

*The Quest for Reality: Subjectivism and the Metaphysics of Colour*, by Barry Stroud. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xv + 228. P/b £16.00.

As the title suggests, *The Quest for Reality* deals with grand themes. Stroud uses debates about the nature and existence of colour as a lens through which to consider questions about the nature of reality, our relationship to it, and the scope of philosophical enquiry. *The Quest for Reality* embodies a particular conception of how philosophy should be done: patiently, with attention to detail but keeping an eye on the bigger picture, and without pandering to philosophical fashion. It is a book that demands careful reading: the argument develops gradually, there are few signposts for the reader of the direction it will take, and the relationship of the material to the recent philosophical literature is mostly implicit; references are mainly to greats such as Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and recent greats such as Wittgenstein, Williams, and Davidson. However, the rewards of engaging with the material are ample. Published in 2000, and drawing on Locke Lectures delivered in 1987, the ideas that Stroud develops remain fresh and important, even a quarter of a century after the material on which the book is based was first presented. This is essential reading for anyone interested in philosophical discussions of colour, but the general challenges it poses for the possibility of philosophical enquiry are of much wider interest.

The titular ‘quest for reality’ is the philosophical enquiry into the nature of reality as it is independent of our experiences and beliefs about it. The debate about whether physical objects are coloured, and if so what colours are, provides a paradigmatic example of this type of philosophical enquiry. At least since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, some form of distinction between primary and secondary qualities has come to seem like ‘nothing more than scientifically enlightened common sense’ (p. 9). In particular, it has become commonplace to assume that it is possible to ‘unmask’ our experiences and beliefs about colour, by explaining away appearances of colour as mere appearances, and explaining away beliefs about colours as systematically false (p. 75). In contrast, Stroud argues that substantiating these *philosophical* claims—which go beyond anything found in scientific theory itself—is far more difficult than it might appear.

The first four chapters of the book consider the difficulties arriving at a sufficiently determinate conception of an independent reality, such that we could discover that colours have no place within it. Stroud argues that we cannot hold our perceptions and beliefs up against the world and assess their correspondence directly, as we can a picture with its subject. We therefore need to work from within, and carve out a privileged sub-set of perceptions and beliefs that represent the world as it is independent of us (p. 27). However, it is not a trivial matter to identify a determinate conception of reality that is of just the right grain: that is sufficiently austere to exclude colours, but not so austere as to exclude seemingly ‘objective’ entities like shapes, numbers, planets, and

fish. Specifically, Stroud argues that neither an ‘absolute’ conception of the world (Chapter 2), nor a ‘physical’ conception of the world (Chapters 3 and 4), provides unambiguous support for the unmasker’s conclusion.

Subsequent chapters consider the complex psychological phenomena—the various inter-related forms of perception and thought—that constitute the explanandum of the unmasking strategy, and the problems for those engaging in the philosophical quest of even acknowledging the relevant psychological facts. Chapter 6 considers the suggestion that the connection between colour perception and thought is ‘indirect’: that in thought we do not ascribe to physical objects the very same properties that we perceive, either because colour perception is purely sensational and so non-intentional, or because colour perception is intentional but represents properties of something other than physical objects (such as sense-data or a private visual field). This view of the relationship between perception and thought fits neatly with traditional dispositional theories of colour. Such theories do not entail the unmasking conclusion that our ordinary beliefs about colour are systematically false, as on these views physical objects are disposed to produce the appropriate psychological responses in the appropriate subjects (p. 119). However, colours at least turn out to be subjective, by virtue of being constitutively dependent on colour perceptions (p. 124).

As Stroud emphasises, the views of colour perception that are consistent with an indirect connection between colour perception and thought about colour are far from natural. However, less convincingly, he argues that if colour perceptions are identifiable independently of the colours of physical objects, then dispositional theories are unable to accommodate what appear to be genuine possibilities: for instance, that yellow objects might look blue, or that blue objects might look yellow. Stroud assumes that on the dispositional view, a change in the perceptions that objects are disposed to produce would bring with it a change in their colours. But dispositionalists often rigidify the description of the perceivers and conditions in terms of which the disposition to appear coloured is identified to avoid just this problem. Although Stroud considers the rigidification manoeuvre, he seems to suppose that a rigidified description can only serve to fix reference to an independent (objective) property (p. 135), rather than specifying the essential nature of a (subjective) dispositional property itself. Though suggestive, Stroud’s arguments against this way of reaching a subjectivist conclusion about the nature of colour are therefore incomplete.

The most interesting chapter of the book (Chapter 7) argues against the possibility of pursuing the unmasking strategy assuming (as is more natural) that the connection between perception and thought is ‘direct’: that the properties about which we have beliefs are the very same properties that we perceive. Stroud argues that having experiences of, and beliefs about, the colours of physical objects, are necessary conditions of identifying the psychological phenomena that the unmasker attempts to explain away: to even recognise the relevant experiences and beliefs, either in others or

oneself, presupposes the possession of psychological attitudes that are inconsistent with the unmasking conclusion. As such, the unmasking project requires a simultaneous engagement with, and detachment from, our beliefs about colour, that is no more possible than consistently asserting 'I believe that it is raining, and it is not raining' (p. 204).

But from the failure of the unmasking project, Stroud does not think we can conclude that colours *really* do exist. A positive answer to the metaphysical question of the reality of colour, no less than a negative answer, presupposes the possibility of occupying a detached perspective from which to assess the fidelity of our beliefs (p. 192). Moreover, even if certain psychological attitudes towards non-psychological reality are necessary conditions for the ascription of psychological attitudes to oneself and others, it does not follow that these psychological facts themselves have non-psychological necessary conditions (pp. 193-203). Stroud's position therefore is not a form of 'naive realism' or 'primitivism', if these terms refer to philosophical theories that are intended to answer philosophical questions. For Stroud, it is true in a quite ordinary ('internal') sense that lemons are yellow, just as it is true in a quite ordinary sense that the number 4 bus runs every 10 minutes throughout the day. But we cannot conclude that lemons are *really* yellow in any philosophically interesting ('external') sense. Somewhat dispiritingly, it seems that we have an almost pathological urge to ask a metaphysical question that we are unable to answer.

Whether this pessimism is warranted raises interesting and important questions. On the one hand, colour realists seem better placed to engage in the metaphysical enquiry than unmaskers. First, realists do not deny the truth of the beliefs about non-psychological reality that, according to Stroud, are necessary conditions of recognising the relevant psychological phenomena; realists insist that these beliefs are generally true, and attempt to discover what makes them so. Second, it is controversial whether there are in fact no non-psychological necessary conditions for experiences of, and beliefs about, colour. Dispositional theories of colour (against which Stroud's arguments are inconclusive) would provide one way of forging a necessary connection (p. 198). A relational theory of perception (such as a naive realist theory of perception), according to which perceptions of colour are themselves constitutively dependent on properties of physical objects, might provide another. Third, even if there are no non-psychological necessary conditions for the relevant psychological phenomena, the existence of colours might still be the best explanation of the psychological facts.

On the other hand, Stroud's arguments against the possibility of unmasking explanations are somewhat elusive. It is tempting to reply that the unmasker's position must be possible, because it is actual: there have been, and still are, many people who believe that physical objects are not coloured. This is perhaps no more (but also no less) plausible than G.E. Moore's response to the sceptic: that we can know the external world exists, because here is one hand, and here is another. Still, Stroud's attempt to unmask

the unmasker—to explain away their meta-cognitive belief that they believe that ordinary colour ascriptions are false—itself threatens to fall foul of plausible principles of psychological interpretation. Unmaskers certainly *seem*, from what they say and write, to believe that physical objects are not really coloured. Besides, it is not clear that the unmasker's predicament is quite as precarious as Stroud suggests. For instance, it is not clear that the engagement with, and detachment from, our beliefs about colour that the unmasking project requires differs essentially from assuming the truth of a proposition for the purposes of *reductio ad absurdum*. As long as we understand what it would be for physical objects to be coloured—the hypothesis is one that we can entertain, like the hypotheses that there are ghosts, witches, or phlogiston—then we seem able to ascribe beliefs about colours, and find these beliefs to be false.

Whether the philosophical quest for reality is ultimately possible requires much more serious consideration of the formidable arguments in this rich and thought-provoking book than is possible here. Whatever the outcome, *The Quest for Reality* serves as a valuable reminder of how difficult philosophical enquiry really is.

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