

STROUD'S QUEST FOR REALITY

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Barry Stroud begins his investigation into the metaphysics of colour with a discussion of the elusiveness of the genuinely philosophical quest for reality. He insists upon a distinction between two ways in which the idea of a correspondence between perceptions or beliefs and the facts may be understood: first, as equivalent to the plain truth of the perceptions/beliefs in question; second, as conveying the metaphysical reality of the corresponding features of the world. I begin by voicing some suspicion about this distinction. Then I go on to consider various aspects of his central argument against the likelihood of any successful unmasking explanation in connection with colour. The final moves of this argument seem to me to be unstable. Either his conclusion that the unmasker's overall strategy is self-defeating is stronger than is warranted, or his insistence that no conclusive result is established in connection with the fundamental quest for reality is unduly cautious, depending on how precisely the dependence, which he rightly insists upon, of the identification of perceptions of colour upon some identification of colour properties themselves, is to be taken.

There is an everyday sense in which beliefs and perceptions may critically be assessed. I measure my desk to check whether it is really 80 cm wide as I believe; and I take a shirt out of artificial lighting to confirm whether it is really the shade of blue which it appears. Certainly the metaphysical issue concerning the reality of colours is not to be

decided in the same way; but Stroud's claim is stronger. He thinks that that issue concerns a quite different notion of correspondence, not to be equated with the plain truth of beliefs and perceptions as this is involved in such everyday cases. As he says,

the philosophical project cannot be understood as the straightforward investigation of how things are. It does not ask simply which of our beliefs are true or worthy of acceptance. To find in the special philosophical way that there is nothing in reality corresponding to a particular belief is not simply to find the belief false or epistemically wanting... the philosophical project aims to reveal a different kind of deficiency or lack of correspondence in a belief. (p. 20, my emphasis)

Call the proponent of the view that colours are in the relevant sense metaphysically real, the realist about colours; call her opponent the anti-realist. Stroud's claim is not in line with my understanding of the orthodox anti-realist position, on which colour perceptions present things in the world as being certain ways which they are not. Thus, colour appearances are all plain false, as is every belief that anything in the world is the way which any colour experience presents it as being. So the deficiency, or lack of correspondence, concerned is nothing other than literal falsity.

It is compatible with this anti-realism to give an account of beliefs expressed using colour words on which many of these are nevertheless true. The idea would be that their truth-conditions require, not that objects should be the ways they are presented as being by colour experiences - none of them ever are - but that they should have, either the disposition to produce those experiences in 'normal observers' in 'normal conditions', or

whatever physical constitution actually grounds that disposition. Perceptual and belief contents may then be aligned by regarding colour experiences, not as intrinsically presentational of worldly properties, but as blank sensations, extrinsically endowed with representational powers in virtue of standing as ‘natural signs’ for their normal causes.¹ On that view, both colour perceptions and colour beliefs normally correspond with reality, in the simple sense of being true. Still, the view retains a strong case to be regarded a form of anti-realism. This has nothing to do with a failure of correspondence in the sense of plain truth; nor is it to be characterized as a failure of any other kind of ‘correspondence’. It is rather to be brought out by means of a contrast in directions of explanation with respect to the individuation of perceptions of colour and the colours of things. Compare the case of shapes. The most basic distinctions are between squareness and circularity, say, as properties of things in the world, Having first identified which property squareness is, we may then identify perceptions of squareness as those which present something as having that property. On the current view concerning colour, the direction of explanation is the reverse. The most basic distinctions are between experiences of redness and experiences of greenness, say, conceived as blank sensations. Having made such distinctions, we may then define a property – redness – which applies to mind-independent objects, as that of being disposed to produce those experiences – red-type ones – or as the property of having whatever physical constitution actually grounds that disposition. Thus, although, the colours are perfectly real, in the sense that representations of objects as coloured, both in perception and belief, are frequently plain true, they are nevertheless essentially mind-dependent. They are individuated by relation

¹ See Ayers (1991, Pt. I, esp. ch. 7), for discussion of this idea, both in Locke, and in its own right.

to colour experiences, whose own individuation is explanatorily basic. In this sense, colours are not features of the world as it is anyway, independent of experiential perspective upon it.²

So, in the sense in which the realism/anti-realism debate is to be characterized by appeal to a notion of correspondence between colour perceptions/beliefs and reality, this is nothing other than the notion of plain truth. In the sense in which this notion is not to the point, no more puzzling notion of correspondence is relevant either. The debate is rather to be identified by means of a contrast in directions of explanation with respect to the individuation of perceptions of colour and the colours of things.

Stroud's central argument against the unmasker of colours is rich and complex. The unmasker aims to provide a complete explanation of all of our colour experiences and beliefs on the assumption that the world as it is in itself contains no coloured objects, and therefore to conclude that nothing we take to give us reason to believe that things are really coloured does any such thing; so parsimony demands an anti-realist stance. Stroud's scepticism revolves around two questions. First, what is presupposed by the unmasker's acknowledgement of the existence of the full range of colour experiences and beliefs? Second, what is required by her provision of a satisfactory explanation of their occurrence? An initial premise of the argument is that these explananda cannot be identified in purely physical terms, in part because it is unclear how properly to delineate

² I do not wish to endorse the current account, but rather to bring out the way in which a form of anti-realism about colours may be characterized by appeal to this contrast in directions of individuation explanation.

physical terms, but also because, on any plausible such delineation, physical terms are not upto the job. I accept this premise for the sake of the subsequent argument, although it may be thought to rest upon an overly demanding conception of what is involved in a purely physical identification of the relevant psychological explananda. Let us accept that full semantic reduction is not possible. The physicalist must claim instead that the facts of colour perception and belief obtain in virtue of the obtaining of certain purely physical facts. Stroud objects that only ground for this claim is a prior argument for exhaustive physicalism, and in any case, the notion of one set of facts obtaining in virtue of another is obscure. It is true that if the physicalism for which prior argument is required concerns, not just psychological facts, but also facts about the colours of objects, then this would render the unmasking strategy otiose. There are arguments for physicalism with respect to folk psychology alone, though; and, even if none so far proposed is fully satisfactory, there are also relatively well worked out attempts to explicate the ‘in virtue of’ claim which such physicalism endorses. So perhaps the initial premise should be taken as a challenge to the unmasker, rather than a thesis which she must accept.

Stroud’s next step is to argue that no satisfactory explanation of colour perceptions and beliefs can be given in purely physical terms. He assumes that any such explanation must make it intelligible why the cited physical explanans produces precisely the psychological explanandum which it does, in the sense that it must be possible a priori to see why just that colour experience or belief - the experience of redness, say - is produced by the particular physical events and process purportedly explanatory of it. This is the intelligibility which Locke insists upon, for example, in the smith’s appreciation,

without trial or experiment, that “the turning of one Key will open a Lock, and not the turning of another” (1975, IV.iii.25). Given Stroud’s initial premise, that the relevant psychological explanandum cannot be identified in purely physical terms, he rightly claims that this condition cannot be met by any purely physical explanans. Why must the unmasker accept the intelligibility condition, though? Hume regards all causal explanations as brute and unintelligible in this sense (1975, VII, and 1978, I.iii). It is only the habits of mind induced by repeated exposure to the relevant successions which give us some feeling of appropriateness or necessity in the relation between cause and effect, which are, in our basic conceptions of them entirely independent events without any a priori connection at all. So Stroud’s case would be significantly strengthened by some principled reason to reject this Humean account of explanations of colour perceptions and belief.

The dialectic here is extremely delicate. For the intelligibility condition, applied to the explanation of colour experiences, is plausibly equivalent to the denial of the unmasker’s principal thesis: surely the only way to meet it is by characterizing perceptions of colour as certain relations to specific colour properties of worldly things, experiences of redness, say, being those which present something as being just that way, namely red. This is to model the relation between perceptions of colour and the colours of things on that I sketched earlier in connection with shapes; and it really does provide a genuine intelligibility, just as it is plain to see why square things should produce experiences of squareness, say. The approach is anathema to the unmasker, though. For it assumes, in its characterization of colour perceptions, the possibility of reference to

colours as properties of worldly objects. Conversely, one might formulate the second form of anti-realism canvassed above as the thesis that, in contrast with the case of shapes, there is no intelligible connection between the physical constitution of coloured things and the colour perceptions which they produce. So Stroud cannot simply assume that the intelligibility condition applies here, and any positive argument for its application may render his criticism of the unmasking unnecessary, by providing a direct argument for realism.

Let us return to Stroud's first question about unmasking: what is presupposed by the acknowledgement of the existence of colour experiences and beliefs? Focus on colour perceptions. According to the initial premise, these may not be identified in purely physical terms; and, on pain of self-defeat, they may not be identified by reference to colour properties of worldly things. Stroud divides the remaining options into two categories: those on which perceptions of colour are thought of as simple sensations, with no intrinsic representational properties; and those on which colour perceptions are construed as intrinsically representational.

He argues that the sensational conception is objectionable for at least two reasons. First, there is no satisfactory characterization of the similarities and differences between colour sensations. That is to say, it is not possible to give an acceptable account of what all and only red-type sensations, say, have in common. Second, the sensational conception is incapable properly of capturing all the interrelations between different kinds of colour perception, or between perceptions of colour and colour beliefs. For the

sake of what follows, I shall go along with this, although there are points which may be made against each of his objections. The first rests on an assumption that it must be possible to give a substantive account of what it is in virtue of which all the members of a given kind belong together as members of that kind, other than simply that they are all of that kind: red-type sensations, in this case. Why must we accept this? His second objection certainly constitutes a challenge, but, as it stands, falls short of any argument that this cannot be met.

Against the second, representational, conception of colour experiences, Stroud argues along the following lines that this commits its proponent to beliefs about the colours of mind-independent objects which are inconsistent with the conclusion of the unmasking strategy. Perceptions are supposed to be characterized in terms of the ways which they represent the world as being. The range of such ways of representing the world which make sense, and are therefore available for the characterization of perceptions, is constrained by the theorist's own conception of the way the world is, by his beliefs about how things are out there. Thus, he is capable of acknowledging the existence of his own and others' colour experiences only if he actually believes that things in the world have the properties which they represent, namely colours. So the unmasker's recognition of the existence of colour perceptions rules out his rationally arriving at the desired conclusion that these are best to be explained on the assumption that nothing in the world is really coloured. The unmasking strategy is therefore self-defeating: it is not possible coherently to combine belief in the existence of its acknowledged explananda with belief in the truth of its conclusion. This does not, in

Stroud's view, entail the positive conclusion that colours as presented in perception are genuine properties of worldly things. Rather, it forces us to recognize that one strategy for arguing that colours are not features of the world is unsuccessful.

This argument strikes me as unstable. Either the dependence of the individuation of colour perceptions upon the idea of specific properties of worldly things is perfectly compatible with the unmasker's overall strategy, or it actually entails a positive result for the realist in the quest for reality: colour properties as presented in experience are genuine features of mind-independent things.

Stroud's distinction between sensational and representational conceptions of colour perceptions corresponds, in my view, to that explicated above between the secondary and primary quality models. Indeed, I think that this is the clearest way to articulate the basic contrast between experiences as mind-dependent objects of awareness, which may or may not be endowed with extrinsic representational properties, and experiences as mind-dependent awarenesses of potentially mind-independent objects, intrinsically representational of such things, and only to be identified as the mental phenomena which they are as such. On the sensational account, then, distinctions between red-type and green-type colour experiences, and so on, are basic, and made entirely independently of any consideration of what the worldly correlates of such experiences may be. This is what it is for colour perceptions to be intrinsically non-representational mental objects. The whole point of the representational approach, on the other hand, is to characterize perceptions of colour in terms of the properties which they

intrinsically represent things as having, which worldly colour properties must therefore be individuatively basic, redness being distinguished from greenness, say, without any essential reference to the colour experiences which such properties normally produce. On this view, it is only possible to say which mental occurrence a given colour perception is by mentioning a specific such colour property which it represents. So there is, as Stroud insists, a dependence of the identification of perceptions of colour upon some identification of colour properties themselves.

Now, I can see just two ways in which this dependence may work. First, the theorist's identification of colour perceptions depends upon her possession of some more-or-less coherent conception of what it would be for things in the world to be the colours such perceptions present them as being. No doubt this conception derives in the first instance from her own possession of the colour perceptions in question, which no doubt also give rise to her own pretheoretical beliefs that some things at least in the world are just those ways. Still, her possession of the conception itself is quite independent of whether anything in the world actually is, or is even believed by her to be, any such way. Thus it is perfectly possible for her to retain her conception of what it would be for things in the world to be coloured, even after her discovery of an unmasking explanation of the production of her and others' colour perceptions and beliefs, which in turn requires the rejection of her own and others' pretheoretical beliefs that things in the world actually are coloured. She retains sufficient understanding of what it would be for them to be so to identify her own and others' perceptions which present them as being so, but has an explanation of the production in her and others of those perceptions which leads her to

the conclusion that nothing in the world actually is like that at all: all colour perceptions and beliefs are in fact false. On this construal of the dependence, there is, so far as I can see, no difficulty of principle in carrying out the unmasking strategy.

Second, the dependence of the identification of perceptions of colour upon the identification of colour properties themselves may consist in the fact that colour perceptions are essentially individuated as the subject's responses to particular properties of things in the world. Thus, the theorist's identification of her own and others' colour perceptions depends upon her successful reference to those very properties which things out there actually have. If this is the way the dependence works, then the unmasker's project is clearly hopeless. This is not because her identification of the relevant explananda requires her belief that her own desired conclusion is false, as Stroud suggests, in such a way that no conclusive result can be reached either way in connection with the quest for reality itself. The claim that things are really coloured remains, in his view, as it was to begin with: except perhaps in moments of peculiar philosophical reflection, we all believe that it is true; but nothing whatsoever has been done to give it any kind of transcendental proof or refutation. Rather, my second construal of the dependence actually entails a positive result for the realist in connection with the fundamental quest. It is a datum that we have perceptions of colour at least. These can only be identified as the particular mental phenomena which they are by making successful reference to the colour properties of things in the non-mental world: perceptions of colour are essentially relations between perceiving subjects and the colour properties of the objects in the world around them. Thus, things in the world really are

coloured. Many of our colour perceptions and beliefs are plain true, and commonsense realism about colour is vindicated.

References

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