

# 11

## Colour, Transparency, Mind-Independence

*Michael Smith*

John Campbell proposes a simple view of colour.<sup>1</sup> He claims that colours are: (i) 'mind-independent' properties of objects (p. 258), (ii) 'the grounds of the dispositions of objects to produce experiences of colour' (p. 258), and (iii) properties whose 'real nature is . . . transparent to us' in colour experience (p. 258). I want to focus on three issues raised by Campbell's proposal.

### 1. The Simple View of Colour

Campbell admits that (iii) would be inconsistent with (i) if we were to embrace the ordinary idea that a mind-independent feature of reality is one that would be mentioned in an 'absolute' or 'objective' description of the world, a description we could understand after abstracting away entirely from our own points of view. But his response is to deny that mind-independence requires any such thing. What, then, does Campbell say mind-independence does require?

In fact he makes two suggestions. First, he tells us:

The view of colours as mind-independent must acknowledge some role for colours in colour-perception. I shall equate this view with the thesis that they are to be thought of as the grounds of the dispositions of objects to produce experiences of colour. (p. 258)

On this construal, (i) entails (ii). An argument for (i) would therefore have to be, *inter alia*, an argument for (ii).

Elsewhere, however, he makes a rather different suggestion:

We have to abandon the notion of an 'absolute' or 'objective' description of reality. . . . We need another tack. We have to appreciate how fundamental in our thinking is our grasp of a simple theory of perception. This theory provides us with the idea that our perceptions are caused by a pair of factors: by the way things are in the environment, and by one's meeting the enabling conditions of perception—being in the right place at the right time, suitably receptive, and so on. (p. 260)

The mind-independence of a property of physical things is just a different issue to whether it can figure in an 'absolute' or 'objective' conception of reality: it has to do rather with the embedment of the property in a simple theory of perception. (p. 261)

But what does the 'embedment' of colour 'in a simple theory of perception' amount to? Does it amount to the same as the claim that colour is the ground of the disposition of objects to look coloured?

Campbell's stated view is that it amounts to no more, and no less, than the claim that the perception of a coloured object requires two distinct elements: a coloured object, on the one hand, and a perceiver who meets the enabling conditions of perception, on the other, in a causal relation (p. 261). According to this second suggestion, then, the mind-independence of colour is clinched once we acknowledge that colour is a property of objects that plays a causal role in perception. And now the problem should be clear. For if colour can play a causal role in the perception of coloured objects without being the ground of the disposition of objects to look coloured, then Campbell's second suggestion is weaker than his first. The question will then be whether Campbell can consistently maintain, not now both (i) and (iii), but both (ii) and (iii). Does this problem really loom?

In claiming that colours are the ground of the disposition of objects to look coloured Campbell casts himself as someone who rejects the view that colours are identical with such dispositions themselves. In order to see that Campbell's second suggestion is indeed weaker than his first, it thus suffices that we see why someone who accepts such a dispositional conception of colour may yet accept the claim that colours play a causal role in perception. (This is not yet to admit that we know exactly what it means to say that colours are the 'grounds' of such dispositions. We will raise this question again presently.)

In fact the reason is stated by Campbell himself. According to the dispositionalist, colour is a higher-order property of objects, related in a certain systematic way to the lower-order properties that figure in the 'grounding' explanation of colour experience (pp. 262–3). The dispositionalist can therefore agree with Campbell that what makes an explanation in terms of, say redness, a genuine causal explanation of an experience of redness is the fact that it 'adds modal data to a description of the physical sequence':

It says that in nearby worlds in which the physical character of the thing was varied but its redness maintained, an experience of redness was still the upshot.  
(p. 263)

But if the dispositionalist can, in this way, agree that colours play a causal role in perception while denying that colours are identical with the properties that ground the disposition of objects to look coloured, then he can agree with Campbell that colour is mind-independent in his second sense, and yet deny that it is mind-independent in his first. (Note that this account of the 'explanatoriness' of the explanation of colour experience in terms of colour suggests one way in which we might explain what it is for a property to be the ground of the disposition of objects to look coloured: 'a property is the ground of that

disposition just in case it figures in the appropriate lowest level explanation of colour experience: i.e. the explanation in terms of fundamental physics'.)

We are now in a position to draw together the threads of the discussion thus far. Let's agree that Campbell has successfully argued that colours may play a causal role in the perception of coloured objects even though they are not properties that would be mentioned in an explanation of colour experience at the level of fundamental physics. As such, he has successfully maintained (i), interpreted in accordance with his second suggestion. But if he is to argue for the simple view of colour, he needs to do more. He needs to provide a further argument for (ii), the claim that colours are the ground of the disposition of objects to look coloured. And in doing so he needs to give an account of what he means by the claim that colours 'ground' that disposition, an account consistent with (iii), the claim that the nature of colour is transparent to us in colour experience. (He certainly cannot have in mind the idea just mentioned, that colours figure in the lowest level explanation of colour experience, for that is straightforwardly inconsistent with (iii).) But does Campbell give such an account?

Campbell does not explicitly give an account of what it is for a property to ground such a disposition. However he does offer some hints:

Suppose . . . that a round peg fails to enter a round hole. We explain this by saying the peg and board are made of a rigid material, and that the diameter of the peg is greater than that of the hole. This is not explanation in terms of basic physics, but it is causal explanation. And there is no reason to suppose that the roundness and size of the peg are anything other than categorical properties of it. (p. 263)

Let us first make sure that we understand the hint and then see how it might be exploited.

Campbell is certainly right that being round and a certain size may figure in a causal explanation despite the fact that the roundness and size of the peg and board are not features that figure in explanations at the level of fundamental physics. In order to see that he is right it suffices to note that we can account for the 'explanatoriness' of this causal explanation in the same way that we accounted for the 'explanatoriness' of the causal explanation of colour experience in terms of colours: that is in nearby worlds in which the materials remain rigid and the peg and hole remain constant in shape and size, there is some distribution of atomic particles constituting peg and board that prevents the matter that constitutes the peg from occupying the region of space that constitutes the hole.

Moreover, Campbell is certainly right that we ordinarily classify shape and size as 'categorical' properties of objects, by which I take it he means that we reject out of hand the idea that being a certain shape or size is merely a matter of appearing a certain shape or size to us.<sup>2</sup> We reject that idea out of hand because there exists a particular canonical method for determining the shape and size of an object: namely, by (correctly) measuring its various sides and angles. This guarantees the independence of facts about shape and size from facts about

the appearance objects present to us. There is, of course, no denying that objects do appear to be certain shapes and sizes to us. But that must be understood as, in Crispin Wright's phrase, 'merely a deep fact of experience':

For bluntly, it is not *a priori* true . . . that our (best) judgements of . . . shape, made on the basis of predominantly visual observations, usually 'pan out' when appraised in accordance with more refined techniques, where such are appropriate. . . . It is not *a priori* that the world in which we actually live allows reliable perceptual appraisal of . . . shape—is not, for example, a world in which the paths travelled by photons are subject to grossly distorting influences.<sup>3</sup>

Objects of various shapes and sizes are, then, *de facto*, disposed to appear those shapes and sizes to us under certain conditions. But their being so shaped and sized is what *grounds* the disposition to appear those ways to us. Being so shaped and sized is what *explains* the appearances, and explains the appearances at a *lower* level than the mere having of those dispositions themselves explains the appearances.

Here, then, we have a model for an account of what it is for colours to 'ground' the disposition of objects to look coloured. The idea is to be that colour, just like shape and size, is an ordinary 'categorical' property of an object. That is, though colour is a *higher-order* property than the properties mentioned in the explanation of colour experience at the level of fundamental physics, colour is a *lower-order* property than the disposition of objects to look coloured. Just as with shape and size experience, the explanation of colour experience in terms of the disposition of objects to look coloured supervenes on an explanation of colour experience in terms of a categorical colour property.

This is all well and good, as far as it goes. The problem is, however, that Campbell offers us no reason to think that colour is a categorical property of objects, as opposed to, say, a dispositional property. (Remember, all he has argued so far is that colours may figure in causal explanations. But that doesn't tell us whether colours are categorical or dispositional.) And indeed, once we have a closer look at the model, we might wonder whether such reasons could be given at all.

Remember, what vindicates our ordinary classification of shape and size as categorical properties is the fact that we can canonically determine the shape and size of an object by (correctly) measuring its various sides and angles. It is this that guarantees the independence of facts about shape and size from facts about shape and size appearances. But what is the analogue of this kind of canonical method in the case of colour? More to the point, what is the analogue if the 'real nature' of colour is supposed to be 'transparent' to us in colour experience: that is, if ordinary perception is supposed to be enough to know *which* properties are referred to by our colour terms;<sup>4</sup> if ordinary perception is supposed, in this way, to reveal everything there is to know about the *nature* of colour? There simply is no analogue. Facts about colour thus seem not to be independent of facts about colour appearances in the way required to make the model work.

And this gives rise to a related problem. For if the categoricity of shape and

size is really to provide a model for the categoricity of colour, then it had better be readily intelligible to us how the distribution of properties at the level of fundamental physics *could* constitute such a coloured object, much as it is readily intelligible to us how such a distribution constitutes an object of a certain shape and size. But it is our independent grip on what it is for objects to be a certain shape and size—the fact that we have available a canonical method for determining shape and size, of the kind described—that helps to make the latter constitution claim readily intelligible to us. For we can form a picture of ourselves determining the shape and size of an object by the canonical method, by (correctly) measuring its sides and angles, and we can then, as it were, imagine decomposing that very object, so sized and shaped, into its constituent parts. But if the ‘real nature’ of colour is supposed to be ‘transparent’ to us in experience then, when our project is to understand how a certain distribution of properties at the level of fundamental physics could *constitute* such a coloured object, this sort of intelligibility simply eludes us. We cannot even *begin* to understand the constitution claim.<sup>5</sup>

It might be thought that Campbell’s discussion of the ‘switching’ objection suggests a reply to this line of objection (pp. 266–7). There he concedes that facts about colour are not independent of facts about colour experience. But, he argues, that is not because facts about colour are *constituted* by facts about colour experience. Rather it is because what makes an experience an experience of the particular colour of which it is an experience is the fact that *that* colour is the normal cause of such experiences. And this, he claims, is straightforwardly consistent with the simple view of colour as a categorical property. For the particular categorical colour properties that are the normal causes of our colour experiences *determine* which colours our experiences are experiences of.

However this reply seems to me not to engage with the objection at all. The objection is that we have no understanding of what it would be for colour to be a categorical property of objects in the spirit of the simple view. For that would require that we have some independent grip on what it is for an object to be coloured, an independent grip that simply isn’t to be had if we are also to imagine, as the simple view demands, that the ‘real nature’ of colour is ‘transparent’ to us in colour experience. Campbell’s response to the ‘switching’ objection *presupposes* that we understand what it is for colour to be a categorical property, it doesn’t *provide* us with such an understanding.

In the end, then, it seems to me that the simple view of colour is dubiously coherent. Certainly Campbell’s own hints as to how we might reconcile the claim that the nature of colour is transparent to us in experience with the claim that colour is the ground of the disposition of objects to look coloured leave the matter wide open.

## 2. The Transparency Thesis

So far I have been uncritical of the claim that the ‘real nature’ of colour is ‘transparent’ to us in colour experience. But surely this claim requires some

attention for, at least as we should ordinarily understand it, the claim seems simply false.

Now no doubt there are properties whose real nature seems to be transparent to us in experience. Pain is the obvious example. According to many, at least, a painful experience is both necessary and sufficient for knowledge of which property pain is. However, in the case of pain, such transparency comes as part of a package deal.<sup>6</sup> Not only does a painful experience give us knowledge of which property pain is, we also know that something felt as pain *is* a pain and that something not felt as pain *is not* a pain. Transparency explains these consequences. For once we know which property pain is we know that there is nothing for a pain to do but to manifest itself in experience. There is nothing for an unexperienced pain to be. And nor is there any room for a state that masquerades as pain.

Can the same be said of colours? Is an object that appears to be a certain colour that colour? Is an object that does not appear to be a certain colour not that colour? No. Neither of these consequences follows. There is, after all, the genuine possibility of colour illusion and unperceived colour. But if this is right then it seems that there is something about colour that *is not* manifest to us in colour experience: namely, what it is about colour that makes colour illusion and unperceived colour possible. This is not manifest to us in colour experience because colour experience merely gives us the 'experience' side of the equation, and what we want is an account of why the 'experience' side of the equation may yet be an unreliable indicator of an object's colour. (Note the disanalogy with pain.)

Someone who wants to maintain the transparency thesis in the case of colour thus faces a challenge. He needs to explain why colours and pains are disanalogous, in the respects just mentioned, despite the fact that the transparency thesis holds for both. If the transparency thesis holds for both then why can pains not exist unperceived when colours can? I see no way of answering this challenge. It thus seems to me that we should reject the transparency thesis for colours.<sup>7</sup>

As I understand it, it is thoughts like these that lead the dispositionalist to embrace the dispositional theory and reject the transparency thesis. The dispositionalist agrees that colour experience is required in order to know what colour is. And he agrees that colour experience is the canonical way of determining what colours objects are. (So far colours and pains are on a par.) But he thinks that claims like these exhaust what can plausibly be maintained by someone who says that the real nature of colour is transparent to us in colour experience. And he thinks this because he sees no other way of explaining the possibility of colour illusion and unperceived colour. Thus he offers us the dispositional theory and rejects the transparency thesis. The mere having of colour experience is not enough to know what property colour is—that is that colour is a certain sort of disposition—for that is a distinctively *philosophical* claim made for *philosophical* reasons.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Mind-Independence

Campbell hopes his discussion will have the salutary effect of forcing us to rewrite the distinction between mind-independence and mind-dependence. He wants us to abandon the ordinary idea that a mind-independent feature of reality is one that would be mentioned in a description of reality that we could understand after abstracting away entirely from our own points of view. He wants us to think, instead, that a mind-independent feature of an object is a feature that is causally independent of our minds, a feature that can cause us to have certain perceptual experiences. I want to close with some remarks about this aspiration.

Campbell's reason for rejecting the ordinary idea is that it entails that *particularity*—an object's being the particular thing that it is—is a *mind-dependent* feature of reality. And this, he claims, is simply wrong (p. 259). An object's being the particular thing that it is is a mind-independent feature of reality if anything is. Thus he is led to rewrite the distinction.

Let me say up front that I find Campbell's discussion of our concept of particularity both fascinating and illuminating. However there is something very odd about the conclusion he would have us draw from it. It's a bit like this: troubled by the fact that, by ordinary standards, I am indeed a philistine, I recommend that we redefine 'philistine' to mean 'person who eats dirt'. If we adopt the recommendation, then it turns out that I am not a philistine. But how, exactly, does that recommendation, even if we adopt it, engage with what troubles me? Surely the underlying problem is that I satisfy the ordinary standards for being a philistine, where 'philistine' has its normal meaning. Redefining the word 'philistine' will not help me solve *that* problem. Similarly, it seems to me, Campbell's proposed redefinition of the terms 'mind-independence' and 'mind-dependence' will not help solve the puzzle with our concept of particularity that he has quite rightly brought to our attention. That requires a different kind of response.

Of course, Campbell might have in mind a different point. He might think that the ordinary way of making the distinction between mind-dependence and mind-independence is *uninteresting*. But again, that just seems to me to be wrong. What is interesting about the ordinary distinction is that it tells us something about the *availability* of a concept. It tells us that the concept of colour is *unavailable* to someone who is incapable of visual experience. And it tells us that the concepts of being round, and a certain size, for example, are. That is an interesting conclusion. Now, if Campbell is right, it follows that the concept of particularity is *unavailable* to someone who is not situated in the context of other objects with which he causally interacts. If Campbell is right about this, then surely that is an interesting conclusion to have reached about our concept of particularity.

At this point we should make it explicit that the ordinary distinction between mind-dependence and mind-independence invites us to think of this distinction as a matter of *degree*. Perhaps certain concepts can be understood after a little

abstraction away from our own points of view, but not after a great deal of abstraction. Others may remain intelligible even after a good deal of abstraction. A proper understanding of the distinction would thus require us to be more precise about the *dimensions* along which we are measuring the degree of abstraction-away-from-our-own-points-of-view. But this is, of course, no objection to the distinction—or, at any rate, it isn't yet. Rather it is a plea for us to ensure that we know what we are talking about when we use the distinction. (If no account of the dimensions could be given then that would, of course, be a fatal objection to the distinction. But that doesn't seem to be Campbell's concern.)

The upshot is, I think, this. We can afford to be ecumenical with the ideas of mind-dependence and mind-independence. We can have different distinctions for different purposes. Campbell's distinction enables us to sort concepts into two groups: those that apply to perceptible properties of objects and the rest. The ordinary distinction enables us to sort concepts along a spectrum: at one end we find those that can be understood even after we have wholly abstracted away from our own points of view and at the other we find those that can only be understood from our own points of view.<sup>9</sup> These distinctions can happily co-exist. They enable us to make different distinctions, distinctions appropriate for solving different problems.<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

1. John Campbell, 'A Simple View of Colour', this volume. Unless otherwise stated, all page references are to this paper.

2. Campbell may have in mind the stronger claim that no functional characterization of shape and size would be appropriate. However I see no argument for that claim in his essay (by which I do not mean to imply that I believe the claim to be false). The whole issue of 'categorical' versus 'dispositional' properties seems to me drastically in need of sorting out. For a useful discussion of the issue, see Gareth Evans, 'Things Without the Mind' and Peter Strawson, 'Reply to Evans', both in Zak van Straaten (ed.), *Philosophical Subjects: Essays presented to P. F. Strawson*.

3. Crispin Wright, 'Moral Values, Projection and Secondary Qualities', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume LXII, p. 20.

4. I take this interpretation of the transparency claim from Campbell's discussion of the 'switching' objection (p. 266). Note that his discussion of that objection (pp. 266–7) reveals that, as he understands it, the transparency claim tells us merely that *which* property colour it is manifest to us in colour experience, it does not tell us that *whether* objects have certain colours is manifest to us in colour experience. I consider the plausibility of this distinction in Section 2.

5. See also n. 7 below.

6. Here I consider the plausibility of the distinction described in n. 4.

7. As perhaps the discussion makes clear, since I am attracted to the idea that the nature of pain is transparent to us in pain experience, I find it hard to see how a certain distribution of properties at the level of fundamental physics could *constitute* a pain (or, for that matter, a painful experience). I therefore find unhelpful Campbell's various



appeals to an analogy with positions on the mind-body problem (p. 262). For the positions he appeals to assume the coherence of such constitution claims.

8. See my earlier contribution to this volume, pp. 241–2.

9. Importantly, the existence of the spectrum does not commit us to the view that there are concepts occupying each of the end points. Thus Philip Pettit has recently argued that the moral of the rule-following considerations is that *none* of our concepts can be understood if we abstract away from our points of view *entirely* ('The Reality of Rule-Following', *Mind* (1990)). We have at least to retain the inclination to 'go on in the same way' given a suitable crop of initial instances, the inclination that is so crucial to our being able to learn a language at all. As he points out: 'This means . . . that . . . all the properties with which we engage fit a condition which many think of as a mark of secondary properties only' (p. 18). That is, they are all, to *some* degree, mind-dependent.

10. I would like to thank John A. Burgess, John Campbell, Adrian Cussins, Lloyd Humberstone, Robert Pargetter, and Crispin Wright for useful discussions and suggestions.

1