the ability "to see beyond" (116). This raises the question: have others' subjective perceptions been altered, or has objective reality itself been changed?

Emotion and habits of feeling are experiential modalities, sensuous perceptions. When Jonas is given memories by the Giver, he feels love, pain, and joy, and he learns something about the possibility of reality through these feelings. His erotic love for Fiona gives him insight into the possibility of real objects otherwise absent in the community. Post-pubescent members of the community must take pills to suppress their libido. Such manipulation supports the perception thesis.

The pale eyes and ability to see beyond demonstrate that perception in others has been manipulated, as does the suppression of sexual desire; that is, the bridge of experience has been intentionally damaged so that the river of doubt cannot be crossed.

The Tunnel of Existence: The Metaphysical/Reality Thesis

Other evidence in the novel suggest a different understanding of the establishment of Sameness in the community. Climate Control was the means by which the community eliminated difficulties including, hills, snow, and unpredictable weather (106). The Giver also tells Jonas, "Today flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones. Probably when you saw the faces take on color it wasn't as deep or vibrant as the apple, or your friend's hair" (119). He continues, "We've never completely mastered Sameness. I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Fiona's must drive them crazy" (120). "We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences," the Giver continues. "We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others," including the beauty of rainbows (120-1).

Here we see that the ontology of the community has been altered genetically, the tunnel of existence has been blocked to impede its ability to traverse the river of doubt. But if Fiona's hair is a tricky problem for the scientists such that her hair persists in being red, why can other members of the community, those without the pale eyes, not see it? Here is the inconsistency in the premise of Sameness.

Where Epistemology and Metaphysics Touch

The capacity for memory is where epistemology and metaphysics touch in the premise of *The Giver*. It is the primary means to cross the river of doubt and see beyond the veil of perception. Jonas is charged at age 12 to be The Receiver of memories. This honor means that he receives memories from the Giver, who consults the Elders based on the wisdom of memories. The plan for Jonas is that he become the new Giver. The memories Jonas is given include pleasant ones of rainbows, of familial love, of the exhilaration of sledding down a snowy hill, and eventually of music. He also receives painful memories, of a broken leg after crashing his sled and of a soldier injured on the battlefield.

Jonas comments on the ontology of the color red: “It had that same thing: the color red. But it didn’t change. It just *was*” (120). The Giver explains that it’s because it’s a memory of a time when red existed. Memory gives Jonas the access to a past where existence was different; but Jonas has the ability to perceive difference amid the altered reality of Sameness. These two features of the premise of the story do not hang well together. It would be more consistent if the pale eyes were what drove the scientist crazy, rather than the reality of Fiona’s red hair.

Randall Auxier penned the analogy of the bridge of experience and the tunnel of existence, which I borrow here. He applies the analogy to Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Charles Hartshorn, arguing that Brightman digs “a metaphysical tunnel of his own under the river of doubt; but he digs only at night, while wearing a blindfold, and does not remember doing so in the light of day” (Auxier, Davies, 117). Mapped onto the world of *The Giver*, the difficulties experienced by the genetic scientists dig the tunnel, the pale eyes build the bridge, and memories access a world with much less water above and below each. The analogy speaks to our real-world fallibility and our indirect access to the in itself, the really real. Then, in *The Giver*, the community’s establishment of Sameness amounts to the attempt to hinder the construction of the bridge *and* the digging of the tunnel, ever widening the river of doubt. While the genetic scientists work on blocking the tunnel, the Elders work on hindering the bridge’s construction, but they have failed to work together in making the river entirely uncrossable. Lowry has failed to establish a consistent philosophical premise, such that the metaphysics and epistemology of *The Giver* end in a vicious circle.