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The Red and The Real

Barry Maund^a

^a The University of Western Australia,

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BOOK NOTES

Cohen, Jonathan, *The Red and The Real*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. xvii + 260, £35 (hardback).

Jonathan Cohen mounts a vigorous defence of two major theses: first, that colours are relational properties—in particular, that they are constituted in terms of some relation between (*inter alia*) objects and perceivers; second, for a particular form of that theory, namely, a version of role-functionalism, one where the role is defined in terms of the way things look to perceivers in certain circumstances.

A central part of the book comprises his ‘Master Argument’, one that depends on pointing out the extent to which the colours things appear to have vary with different viewing conditions, different classes of observers, and different types of animals. This argument is persuasively deployed to rebut the standard versions of colour realism—colour physicalism and primitivism—and other versions of colour-functionalism. Cohen is also impressive in explaining the virtues of both the relational account of colours and role-functionalism, and in handling a wide range of objections to these accounts.

Of considerable interest are the sections aimed at showing how the relational account of colour can deal with what would seem to be its Achilles’ heel—explaining the phenomenology of colour experience. He constructs a detailed response to Colin McGinn’s [1996] able exposition of the relevant problems. I think that these sections comprise both the strength and the weakness of the book. He raises a whole set of interesting issues in defence of an apparently implausible position. The discussion provides a powerful stimulation for future debate.

I think that Cohen is far too quick, however, in dismissing McGinn’s argument that phenomenology reveals that colours are perceived not as relational properties, but as intrinsic properties of the surfaces of objects. He does not address the fact, for example, that there are lots of cases in which our sense-experiences’ representation of relational properties is open to phenomenological inspection. In particular, visual experience represents both intrinsic size and relational size—angular size and projective size—and intrinsic shape and projective shape. It also represents the distance of an object from me, the perceiver, and the slant of an object relative to my viewing position. (Likewise, especially, for our experiences of tastes and of hot and cold.)

Additionally, in rejecting Colour Irrealism (Eliminativism), Cohen does not give enough allowance to the fact that Eliminativism comes in different

forms, some much more nuanced than others. The thesis need not be a bald Eliminativism. It can combine acknowledgment of the metaphysical thesis that there are relational properties deserving to be thought of as (kinds of) colours, while maintaining that there is point to saying that there are no colours, as ordinarily understood.

These criticisms do not detract from the fact that the book is an impressive achievement, one that is sure to inspire much debate and controversy.

Barry Maund

The University of Western Australia

Reference

McGinn, Colin 1996. Another Look at Color, *Journal of Philosophy* 93/11: 537–53.

Handfield, Toby (ed.), *Dispositions and Causes*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009, pp. ix + 343, £45 (hardback).

Suppose that negative charge is one of the fundamental properties of science. Is there a possible world in which negative charge exists but plays a causal role completely different from that which it plays in the actual world: for example, a world in which negative charge plays the same causal role that positive charge plays in this world? If, with the Humeans, we say yes, then something (an unpopular ‘quiddity’) makes it true that negative charge is the same property in both worlds. But perhaps (if the ‘Dispositionalists’ are correct) all fundamental properties are dispositional properties: properties like being fragile or being buoyant. It seems unobjectionable that there are no possible worlds in which fragility or buoyancy exist but play causal roles completely different from those which they play in the actual world.

Debates like that between Dispositionalists and Humeans are at the heart of this collection. The ten essays (some of them originating in a conference) cover a broad range of topics concerning the nature of causes and dispositions, but all are broadly centred around matters of ontological priority and reduction. Eagle presents an interesting modal challenge for dispositional essentialists. Whittle develops and defends a nominalistic version of the causal theory of properties (that is, a version of the view that properties are individuated by their causal features that does not require properties to be basic entities of our ontology). Handfield and McKittrick discuss the prospects for reducing causes to dispositions or *vice versa*. Barker considers whether both can be reduced to chances. Several papers deal with similar questions by appeal to notions of ‘invariance’ or ‘stability’ of laws under counterfactual suppositions (Cartwright, Corry, Lange).