

ALEX BYRNE

YES, VIRGINIA, LEMONS ARE YELLOW

ABSTRACT. This paper discusses a number of themes and arguments in *The Quest for Reality*: Stroud's distinction between "philosophical" and "ordinary" questions about reality; the similarity he finds between the view that color is "unreal" and the view that it is "subjective"; his argument against the secondary quality theory; his argument against the error theory; and the "disappointing" conclusion of the book.

The goal of the eponymous "quest for reality" is "what the world is really like, or how things really are" (p. 3).¹ Stroud's book is devoted to a representative instance of the quest, the case of color.

There is much to think about in this stimulating and subtle book – it is a significant contribution to metaphysics. I shall go through the main lines of thought in the book in roughly the order in which they appear, concentrating of course on points of dispute; inevitably such a brief tour will leave out much material of interest.

1. THE QUEST FOR REALITY

I said, quoting Stroud, that the goal of the quest for reality is "what the world is really like, or how things really are". So, in the case at hand, the question to be asked is: Is the world really colored? Specifically, are lemons yellow, tomatoes red, and cucumbers green?

These questions, asked by the philosopher engaged on the quest for reality, look perfectly straightforward, but Stroud takes great pains to emphasize that they are not. "Philosophical questions about reality", he says, "can look and sound exactly like familiar ordinary or scientific questions about reality . . . But the two must be distinguished, however difficult it is to say what the difference is" (p. 4). I might have forgotten what color lemons are, and so check by looking at a basket of them in a greengrocer's. I am wondering what color lemons are, and I find out that they are yellow. "The page of the book I am reading in bright sunlight shows a sickly, yellowish



tinge, but I remember that I am wearing new sunglasses. I can take them off and find out whether the paper is really yellow or only looks that way through these glasses” (p. 5). Such questions about the colors of objects are all “questions about reality, in fact about appearance and reality, but they are perfectly familiar questions of the kind we raise and answer every day. They too, are just questions about what is so, even about what is really so” (p. 5). But, Stroud says, these questions are not the ones the philosopher is asking. The “everyday” question *Are lemons yellow?* is not the “philosophical” question that is “expressed in the very same words” (p. 4).

What is distinctive about the philosophical question, *Are lemons yellow?* In the first chapter, Stroud considers a few candidates – for instance, that the philosophical question is more general – but wisely rejects them. “[I]t is difficult”, he admits, “to see or describe the difference between the two kinds of question” (p. 15).

But is there really such a difference? I think not. First, often it’s clear that the philosopher who wonders whether lemons are yellow is asking the “everyday” question. For instance, the problem of color realism is sometimes tackled by attempting a conceptual analysis of the proposition that lemons are yellow, and it is usually apparent from the context that this proposition is the one ordinarily expressed by the sentence ‘Lemons are yellow’. This procedure would make little sense unless the “philosophical” and “everyday” questions were one and the same.

Second, and more importantly, the *philosophically interesting* question is the everyday one. According to some philosophers, the question *Are lemons yellow?* should be answered in the negative – lemons are not yellow. This is a disturbing and exciting claim precisely because it denies what the man on the Clapham omnibus believes.²

Of course, there is a difference between asking whether lemons are yellow in the greengrocer’s as opposed to the seminar room. Surely, though, the difference is not in the question asked, but rather in the acceptable ways of answering it. In the greengrocer’s, examining a lemon in good light is sufficient. In the seminar room, where we wonder whether our perceptions of color are ever veridical, it isn’t.³

2. “UNREAL” OR “SUBJECTIVE” VS. “REAL” OR “OBJECTIVE”

The quest for reality is somewhat more complicated than the previous section suggested. In the case of color, it isn't *simply* concerned with questions like *Are lemons yellow?* Even if lemons *are* yellow, a further question arises, whether “there is simply no place for colours in the world as it is ‘absolutely’, independently of us” (p. 44). On the view that colors are “secondary qualities”, dispositions to affect us in certain ways, lemons are yellow. But on this account lemons are not yellow “independently of us”. Stroud thinks that this makes the secondary quality theory importantly like the error theory – the view that no material object is colored. The claim that the colors are “unreal” or “subjective” is repeatedly contrasted with the claim that they are “real” or “objective” (e.g. pp. 60, 192, 209).

Although historically motivated, this seems to me to be an odd way of dividing the territory. To repeat a point that Stroud makes himself, the secondary quality theorist and her “objectivist” rival agree that lemons *are* yellow, which the error theorist denies. Further, although an error theorist might hold that colors are somehow “subjective” (she might think they are properties of sense-data), she doesn't have to. More fundamentally, the secondary quality theory does not imply that colors are in any philosophically interesting sense less than fully “real”. Let it be granted that colors are constitutively connected to minds, and that shapes aren't. Let it even be granted that objects are not colored in worlds with no minds. This doesn't show that colors enjoy a kind of second-class ontological status. Presumably mental properties are automatically “subjective” or “not independent of us”, but are not thereby less qualified to be part of reality. It is unclear why color is any different.⁴

3. THE SECONDARY QUALITY THEORY

The secondary quality theory implies biconditionals such as:

- (D) An object is yellow iff it is disposed to produce perceptions of yellow (in normal human perceivers). (Cf. p. 121.)

(D) is subject to a number of different interpretations, yielding different versions of the secondary quality theory. Stroud argues individually against these different versions.⁵ But he also has one argument that is designed to work against *any* version: the secondary quality theorist takes (D) to be some kind of “analysis” of what it is for an object to be yellow, and therefore (D) should be necessary (pp. 126–127); however, (D) is contingent (pp. 128–130).

The basic argument for the contingency of (D) is simply that we can coherently imagine a world in which lemons are yellow but in which normal human perceivers get perceptions of yellow only from blue objects. I think Stroud is right: (D) is contingent. It must be admitted, though, that some secondary quality theorists would be entirely unmoved. They have soberly contemplated the situation Stroud describes, and either declared it to be impossible (e.g. McGinn⁶), or else a case of conceptual indeterminacy that accordingly may be precisified either way (e.g. Johnston⁷). Stroud does not explicitly engage with these philosophers, making his point less dialectically effective than it otherwise would have been. But let us concede to Stroud that (D) is contingent. If a necessarily true biconditional is what is wanted, then the secondary quality theorist can help herself to the device of rigidification. That is, she can change (D) to:

(D_R) An object is yellow iff it is disposed to produce perceptions of yellow (in normal human perceivers *as they actually are*).

Suppose the secondary quality theorist claims that (D_R) is necessary and a priori (of course, it would be natural for her to claim that (D) is also a priori, albeit contingent). Evidently Stroud thinks that this position is mistaken, but what is his objection? It seems to be that the theorist doesn't really hold the secondary quality theory. For, on her proposal,

[the] property yellow – whatever it is – is something that objects retain even in circumstances in which they are not disposed to produce the kinds of colour perceptions they are disposed to produce as things are. So the suggestion does not reveal any relativity to us in the colours of objects. Nor does it support a subjectivist or dispositional view of an object's colour. (p. 136)

For present purposes, why can't the theorist who claims that (D_R) is necessary and a priori just concede all this to Stroud? If (D_R) (or,

for that matter, (D)) really is a priori, then it may be known without begging the important question whether our perceptions of color are ever veridical.⁸ And since the participants in the quest for reality concede that lemons *are* disposed to produce perceptions of yellow, by the terms of the debate it follows that lemons really are yellow. Admittedly, the “subjectivity” of the colors is perhaps still up in the air, but as to the yellowness of lemons, the quest for reality is over.

Since one of Stroud’s main points is that the quest for reality is *not* over (see section V below), his objection from the contingency of (D) is not as powerful as he needs it to be.

4. THE ERROR THEORY

Stroud considers at length the traditional argument that objects have no colors because color properties are not required to explain our perceptions – only physical properties are.⁹ He emphasizes that a proponent of this argument for the error theory must find, somehow, a place in reality for our *perceptions* of color, for these are the things that are supposed to be explained (p. 80). Stroud links this excellent point with his master argument against the error theory.

The master argument tries to show that “it [is] a necessary condition of our acknowledging the presence in the world of perceptions of and beliefs about the colours of things that we believe that some [material] objects are coloured” (p. 157). If correct, this is an astonishingly strong result. It would show that error theorists who were not also eliminativists about color-psychology have an unstable position: one could not rationally maintain that people have color perceptions and beliefs without affirming that some objects *are* colored. Stroud does not pretend to offer a “conclusive proof” (p. 157), but does think he has “a very strong case” (p. 149). The argument, as Stroud says, is Davidson-inspired.¹⁰ The basic claim is that if one is to interpret another as having a perception of yellow or as believing that lemons are yellow, one cannot “identify the property in question” (p. 158) unless one believes that *some* (material) objects are (were?) yellow. I’m not sure just what it takes to “identify the property”, but Stroud tells us how the color realist can do it: “I know what perceptions of yellow are because I know what yellow

is. It is the color of yellow objects. I believe that many objects are yellow” (p. 160).

Stroud examines in detail the possibility that the error theorist might “identify the property” as a property of some of her sense-data, and rejects this suggestion on broadly Wittgensteinian grounds (pp. 161–66). Let us briefly try a different line of response.

We may imagine people very much like ourselves who one day come across an object with a color – the missing shade of blue, say – they have never seen before. For one reason or another they might be quite doubtful whether this object really does have the color it appears to have. (Perhaps the object is a rotating disc that is seen, when stationary, to be painted with an achromatic pattern.) Still, surely nothing prevents them from introducing a name for this shade of blue, and doubting whether anything really has it. In order for this story to make sense, no contentious doctrines about private mental objects need to be assumed.

So far, Stroud would doubtless agree that the case is possible – we may suppose that these people believe that lemons are yellow, the sky is blue, and so forth. But now change the story slightly, and imagine that these people have not seen any (chromatic) colors before seeing the strange object, and have no beliefs about the colors of things. They see the strange object, and it looks to them to have that striking shade. What’s to stop them introducing a name for this shade and doubting whether anything really has it?

If this is granted, then we just need to elaborate our story so that it encompasses the full range of chromatic colors. These folk next encounter a strange scarlet object, introduce a name for this shade and doubt whether anything really has it. Then they encounter a strange aquamarine object, and so forth. (The extension of the story to include the achromatic colors is left as an exercise for the reader.) The net result is a community of rational error theorists: they can speak about the colors that objects look to have, and their perceptions of color, but they do not believe that anything is colored. If Stroud’s master argument is correct, such a community is impossible.

Pace the master argument, the story just told seems quite coherent. Stroud’s own picture of perception helps explain why. When one looks at a lemon, it appears to have a certain property, viz.

yellowness. In Stroud's terminology, "predicational seeing" occurs: one sees the lemon to be yellow. On Stroud's use of 'see', this does not imply that the lemon *is* yellow: "We can sometimes see what is, in fact, a green lemon to be yellow" (p. 102). When one sees the lemon to be yellow, one is thereby able to think and talk about the property one sees the lemon to have, and intelligibly speculate about whether the lemon actually has this property. As Stroud puts it, there is a "direct connection between the objects of perception and of thought" (p. 145). Naturally one will typically believe that the lemon is yellow, but this picture of perception seems admirably well-suited to explain how someone might reasonably think and talk about colors and perceptions of color, without himself believing that any objects are colored.

5. YES, VIRGINIA, LEMONS ARE YELLOW

Suppose, though, that Stroud's overall argument is right: colors are not secondary qualities, and the error theory is incoherent in the way explained. One might think the quest for reality has ended in a pretty satisfactory fashion: the most promising way of being a color "subjectivist" doesn't work, and there is no good argument against the testimony of our senses that objects are colored. Colors, we may fairly conclude, are "real" and "objective". Anyone familiar with Stroud's work on scepticism will doubt that matters could be *this* simple, and so it proves.

In chapter 9 Stroud agrees that there is "a temptation to conclude that objects really are coloured after all", but says that this is "worth resisting" (p. 192). On the next page, however, Stroud says that he does "not mean to suggest that perhaps those beliefs [that lemons are yellow, etc.] are not true or that there is reason to doubt them" (p. 193). Indeed, Stroud asserts that lemons *are* yellow, and that "we do *know* that objects are coloured" (p. 205, my italics). So why hasn't Stroud just succumbed to the "temptation" that he claims must be resisted?

I'm not confident of the answer, but it is evidently connected with the master argument's limitations. The master argument only purports to show that if one of the error theorist's premises is acceptable, then her conclusion must be rejected; and it doesn't follow

from this that her conclusion is *false*.¹¹ So, despite the fact that we have an “assurance . . . in everyday life that objects are coloured”, we cannot say that the answer to the “metaphysical” or “philosophical” question is: “Yes. Objects are really coloured” (p. 208). If we foist on Stroud the view that the “philosophical question” is simply the “everyday question” with much higher standards attached, then he is saying that although we know that objects are colored, we lack an incontrovertible proof that they are, which is “disappointing” (p. 209).

This interpretation of Stroud may well be incorrect, however. First, it is difficult to see why the lack of an incontrovertible proof is at all disappointing: it would be unreasonable to expect philosophy to be *that* powerful. Second, the interpretation fits poorly with other formulations of the “disappointing” upshot, for instance that we do not have the right kind of “understanding of our position in the world” (p. 209). Our knowledge that lemons are yellow has been strengthened, not undermined, by philosophical reflection (or so we are granting). True, we have no incontrovertible proof that lemons are yellow, but that does not show that our understanding falls short. One may fully understand why something is so, even though one’s understanding is based on less than conclusive reasons.¹²

NOTES

¹ This paper is a condensed version of my contribution to a symposium on Stroud’s *The Quest for Reality* at the Pacific APA, 30th March, 2001. (All page references are to this book, unless noted otherwise.) For the original version, see Byrne (2001).

² There is a complication. Some error theorists might hold that principles of charity force some ordinary utterances of sentences like ‘Lemons are yellow’ to express *truths*, even though (as the error theorist thinks) lemons *aren’t* yellow (cf. Boghossian and Velleman, 1991, p. 107 of the reprinting in Byrne and Hilbert, 1997). Such an error theorist would say that in the mouths of the vulgar, ‘Lemons are yellow’ expresses the true proposition that lemons look yellow to us in good light, or something of the sort. Thus the “everyday” question *Are lemons yellow?* would be different from the one the philosopher is asking. On this view, the error theory does not deny what the man on the Clapham omnibus believes; instead it denies what many clear-headed philosophers believe, and perhaps that is enough to make it (faintly) disturbing.

³ According to the contextualist about knowledge, the “philosophical” question

“Do we have knowledge of the external world?” *does* differ from the “everyday” question “expressed in the very same words”. That is because, in the context of the seminar room, the standards for knowledge are allegedly much higher than they are in an everyday context. One might, rather heroically, try to defend the “two questions” thesis in the color case along similar lines. But this not what Stroud has in mind. For one thing, he is unsympathetic to contextualism about knowledge, and the color case is hardly a *better* candidate for a contextualist treatment (see Stroud, 1984, ch. 2).

Nonetheless, Stroud thinks there *is* a distinction between “everyday” and “philosophical” questions about knowledge, and this distinction is presumably the very same as the one in the color case. According to Stroud, the problem with G. E. Moore’s reaction to scepticism is that he only answers the everyday question: “It is precisely Moore’s refusal or inability to take his own or anyone else’s words in that increasingly elusive ‘external’ or ‘philosophical’ way that seems to me to constitute the philosophical importance of his remarks” (1984, p. 119). As the quotation suggests, Stroud does not pretend to give a clear account of the “philosophical” way of taking words; accordingly, the “philosophical” question about knowledge is no easier to explain than the “philosophical” question about color.

⁴ For similar complaints in the context of debates about “realism”, see Rosen, 1994.

⁵ For discussion, see Byrne, 2001, sect. 3.

⁶ 1983, p. 12.

⁷ 1992, p. 155 of the reprinting in Byrne and Hilbert, 1997.

⁸ Stroud compares rigidified biconditionals about color to ones about shape (pp. 136–137), suggesting that there is no important difference. However, it is commonly held that the former but not the latter are a priori. I am not *defending* this view (in fact, I think it’s false), but it does need to be addressed.

⁹ The primary quality theorist has the simplest reply to this argument – these physical properties of objects that explain our perceptions *are* the colors. It is therefore unfortunate that Stroud does not discuss the primary quality theory. (For a little more here, see Byrne, 2001, sect. 4.)

¹⁰ See also Stroud, 1999a, 1999b.

¹¹ Cf. Stroud, 1986.

¹² Stroud strikes a similar note of pessimism in the case of knowledge: “once we really understand what we aspire to in the philosophical study of knowledge, and we do not deviate from the aspiration to understand it in that way, we will be for ever unable to get the kind of understanding that would satisfy us” (1989, p. 100 of the reprinting in Stroud, 2000b). However, there appears to be an important asymmetry. Stroud thinks that the traditional project of understanding knowledge leads inevitably to scepticism, and that is the reason for the general gloom. But, as we’ve seen, Stroud does not think that the quest for reality (in the case of color) leads inevitably to the error theory – quite the contrary.

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Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA 02139, USA
E-mail: abyrne@mit.edu