

## **Tony Chadwick Prize 2006 Runner-up: Brenda Johnson**

### **Is there an Error Involved in the Way in Which we Typically Attribute Colour Properties to Objects?**

The alleged error is that we tend to think that colour is in the object of perception in the same way as size and shape are in the object; so, for example, we perceive the rusts and browns of autumn leaves to be just as much a part of the leaves as the curved shape. The small, light objects floating down from the trees would not be autumn leaves to us if they were not coloured. They present as complete, and we typically accept this presentation as fact. The claim is that, in this, we are mistaken; although the size and shape are actually in the leaf, the colour (of it) is but a power (to use Locke's term) in the leaf to produce a sensation of colour in a being capable of that sensation. There has to be this reaction for the colouring-in to take place, so the property of colour is mind-dependent - its being coloured is its having a disposition to appear coloured. It follows that what makes a leaf brown is its looking brown to standardly-sighted observers in normal conditions of visibility.

I will argue that if our common-sense intuitions tell us that colour is mind-independent, that is, an intrinsic property of objects, then common-sense is in error; however, because a colour potential is objectively there waiting, as it were, for a perceiver to relate to, our normal experience of colour is a true experience. Firstly I will outline Locke's classic distinction between secondary and primary qualities, then look at ways in which Mackie and Evans support the claim that colour is not an intrinsic property of objects. I will then examine McGinn's view that the supposed mismatch between perception and analysis does not mean that we make an error.

John Locke (1) distinguishes between an object's secondary qualities - its colour, taste, sound, smell and feel to us, and its primary qualities which include its size, shape, solidity, motion/rest, number and texture. Secondary qualities are nothing but powers in the object, issuing from its primary qualities, to cause ideas of colour etc in our minds; we are wrong if we think secondary qualities are intrinsic properties of objects (sec 24-25). Locke explains that porphyry (a hard stone) seems to lose its red and white colour in the dark. In fact the particles in the stone (primary) are so configured that, when light rebounds from them, some produce the idea of redness, some of whiteness (sec 19). Those ideas bear no resemblance to anything actually in the object. By implication, our ideas of primary qualities (or how they standardly appear) are true resemblances - a curved leaf standardly appears curved because it is curved, whereas it is brown because it standardly appears brown.

John Mackie (2), has no doubt that when most people say a thing is a particular colour, they commonly believe that the colour is there in the thing rather than being only a description of the colour sensation they are experiencing, and that they make an error if they do so. He asks what would justify a view that colour (say) were a primary quality. Physics would need to provide a theory which would replace or add to existing explanations (Locke's and others), a theory which would postulate colour as having the structure of a primary quality. We would also need reasons for claiming that people saw the same colour because it was the colour that was there, that brownness-as-we-see-it was veridical. However, as the current theory adequately explains how colour works, there is good reason, following the philosophical principle known as Ockham's Razor, not to postulate brownness-as-we-see-it as an

intrinsic property of a leaf (say), because there is no need to do so - we would be multiplying entities beyond necessity (pp19-20).

So both Locke and Mackie think that colour is dispositional and that we deceive ourselves - we do typically attribute colour properties to objects. However Mackie's argument in favour of simplicity seems to suggest that if we were required to, we could postulate colour as a primary quality and, consequently, common-sense might not be wrong. Gareth Evans (3) questions the notion that brownness-as-we-see-it could be an intrinsic property of an object at all, a property which would be there even though unseen, in the dark, for example (pp 272-274). How would we know it was there? How can an intense phenomenological experience exist without our experience? Switch on the light and you only get - looks brown. You find out that it was, in the dark, disposed to look brown in this light - brownness as disposition can exist unperceived. One could argue that colour is in an unperceived object because if the object were observed in standard conditions, it would appear coloured. I think Evans would agree; his point is that to try to imagine colour-as-we-see-it unseen, is to stretch imagination too far.

Colin McGinn (4) agrees with Locke, Mackie and Evans that colour is dispositional, but he does not agree with an error theory (pp132-137). He asks what is it that carries colour, after all we are seeing something; perhaps it is an intermediate item, a sense-datum - a sort of mental thing similar to Locke's 'Idea'. This could be described as a representational theory of perception. If we adopted this theory we could keep the dispositional account of colour and not be mistaken in what we see.

The sense-datum is the thing which looks coloured. However, McGinn sets up this argument only to reject it. We wanted to explain why the leaf (again, my example) in (a) looking brown to us, does not look like what it is, that is, (b) a disposition to produce a brown (leaf) experience in us. But why should it? The context of (a), the leaf looks brown, is, according to McGinn, an intensional context.

At this point, I think it is important to spell out what is meant by "intensional", and I can do no better than to summarize an example given by Tim Crane (5) in his *Elements of Mind* (p11):

(1): Dorothy believes that Vladimir is taller than George Orwell.

(2): George Orwell = Eric Blair.

(3): Dorothy believes that Vladimir is taller than Eric Blair.

(1) and (2) could be true, but (3) false. (1) together with (2) do not entail (3) because Dorothy may not know of an 'Eric Blair' or that it is George Orwell's real name, that is, she may not believe - that Vladimir is taller than Eric Blair. Sentence (1) is in intensional context. 'George Orwell' and 'Eric Blair' refer to the same man, but the two names may mean different things - each have a different sense - to Dorothy.

To be a brown leaf, the leaf must standardly look brown; an experience which is intensely phenomenological (as Evans has argued), and we cannot infer (b) from (a) even though they refer to the same thing - (a) cannot be substituted truth-preservingly by (b). To illustrate, McGinn gives the example of looking polite. Just as brownness is analysed as a disposition of an object to make it look brown to us, politeness is analysed as a form of generally approved behaviour. Looking polite - when someone behaves politely - phenomenologically does not look like a form of generally approved behaviour, even though it is. Similarly, an object's looking brown to us does

not look like its disposition to make it look brown to us, even though it is. 'Looks' creates an intensional context. That brown-as-we-see-it is a disposition of a leaf to cause the sensation of brown in us, does not imply that when the leaf looks brown to us, it must look like a disposition ... The way it is presented in experience (as with 'George Orwell') is different to the way it is presented in analysis (as with 'Eric Blair'), even though the two have the same reference. McGinn draws a parallel with indexical thoughts whereby, for example, 'I', 'here', 'now' are perceptual perspectives. Both secondary quality ascriptions and indexical thought expressions deal with subjective impressions of the world (pp21-22).

When I watch the falling, autumn leaves I see them from my particular point of view which depends on factors such as where I am standing and where the light is. On a grey day they probably appear to me to be uniformly grey, whereas if the day were sunny, the same leaves may deliver all the colours which autumn leaves are famous for. The colours are never going to look dispositional.

McGinn himself, in a footnote (p136), expresses unease about his still-abiding idea that a leaf (say) does look intrinsically brown - as if it were a primary quality. If a sense-datum intermediary object of perception is to be avoided (many philosophers now think that this is advisable), and if we think the colour is intrinsic to the object rather than intrinsically relational to us, we 'may' need to admit to an error. McGinn wishes he could say that despite the fact that the leaf looks intrinsically brown but is not, our perception is not illusory. While not exactly contradicting his main thesis, he does here seem to be casting doubt on it.

Mackie's error theory holds that we typically attribute colour-as-we-see-it to objects, when we should correctly take objects to possess powers-to-produce-colour-as-we-see-it: (a) colour-as-we-see-it and (b) colour-as-dispositional are two different referents. On the other hand, McGinn argues that they are the same referent. An analysis of the ascription of brownness to a leaf can be expressed as:

'the leaf is brown if and only if it standardly appears brown'.

The brown-ness of the leaf is the disposition to cause it to appear brown-as-we-see-it, and, it is claimed, we typically interpret brown-as-we-see-it to be an intrinsic quality of the leaf (which it is not). It seems, therefore, that, on this analysis, our interpretation must be in error. However I veer more towards McGinn's position with his expressed doubts, rather than towards a committed error theory. I will argue that colour perception is subjective to individual observers, and that typically we do not attribute colour properties to objects.

My seeing the falling leaves as brown is essentially a personal experience. The scientific theory about the dispositional quality of colour, in effect, states that, necessarily, colour is an experience, and that a particular colour ascription to an object is a matter of the personal experiences of standardly-sighted observers in normal conditions of visibility agreeing. It all lies within the confines of a personal colour experience which comes, not in isolation, but together with the object's primary qualities, for example, the lightness, the shape, the floating down qualities of the leaf.

One is immediately aware of a colour's 'belonging' to a particular object. One can hear a sound or smell something, and then realise to what it relates; but with colour, there is no delay in relating it to an object. It is difficult to just see colours without them being sized, shaped, numbered - this is how we differentiate one colour from another. We do see patterns of colour and haphazard shades - the sky, the sea, for

example, which sometimes appear without a background contrast, but we already know the intimate mirror relation between these two phenomena; so colour experience is always situated in a context. This context includes other factors which are subjective to the observer. I have mentioned the perspective of a position in space vis-à-vis where the light falls; there are also the matters of one's state of awareness and one's expectation.

We sometimes talk about being in a 'grey' mood and this, in turn, colours how we see things, literally and metaphorically, and we are aware that our state of mind is affecting the nature of perception. We do not think that the leaves are intrinsically grey even though they may appear so. This may be contrasted with our perception of shape (a primary quality) which does not change with our moods. I think we are aware of our 'error' not only in respect of our colour-as-we-see-it ascription but also in respect of the fact that it seems to be a property of the thing we are looking at. Just because something seems to be a certain way to us does not mean that we do not intuit a possible illusion. The appreciation of art relies heavily on the various ways in which colour is perceived. Some colours 'jump out at you', some seem 'in your face', some seem to sink through and out of the back of the painting. A picture which is all white or all black, that is, arguably, no colour, is still a colour experience because absence of colour is so unexpected and, therefore, as symbolic as colour itself.

We confront the world with expectations of all kinds. I see a leaf which looks brown to me. 'Brown' is a symbol for a colour which I have seen before and which has been verified by others. When I use the term 'brown' I am already understanding that 'brown' is a standard way of describing a particular colour experience; I know how it is used. If I had not learnt this I would still see a colour but I would not know to label it 'brown'. So what I refer to when I say 'the leaf looks brown' is both how the leaf appears to me at this time - that my experience matches my previous experience, and that 'brown' is a standardly understood description of this colour. (If I am colour blind I will be unable to match my experience with the standard experience.)

Of course, the question of what is normal - what is standard - is frequently asked about human life generally, and I would say that this shows the rather unsatisfactory nature of the dispositional analysis of colour. My point is that the standard is made up of subjective experiences mitigated by various factors which make each experience the experience it is. We are aware, and I think typically aware, of these influences on colour perception. We are also aware that our perception of primary qualities is not influenced in the same way. I would argue that we notice colour first and the shape, size etc seem to be behind the colour. We intuit a separation between colour and object, yet we know they are connected; that is why we talk of objects being coloured.

A metaphor for the underlying metaphysical structure of colour suggested by Robert Boyle and quoted by Anthony Kenny (6) seems apt:

the secondary qualities are keys which fit particular locks, the locks being the different human senses.

## Notes

- (1) An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Book ii Chapter viii (2) Problems From Locke Chapter 1
- (3) Things Without the Mind pp 272-274 (4) The Subjective View pp 132-137
- (5) Elements of Mind p 11
- (6) Descartes to Kant, The Oxford Illustrated History of Western Philosophy p135

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- Mackie, J.L. *Problems From Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976)
- McGinn, Colin *The Subjective View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983)