

Wittgenstein on Colour

by F.A. Gierlinger and Š. Riegelnik

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Colours are so familiar to us that we cannot help wondering how they can be so troublesome and enigmatic to some philosophers. They are subject to much discussion in the history of philosophy: from Aristotle on exclusions by contrariety and problems for the principle of excluded middle to the collapse of Wittgenstein's early philosophy; from the discussion on the nature of secondary qualities in early modern philosophy to more recent puzzles associated with the hard problem of consciousness; from natural candidates for the synthetic *a priori* to the refusal of a sharp distinction between form and content in aesthetics; from challenges to the distinction between the subjective and the objective to technical efforts to pin down the inevitable vagueness of our language. The discussion on the nature of colours figures at the core of many classical philosophical disputes, such as that between Locke and Leibniz,

that between Newton and Goethe, and that between Wittgenstein and himself.

The essays collected in Gierlinger and Riegelnik's volume are contributions to some of those problems. Their collection is particularly concerned with Wittgenstein's struggles with the intricate connections between perception, concepts and language in his later philosophy. The relevance of their book is that it approaches colours in a significantly different way from some previous works on colours, like *Readings on Color*, edited by Byrne and Hilbert (1996), and *Colors for Philosophers*, authored by C. L. Hardin (1988), which focus primarily on the naturalist tradition in analytic philosophy. Those works connect philosophical issues about the nature of colour to empirical enquiry, by conceptualising philosophical problems as continuous with the natural sciences. This is a legitimate and

fruitful approach. However, although both works concentrate on surveys of colour science, they do not fully address the breadth and depth of philosophical problems concerning colours, as Wittgenstein's insightful and critical remarks may be taken to show.

Gierlinger and Riegelnik's volume is an essential reference and resource both for those who work on Wittgenstein's philosophy and for those who work on the philosophy of colour in general. Each chapter provides a philosophical analysis of one or more cases in which colours raise philosophical problems in Wittgenstein's philosophy. However, the discussions are relevant to any philosopher working with metaphysical aspects of colours, that is, with the epistemological, phenomenological and ontological aspects of colours.

The book contains nine papers. The table of content exhibits an impressive list of prominent authors in the field. However, it would have been useful also to have an introduction which gave an overview of the papers, explained how they relate to each other, examined the main focus of the book and offered some justification for the chosen order of the contributions.

In what follows, I briefly present each chapter and then criticize one editorial decision.

Andrew Lugg's paper, "When and why was *Remarks on Colour* written – and why is it important to know?", opens the volume. Lugg

addresses difficulties involved in organizing Wittgenstein's posthumous material. He tries to understand why Goethe turned out to be so interesting to Wittgenstein at that period of his thought – some passages in *Remarks on Colour* (RC) are characteristically Goethean in spirit. Lugg shows that this question can be answered only if we understand how to read RC as a whole. Of considerable interest is his point that Wittgenstein's discussion of transparency and transparent white plays a more decisive role in comparison to other topics much discussed in the secondary literature, such as as the impossibility of reddish-green, primary colours, and the relationship of lightness and darkness.

In his contribution, "We Have a Colour System as We Have a Number System", Joachim Schulte investigates the difficulties in dealing with the notion of system in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in connection with the question of wherein the nature of our colour and number systems resides: in *our* nature or in the colours and numbers themselves? Schulte claims that a system consists in principles of ordering or arranging things and that our nature as human beings should be taken into account when it comes to considering our systems. He also holds that the kind of mixing of colours intended in speaking of Wittgensteinian problems is not a purely practical, but an highly theoretical or quasi-mathematical kind of activity.

Although Richard Heinrich's "Green and Orange – Colour and Space in Wittgenstein" main focus is to examine some of Wittgenstein's late comments on colours, it offers a very useful description of Wittgenstein's problems at the beginning of the 1930's – the point of connection being his interest in different approaches to problems about differentiating colours and mixtures and about rendering a geometrical representation of them. That is a main reason for Wittgenstein's preference for the colour octahedron, Heinrich maintains. He also points out a relevant way of conceiving the problems of "determination of a coordinate" around 1930 connecting it to the (late) notion of "perspicuous representation".

In her paper "Propositions About Blue' – Wittgenstein on the Concept of Colour", Gabriele M. Mras makes interesting use of the conversations between Wittgenstein, Schlick and Waismann, pointing out relevant connections between *Philosophical Remarks* and *Remarks on Colour*. Her main concern seems to be to determine how to understand colour, if colour is conceived as a relationship between a system of colour and the world, since particular colours as geometrical representations of colour relations fail in many cases of application. In other words, she aims at answering how a geometry could provide criteria for the use of colour terms. She investigates the extent to which our concept of colour allows an understanding of colour terms that is

not exhausted by predicating colour terms to objects.

In his contribution, "Did Wittgenstein have a Theory of Colour?", Gary Kemp defends the claim that there is no such a thing as the nature of colour to be described – and he is puzzled that anyone would think there is. Using some of Wittgenstein's remarks, he wants to show that "there is no such thing as a true philosophical and informative proposition about the nature of colour, and indeed the whole idea doesn't really make sense" (p. 57). It is a paper which makes a strong case against a great philosophical temptation to believe in an eternal conceptual realm totally independent of our discursive practices. Accordingly, Kemp gives interesting arguments against both a scientific-essentialist answer and a phenomenological answer based on the notion of introspection.

In "Imagine a Tribe of Colour-Blind People", Frederik A. Gierlinger offers a very interesting analysis of what Wittgenstein could have meant when he proposed the thought experiment of people who do not have the same colour concepts as we do. Gierlinger addresses the transition from the familiar notion of colour blindness to the more difficult notion of someone who has different colour concepts. After reading Gierlinger's paper, I am convinced that the intelligibility of such a transition should not be taken for granted: the assumption of a tribe of colour-blind people could not easily provide us with a picture of people with colour concepts different from our own.

In “Reddish Green”, Herbert Hrachovec investigates the role of the synthetic *a priori* in Wittgenstein’s obsessive occupation with the impossibility of reddish green. Hrachovec’s paper addresses Wittgenstein’s philosophical development using both a normative view and a pragmatist approach to his later work. He also rejects the usual account of Wittgenstein’s eventual refusal of his *Tractatus* views, as he (controversially) defends the idea that “[i]t can be shown that empiricism is built into the framework of the *Tractatus*’ ontology. And the conceptual concerns of this early book can, on the other hand, still be detected in Wittgenstein’s seemingly open ended later writings” (p.79). Hrachovec defends the claim that ordinary cases of discursive misunderstandings between cultures arise at certain junctures recognizable as such due to common background assumptions. Accordingly, the unilateral stance turns into a universalist approach as far as those commonalities are concerned.

Martin Kusch’s “Wittgenstein as a Commentator on the Psychology and Anthropology of Colour” is one of the highlights of this volume. It is a very interesting and well-informed discussion on the history of some anthropological expeditions. Kusch makes a strong case for some of Wittgenstein’s remarks on anthropology by including a good number of his remarks on colour into the corpus of relevant texts. Kusch shows the intricacy of our colour-distinctions, as they can be based on

physiology, anatomy, evolution, salience, practical needs and various other factors. The problem, he holds, is to use such classifications as a tool for determining any cognitive deficit or evolutionary lag of some ethnic groups. He reminds us that Wittgenstein’s aim is to offer a social-cultural explanation that treats the other culture in a neutral, non-evaluative way. As a result, the colour vision of people we call “colour-blind” need not be regarded as deficient; it should be taken as a different way of organising the space of colours.

In “Concepts of Colour and Limits of Understanding”, Barry Stroud discusses topics which were presented before by Schulte, Gierlinger and Mras. Stroud also brings up a more general concern raised by Wittgenstein, about the way in which our possession of colour concepts imposes certain restrictions on our understanding of other apparent possibilities. He offers an illuminating investigation of the following remark made by Wittgenstein: “But I have kept on saying that it’s conceivable for our concepts to be different than they are. Was that all nonsense? (RC III, 124). Understanding the use of concepts different from our own seems especially troublesome when we try to imagine people with richer concepts, or concepts completely different from our own. The problem is that “to conceive of others who have and use concepts that we do not even possess we have to describe more and more fully the practices in

which those concepts get their sense. Is what they can be understood to be doing really a conceptual alternative to what we understand ourselves to be capable of doing and saying in our familiar language-games?" (p.113).

Although Gierlinger and Riegelnik's volume is the very first collection of articles dedicated to Wittgenstein's thoughts on colour, its main focus on *Remarks on Colour* puts an overemphasis on his late philosophy. Since Wittgenstein was also concerned with the nature of colours in his early and middle philosophies, and since those pieces of writings have received comparably little attention from scholars interested in how colours matter to his philosophy, it would be important to investigate why he wrote so intensively about colour not just during the last years of his life, but from his early philosophy and onward. In fact, throughout Wittgenstein's philosophical career, the theme of colours was one to which he returned constantly. His reflections on colours already appear prominently in the *Tractatus*, and one of the unfinished manuscripts that remained on his desk in Cambridge at the time of his death is almost entirely dedicated to the subject. The great diversity of problems concerning colours that Wittgenstein deals with, some belonging to the philosophy of language, some to philosophy of logic and phenomenology, suggests that what he was investigating is not a consolidated subject, but rather a set of philosophical issues that cannot be

properly addressed independently of other typical Wittgensteinian themes and of a careful attention to his intricate philosophical development.

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