

# Simple Colours

NICHOLAS NATHAN

## 1. Introduction

'Colour is king in our innate quality space, but undistinguished in cosmic circles.'<sup>1</sup> Most philosophers would agree with at least the second half of Quine's dictum. It is indeed on the general view wrong to believe that, as qualities, colours are extra-mentally actual in even the humblest role. Mind-independent material things have on the general view powers to cause sensations of red or blue, but if, in 'sensations of red or blue', 'red' and 'blue' name qualities, we are not to believe that these qualities are possessed by things causing the sensations. My first thesis, defended in section 2, is that partly because we do count colours as eminent among qualities, we would on reflection want it to be true that some things have such qualities when they are not perceived. It would therefore be sad subsequently to discover the wrongness of believing that this is how things are. My second thesis, defended in sections 3 and 4, is that there is in fact no danger as yet of this kind of disappointment. So far, the philosophers have not shown that, if we believe that colour qualities exist as contents of experience, we ought not also to believe that things have these qualities when they are not perceived. One might of course deny that colour qualities exist even as contents of experience, so that the desire for them to be mind-independently exemplified evaporates on the realization that it lacks an intelligible object. Our pre-scientific concept of red, according to Armstrong, is, apart from being the concept of something falling under a determinable, 'all blank or gap'.<sup>2</sup> I shall assume without argument that this is a mistake, that whenever we see something, or whenever we have a visual illusion, there is at least one colour quality or, as I will say, simple colour, of whose non-relational properties we can thereby gain a complete knowledge. Only science can tell us about the causes of the perceptions or illusions by means of which we gain this knowledge of simple colours. And not every such episode can give us knowledge of the relations among these colours themselves, knowledge for example that there is no such thing as bluish orange or reddish green.

<sup>1</sup> W. V. Quine, 'Natural Kinds' in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 127.

<sup>2</sup> D. Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind* (London: Routledge, 1968), 275.

But that each perception or illusion can give us a complete pre-scientific knowledge of the non-relational properties of at least some simple colour is in this paper an axiom.

## 2. Wants

A desire for things to be simply coloured when not perceived might I suppose be just the joint product of a general desire for one's beliefs to be true and an unreflective belief that colours as we see them are inherent properties of things. It may be that we do all at some stage have some such unreflective belief, and it may even be that there is something called common sense of which some such belief is a perennial component. But I think that one is liable to want things to be simply coloured when not perceived even if one never has believed and never will believe this actually to be the case. One root of that kind of desire is one's initial feeling that the colours most often presented to us by the things and people we are attached to are an essential part of them, rather than an aspect of an effect they have on us. How could I see that rhododendron, if its crimson colour, so much a part of it, is a quality realized merely in my own experience? How could I see her corn-coloured hair, so much a part of her, if the corn-colour were a quality realized merely in my own experience? One's attitude here gets modified, perhaps, on thinking of how what one is attached to looks or would look under different and less usual perceptual conditions. Suppose that, looked at under a microscope, what seemed crimson or corn-coloured would appear as a collection of blue and scarlet elements, or scarlet and lighter yellow elements. Such new appearances will not actually disturb us: we just take the new colours, and their powers to mix into appearances of crimson or corn-colour, as essential parts of the object of our attachment. But we do not without resistance move over into the belief that the flower, or the hair, would, when not perceived, have no simple colour at all. That would be to subtract what we took as a part of what we were attached or attracted to.

That we can after all painlessly move over to that new belief from our initial unthinking attachment to things as we normally see them is a principal thesis of Strawson's recent essay 'Perception and its Objects', and it may be worthwhile at this point to look briefly at what Strawson says. The starting point, for Strawson, is not so much that, admiring the rhododendron, an independently existing object, partly for its crimson colour, we take that colour to be an essential part of what independently exists, but rather that we take the rhododendron to be *really* crimson. And then if, when magnified, it appears as a collection of blue and scarlet elements, we say, according to Strawson, that it is really blue and scarlet. Strawson can then argue that 'really' means 'relative to a particular

perceptual standpoint', and that if it is easy enough to shift from one perceptual standpoint to another, it may not be too difficult to shift from some perceptual standpoint to the standpoint of what he calls 'scientific realism', a standpoint from which no characteristics are ascribed to things except the ones which figure in 'the physical theories of science'.<sup>3</sup>

This is a new application of the old Oxford idea that 'real' never means 'existing whether or not perceived'. If, contrary to this, we admire the flower or the girl as independently existing and the simple colour of the flower or of the girl's body as parts of them, then all that a shift from one perceptual standpoint to another can easily change is the particular simple colour or colours we take to be parts of the objects of our admiration. There is no serious analogy between *that* kind of change and total abandonment of the belief that simple colours are properties of independently existing things. And there are perhaps some changes in perceptual standpoints which do not even affect the simple colours which we take to be parts of the objects of our admiration or attachment. If, in a special light, the rhododendron looks purplish or brown, that is not enough to stop us taking crimson as a part of it, though on Strawson's view we should be just as willing to say 'it's really brown' as 'it's really crimson'.

If our ordinary affections make it difficult not to want things to have simple colours when not perceived, there are also some abstract reflections which can help to produce the same result. Suppose you do actually value simple colours for themselves, quite independently of any thought about how exactly they are instantiated. For you, as for Quine, colour is king in our innate quality space. Add to this the not too extravagant assumption that you want things and people to exist independently of being perceived. It seems plausible to suppose that if you want a particular kind of individual to exist you will on reflection want it to have the largest compossible set of valuable properties which is consistent with its being an individual of that kind. If follows that it will be difficult on reflection not to want people and things to have simple colours when not perceived. And this elementary metaphysical reflection can be reinforced with another equally obvious thought. If we value simple colour properties for themselves, we do not want their realization to be hostage to the fortunes of sentient life. But that would indeed be the case if simple colours were realized only in the contents of human or animal experience. So unless, as Berkeley thought, there is a God who will forever contemplate qualities, the imperishability of these colours requires their possession by material things which exist independently of experience.

One might even try to derive the desire for simple colours to be mind-independently realized from one's desire for there to be things existing

<sup>3</sup> P. F. Strawson, 'Perception and its Objects', *Perception and Identity*, G. F. MacDonald (ed.) (London: Macmillan, 1979), 57.

when they are not perceived which are more than mere bundles of unactualized dispositions, or dispositions to produce mental states. There is something vaguely alarming in the prospect that pan-psychism might be true, or at least in the thought that one's own body is a mere community of minds. And we are obviously in danger of talking nonsense if we try to suppose that there are non-dispositional properties which do not consist in being conscious of something, and neither are nor involve the possession of simple colours. It will now be objected that even properties of being conscious of something, and even simple colour qualities, are dispositional. If a dispositional property is one whose ascription to an individual entails a subjunctive conditional, then every property is dispositional. Even 'x is simply red' entails the conditional that if someone were to believe that x is simply red he would believe something true.<sup>4</sup> But if that is how we define 'dispositional property' then we will need some term, say ' $\alpha$ -property', to cover those properties whose ascriptions to an individual entails a subjunctive conditional which does not itself entail that the individual has that property. Fragility will be an  $\alpha$ -property because 'x is fragile' entails 'if x were suitably dropped it would break', but that conditional does not itself entail 'x is fragile'. The latter entailment does not hold because for x to be fragile it must have other properties, perhaps  $\alpha$ -ones, which explain why the conditional in question is true. Simple redness will by contrast be a non- $\alpha$ -property, because like every other subjunctive conditional entailed by 'x is simply red', 'if someone were to believe that x is simply red he would believe something true' entails that x is simply red. The thought will then be that we want things with non- $\alpha$ -properties to exist when they are not perceived, and, pan-psychism apart, it is hard to see how these properties could not include simple colours. But perhaps you will agree that there is really no need to rely on this last line of thought, and that the desire for things to be simply coloured when not perceived is a natural outcome of less problematical reflections and evaluations, if not an entrenched component of quite ordinary attitudes to the outside world.

### 3. Incoherence

I turn now to the arguments by which philosophers have tried to convince us that we ought not to believe that things are simply coloured when not perceived, and firstly to arguments which are supposed to show that there is nothing here of a coherent or intelligible sort which we *could*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. D. H. Mellor, 'Counting Corners Correctly', *Analysis* 42, No. 2 (March 1983), 96-97; 'In Defence of Dispositions', *Philosophical Review* 83, No. 2 (April 1974).

believe. For this general thesis of incoherence I have been able to find just three lines of support.

The first takes the form of a challenge. There are qualities of noisiness, bitterness and sweetness, of pain, perhaps even of boringness or amusingness, of whose non-relational properties experience gives us a complete pre-scientific knowledge. But obviously it is senseless to say that *these* qualities belong to things which are not experienced. How is it then that it does make sense to say that things have simple colour qualities when they are not perceived? One answer is that the phenomenologist, trying to give a full description of what experiencing blue or crimson is like without importing the subject's beliefs about external causes, has to say that there is an experience of *something's* being blue or crimson. But in the case of taste or sound or pain experiences, he cannot improve on phrases of the form 'experience of such and such a sound (taste) (pain)'. We can understand how something not experienced can be simply crimson because our experiences of crimson are already of *something* crimson. The construction is intentional: in describing the experience as being of something crimson one does not imply that there is anything crimson which exists when not experienced. But the 'of something crimson' description does nevertheless leave room for us to understand how something which really does exist when not experienced could be crimson in the same sense. No room is left for this kind of understanding in the case of experiences of sound or taste or pain, because they are not experiences of *something* having a sound or a taste, even in the intentional sense, but at most experiences of e.g. noisiness or bitterness or dull pain, accompanied by beliefs about the material objects which cause the experiences. In the same way, something is amusing if it amuses you, and being amused, if an experience as of anything's having a special quality, is an experience as of one's own sudden glory, not an experience as of a special quality of what one is amused by.

The second argument for the incoherence thesis moves from the premise that we learn what simple colours are only through experience to the conclusion that in their simple sense colour terms like red or blue are names *only* for ways things look or appear or are experienced. 'x is simply blue when it is not experienced' will entail the self-contradictory proposition 'x looks some way to someone, or is experienced by someone, when it is not experienced'. I think there are two possible replies. One is to ask why red and blue are not names of properties, or classes of properties, instances of which we just happen to be acquainted with by means of visual experience. Why, for example, is Mackie wrong to say: 'the contents of our experience are not undetachably labelled as such: mind-independence is not a part of what we perceive, and certainly not a part from which it would be impossible to abstract, for constructive use

elsewhere, other facts of that experiential content'?<sup>5</sup> But there is a second and perhaps stronger reply. If we learn what 'blue' means, in its simple sense, as name of a quality, through experience as of simply blue things, then presumably it is also true that we learn the meaning of the phrase 'experience as of something blue', with 'blue' taken in its simple sense, only through experience as of experience as of simply blue things. So if it follows from the premise about how we learn what 'blue' means, in its simple sense, that nothing would be blue in that sense when not experienced as such, it presumably also follows from the parallel premise about how we learn what 'experience as of something blue' means, that there are no experiences as of simply blue things, without experiences as of those experiences. This last conclusion seems to be false, and even if it is true, further parallel reasoning would lead us to the obviously false conclusion that no matter how often we iterate 'experience as of', in front of 'experience as of something blue', when 'blue' there is taken in its simple sense, there are no experiences, of the possibly already very complex kind we thereby attempt to describe, without yet further experiences as of those experiences.

Similar considerations may also dispose of the variant on the second argument for the incoherence thesis which Berkeley may have had in mind in, for example, the famous passage of *Principles I*, section 23. I mean this train of thought. How can we know that it is meaningful to suppose that something is simply coloured when not perceived unless we can check up by imagining what it would be like for this to be the case? But anyone who does try to check in this way will simply end up imagining himself looking at the simply coloured thing, and thus not actually imagining what it would be like for it to exist unperceived after all. One answer would I suppose be that instead of trying to imagine anything we must just think that the simple colour properties which happen to have instances which we have encountered in visual experience also have instances which nobody is acquainted with in visual experience. And the other answer would be that on these principles about knowledge of meaningfulness, we could not even know that it was meaningful to suppose that there are unexperienced experiences.

The third and last argument for the incoherence thesis which I have been able to discover comes from John Foster's fascinating book *The Case for Idealism*. It is a vital part of Foster's case that things do not have simple colours when they are not perceived, and there is just one argument for this conclusion in which he is willing to put his trust. It depends on some thoughts of C. J. Ducasse, set forth in his classic statement of the adverbial theory of perception, in reply to Moore. Experiences, for

Ducasse, do not have objects or contents which can be described by adjectives like 'red' any more than activities like executing a double somersault have contents. Nor can we speak of a red experience: that would be like talking of an iron metal. 'If we wish to use "iron" as an adjective, we have to apply it to something—for instance a kettle or a door—which stands to iron not, like "metal", as genus to species, but as substance to property.'<sup>6</sup> Red stands to sensing red as a kind stands to the occurrence of a case thereof, and one can handily remind oneself of this by talking about sensing redly.

Foster's own argument goes like this. Colours are somehow *realized*, not merely conceived of. We have to grant this, Foster thinks, in order to account for the fact that, even when they have exactly the same content, episodes of sensing and episodes of imagining differ in their intrinsic character. But it is impossible to explain how colours are realized, as distinct from merely conceived, unless we say that colours are the sensation-types of which particular episodes of sensing colours are the self-revealing tokens or instances. We do not *explain* the difference if we say that in sensing a colour we are aware of a content, for we are also aware of a content when we conceive a colour. But if we do say that colours are sensation-types, instanced in particular episodes of sensing, then according to Foster we can deduce that colours, or as he calls them, colour-qualia, cannot have an ultimate non-sensory realization. The complete content of a colour-sensation, i.e. a colour expanse, cannot have an ultimate non-sensory realization simply because 'for the existence of a sensation, nothing more is required than an ultimate realization of the quale'.<sup>7</sup> Nor is it possible to detach colours from visual extension, and say that they can have an ultimate non-sensory realization by themselves.

I find this unconvincing for two reasons. First, what has to be shown by Foster is not just that colours are sensation-types, but that they are *only* sensation-types and not types whose tokens also include unexperienced states or events. Secondly, Foster says that particular episodes of sensing colours are always self-revealing, or objects of consciousness. And he has to say this if there is to be any chance that his description will fit the phenomena. There is some object of consciousness in every episode of sensing, and if we agree with Foster that the particular episode of sensing does not itself consist of awareness of an object, then the consciousness can only be of the whole episode. But surely one can sense a colour without being aware that one is sensing it, without being aware of the whole episode of sensing.

<sup>6</sup> C. J. Ducasse, *Nature, Mind, and Death* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1951), 265.

<sup>7</sup> J. Foster, *The Case for Idealism* (London: Routledge, 1982), 106.

<sup>5</sup> J. L. Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 68–69.

#### 4. Explanation

If it cannot be shown that there is anything incoherent or unintelligible in the supposition that things are simply coloured when not perceived, is there some other reason why we ought not to believe that they are? The most common claim is that this would be wrong to believe because there is no good evidence that the belief is true. There is no good evidence because the simplest and perfectly satisfactory explanation of colour experience does not need to suppose that mind-independent objects are simply coloured. And if we have no good evidence for a proposition, then we ought not to believe it. Thus, according to Mackie, 'the literal ascription of colours, as we see colours, . . . to material things, forms no part of the explanation of what goes on in the material world . . . And the philosophical principle of economy of postulation then supplies a reason for not introducing supposedly objective qualities of kinds for which physics has no need.'<sup>8</sup> Or again Jackson, in the Colour and Science chapter of his recent book *Perception*, after establishing to his own satisfaction that we have no reason to believe that material things are simply coloured, moves rapidly to the further conclusion that 'we ought *not* to ascribe colours to material things',<sup>9</sup> i.e. ought *not* to believe that they are simply coloured.

The obvious objection to this argument is that if, as in the present case, one wants something to be true and neither has nor ever will have any good evidence for its falsity, then there is nothing at all wrong with believing it to be true, if that is the lucky position one finds oneself in. It might, I admit, be a bit ignoble actually to get oneself to believe that things are simply coloured when not perceived, purely on the grounds that one will never have evidence for its falsity and that it is more comfortable to believe what one wants to be true than not to believe it. Though even this course of action seems defensible, on standard decision-theoretic principles. But at least one should not worry too much about one's good fortune if one finds that in this case one is at least intermittently convinced of the truth of what one wants to be true.

To meet this objection, it would be necessary to vindicate a very strong principle about the connection between explanation and truth. One would have to suppose, not merely some such principle as that if  $p$  describes experience then  $p$  is good evidence for  $q$  only if  $q$  is entailed by the best explanation of  $p$ , but also that if  $q$  does not describe experience, then it is good evidence for not- $q$  that  $q$  is not entailed by the best explanation of any propositions that do describe experience. And that

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 68–69.

<sup>9</sup> F. Jackson, *Perception* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 123.

seems like pure dogmatism. It looks as if writers who have taken the line I am criticizing have just not bothered to consider whether or not we actually want the truth of the propositions about simple colours for which, as they rightly argue, we have no good evidence.

#### 5. Further Problems

I do not claim that adjustment to logic and reality is in every respect easy, so far as colours are concerned, even for someone who does believe that things are simply coloured when not perceived. If reflection leads us to want things to be coloured in this way, it may also lead us to want *justification* for believing that this is the case. And even on modest assumptions about what in general we want in the way of justified belief, we cannot get justified belief in the truth of our desideratum about simple colours. It may also be that, in addition to wanting things to have simple colours, we want actually to see that they have these colours. But may we believe this? If seeing involves a causal relation between the seer and what he sees, how would the causation involved in veridical perception of the simple colours of things relate to the causal mechanism postulated in orthodox scientific explanations of colour experience, explanations which do not suppose that simple colours are possessed either by light rays or by the objects external to the perceiver by which light rays are reflected on to the retina? If we insist that there is such a thing as the veridical perception of simple colours, then the only way of preventing the causal process involved in it from being totally anomalous would be to treat the orthodox scientific theory of perception in an instrumentalist way, and say that while simply coloured things exist independently of being experienced, the entities postulated by the scientific theory are fictional: we can predict the course of experience if we suppose that it elapses as it would if light rays and the objects which reflect them really existed. Nothing impels us to take this step, until we can identify, as I have not tried to do, a reason for wanting it to be true that we actually *see* the simple colours of independent entities, as distinct from wanting it to be true that they *have* simple colours. But there may in any case be a certain attraction in dissociating the exigencies of prediction from the ontology we want to be true. Kantians would abolish scientific realism to make room for the postulates of practical reason. But they will never convince everyone that transcendental realism excludes freedom or even eternal justice. Perhaps it is time to consider instead how empirical knowledge must be if it is to coexist harmoniously with the postulates of a non-formal theory of value, postulates on which simple colours reign, perhaps even as seen to reign, in mind-independent reality as much as in 'quality space'.