

# ITINERA

Numero 19  
Anno: 2020

⊙ *Rivista di filosofia e di teoria delle arti*

COLOUR  
FOR  
PHILOSOPHERS

edited by  
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UNIVERSITÀ  
DEGLI STUDI  
DI MILANO

ISSN: 2039-9251

# **Colour for philosophers**

## **Introduction**

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«The ox becomes furious if a red cloth is shown to him, but the philosopher, who speaks of colour only in a general way, begins to rave». This is still true now: the philosophical discussion on colour is very lively. There is a debate within Anglo-American philosophy that has been going on for the past fifty years, and is still going on today, as is demonstrated by the imminent publication of the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Colour*, which we are happy to announce in this issue. Colour is something very familiar but, nevertheless, it is also a subject on which philosophers never cease to raise questions. Why?

Keywords: colour, philosophy, perception, language

# Colour for philosophers

## Introduction

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Purple haze all in my eyes  
Don't know if it's day or night  
You got me blowin', blowin' my mind  
Is it tomorrow, or just the end of time?  
(Jimi Hendrix)

«The ox becomes furious if a red cloth is shown to him, but the philosopher, who speaks of colour only in a general way, begins to rave»<sup>1</sup>. This is still true now: the philosophical discussion on colour is very lively. There is a debate within Anglo-American philosophy that has been going on for the past fifty years, and is still going on today, as is demonstrated by the imminent publication of the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Colour*, which we are happy to announce in this issue<sup>2</sup>. Not by chance, the title of the first presented paper, written by Derek Brown – co-editor with Fiona Macpherson of the *Handbook* – is “The steady pace of the philosophy of colour”. Colour is something very familiar but, nevertheless, it is also a subject on which philosophers never cease to raise questions. Why?

If we go back to Goethe, we find that one of the most striking aspects of colour is that it is at the same time something very unstable – colours appear, transform and disappear very quickly – and something that nevertheless follows some very precise rules<sup>3</sup>. This polarity between instability/surprise and rules also reappears in the most

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<sup>1</sup> J. W. Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre*, Engl. trans. *Theory of Colours*, trans. by C. L. Eastlake, Murray, London 1840, p. V.

<sup>2</sup> D. Brown, F. McPherson (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Colour*, Routledge, London 2020. A review of the text is available in this issue.

<sup>3</sup> See *ivi*, § 688-713.

recent philosophical debate on colour<sup>4</sup>. What is the connection – this was one of most important questions raised in the most recent debate – between the well-regulated and understandable world of physics and the unpredictable sphere of our personal sensations and experiences? One of the main reasons for colour's philosophical interest, according to the authors of the *Handbook*, is the challenge that it raises to find a link between our manifest and scientific image of the world<sup>5</sup>. Physics has taught us, since Newton, that the world is not “coloured” in the sense in which we intend this expression: colour is something that arises in our perception, as a response to the different wavelengths of light that the objects reflect. On the other hand, our experience of colours doesn't seem to concern wavelengths, or the microphysical properties of objects that allow these wavelengths to be reflected.

From this contradiction a very lively debate arose, which has characterized the Anglo-American philosophy since the beginning of the Seventies<sup>6</sup>. In a famous book, which takes its title from an equally famous song by Jimi Hendrix, Joseph Levine used the image of the “purple haze” to show the gap that exists between the qualitative aspect of our experience and the physical qualities that should explain them<sup>7</sup>. Even if we knew everything of the physical structure of matter and light – the physical entities to which physicalism claims colour can be reduced – we could not know why exactly it is *this* purple (or green, or yellow...) that we are experiencing, why this purple has *the quality* that it has.

Is colour, then, only in our minds, as eliminativism often maintains<sup>8</sup>? One of the books that gave birth to the Anglo-American debate on the ontology of colour, *Colour*

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<sup>4</sup> C. L. Hardin says that colours have both an «internal relatedness» and a «brutal factuality» (C. L. Hardin, *Colour for Philosophers: Unweaving the Rainbow*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1988, p. XX).

<sup>5</sup> See W. Sellars, *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*, in Id., *Science, Perception and Reality*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1963, pp. 1-40.

<sup>6</sup> Among the texts that gave rise to the debate: D.R. Hilbert, *Colour and Colour Perception: A Study in Anthropocentric Realism*, csl, Stanford 1987; J. Westphal, *Colour: Some Philosophical Problems from Wittgenstein*, Blackwell, Oxford 1987 (then published as *Colour: a Philosophical Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford 1991); C.L. Hardin, *Colour for Philosophers: Unweaving the Rainbow*, cit.; C. Landseman, *Colour and Consciousness: an essay on Metaphysics*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1989; A. Clark, *Sensory Qualities*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993; E. Thompson, *Colour Vision*, Routledge, London 1994. In 1978 Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour* had been published. I tried to give a short account of the debate in A. Barale, *Il giallo del colore. Un'indagine filosofica*, Jaca Book, Milano 2020.

<sup>7</sup> J. Levine, *Purple Haze: The Puzzle of Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

<sup>8</sup> On the different philosophical positions in relation to colour, see A. Byrne, D.R. Hilbert, *Introduction*, in *Readings on Colour*, vol. 1, MIT Press, Cambridge ma 1997, pp. xi-xxv; J. Cohen, *The Red and the Real*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 1-15; B. Maund, *Colour*, Stanford Encyclopedia of

*for philosophers* by C. L. Hardin (1988), sustained exactly this thesis. It had a very evocative subtitle: “Un-weaving the rainbow”, which comes from a famous poem by John Keats:

Do not all charms fly/ At the mere touch of cold philosophy?/ There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:/ We know her woof, her texture: she is given/ In the dull catalogue of common things./ Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings./ Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,/ Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine/ Unweave a rainbow<sup>9</sup>.

Do philosophers have to “unweave” the rainbow? And more importantly, can they really do that? Can colour be reduced to something else? Within the Anglo-American debate on colour there is a position, called “naïve realism”, which strongly denies this. According to naïve realism, colours are neither in the mind, nor do they coincide with physical properties. They *supervene* on the physical properties of matter, according to different naïve realists, but they are something different, something “queer”<sup>10</sup>.

This position is very interesting, because it tries to overcome the aforementioned “gap”, between the scientific and the everyday picture of the world. However, this thesis also has some problematic aspects. In fact, if green (or yellow, or purple...) is something that exists in a pre-determined way, it becomes difficult to explain all its different variations: the different shades of green that are perceived by different subjects or in different situations (under different illuminations, for example, or against different backgrounds) – not to mention from different historical periods, in which even the names of colours could change... In order to address this problem, naïve realism tends to separate the “real” or “objective” colours from the “apparent” colours<sup>11</sup>.

How is it possible, then, to overcome this separation: to consider the autonomous reality of colour together with the infinity of its possible shades and variations? Is the only alternative that of colour relationalism, i.e. the philosophical position according to which colour exists only in its relation to a subject<sup>12</sup>? Perhaps this is not necessarily the

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Philosophy, csli, Stanford 1997, second ed. 2018 (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colour/>) and most recently D. Brown, F. Mcpherson, *Introduction*, in Idd. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Colour*, cit.

<sup>9</sup> J. Keats, *Lamia*, ii, 229, cit. in C.L. Hardin, *Colour for Philosophers*, cit., p. xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> On the thesis of supervenience within naïve realism, see K. Allen, *A Naïve Realist Theory of Colour*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016. For colour as a “queer” property see also there.

<sup>11</sup> I tried to discuss this problematic aspect of naïve realism in *Il giallo del colore*, cit., pp. 76 ss.

<sup>12</sup> For colour relationalism see at least J. Cohen, *The Red and the Real*, cit.

case, as the different avenues of inquiry that we are going to pursue in this issue will help to suggest.

Derek Brown writes, in the first essay of this issue, that the “analytic” debate until now focused mainly on the ontology of colour (the question “does colour exist, and where?”), but there are also other interesting fields within the philosophy of colour that have not yet been thoroughly investigated. Some of these are, according to Brown, the question of colour in the arts, the colours of memory and imagination, colour in virtual reality, and the relation between colour and our ability to make predictions (the «predictive mind»). All these fields have been scarcely considered by Anglo-American philosophy, because of the high priority that this tradition gives to ontology and to science. This remark is even more interesting because it comes from within analytical philosophy, which is the tradition to which Brown's work belongs. It shows an interest, within analytical philosophy itself, to widen the horizons of the debate.

One of the clearest examples is that of the so-called “impossible colours”, in relation to which, as Brown demonstrates, the investigations of analytical philosophy can meet those of art. In fact, according to the «opponent process theory» of colour, a greenish-red or a yellowish-blue cannot exist, because green and red are opposite colours<sup>13</sup>. We are not able to see a red that tends to green, nor a blue that tends to yellow. We don't even have the concepts for these colours; this question will be very disquieting for Wittgenstein, as it is well known. Nevertheless, as Brown argues, a painter is able to paint «something that looks like a smooth transition from blue to yellow that doesn't go through any other colour». «This demonstrates», according to Brown, «that challenges to colour theory do derive from artistic practice». This is something that still awaits further development within the Anglo-American debate on colour.

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<sup>13</sup> The “opponent process theory” has its roots in a hypothesis formulated by E. Hering at the end of the Nineteenth century, but it could become an experimentally based theory only through the discoveries made in the Fifties by D. Jameson and L. Hurvich (L.M. Hurvich, D. Jameson, An opponent-process theory of colour vision, in «Psychological Review», 64, 6, 1954, pp. 384-404). According to this theory, the information received by the three types of colour receptors in human eyes (cones) is processed in an antagonistic manner in the brain. There are some cells, in a particular area of the brain, which are excited or inhibited in the presence of opposite colours (red/green, blue/yellow, white/black). For this reason, as Hering had already remarked, we not only have three basic colours, but four: blue, yellow, red and green. Moreover, according to this theory, we cannot perceive red and green at the same time, nor can we simultaneously observe blue and yellow, or white and black. On this theory, see A. Byrne, D. Hilbert, Introduction, in Idd. (eds.), *Readings on Colour*, vol. 2, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1997, pp. xiv-xviii. See also the paper of D. Brown in this issue.



To this purpose, another question arises. Could it be, perhaps, that the new fields Brown is talking about are not so much something that exceeds the borders of ontology, as he states, but rather something that could contribute to reformulate the question of ontology itself? Let me elaborate this through the different avenues of inquiry proposed in this issue.

In the second paper presented in this issue, Andrew Benjamin focuses on the traditional opposition between line and colour. Very often, in the history of the dialectics between these two poles of painting, line has been associated with spirit and colour with the senses. Benjamin goes back to Hegel in order to overcome this opposition and to show that colour, exactly as line, is always a «locus of thought». Differently from what Hegel states, however, colour cannot have a univocal meaning from the start – in the case of Hegel, the meaning of carnality, i.e. the Spirit that has become flesh –, but it always remains open to different meanings. Colour, then, can neither be considered as a pure presence detached from meaning (a pure “gestus”), nor as something that already has a unique and determinate sense<sup>14</sup>. The colour of Christ's body, for example, is the colour of the Spirit becoming body, for Hegel, but it can also be the colour of sensuality, even if Hegel excluded this aspect.

Another question, however, arises. In fact, would it not be possible that this temporal character of colour – colour as the locus of an encounter between matter and thought that has to take place time and again, and can never be removed or accomplished – concerns not only art (as Benjamin seems to state), but also our experience of colour in general?

This aspect – the temporality of colour – emerges strongly in Richard Cytowic's paper, through the comparison between the colours of synesthesia and fireworks. Colour is present in the greater part of synesthetic experiences. In some of the most common cases, for example, the subject sees the alphabet letters, or different musical pitches, as coloured. What is also very interesting is that synesthetic experiences are completely unintentional. This is an important difference between synesthesia as an ideal of art,

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<sup>14</sup> On this question see also A. Benjamin, *Colouring Philosophy: Appel, Lyotard and Art's Work*, in Id., *Art's Philosophical Work*, Rowman and Littlefield International, London 2015, chpt. 6 e Id., *And Colour? Sallis on Art's Colouring*, ivi, chpt. 7.

which, for example, became very popular with the artistic Avantgardes, and synesthesia as a neurological phenomenon. In this latter case, the subject cannot decide to see a precise colour in a particular situation, but this is something that *happens* to him. It happens, to go back to the comparison from which we have started, in a manner that is similar to that of fireworks: «a configuration arises, moves, scintillates, and then fades unless the stimulus persists to replenish the photisms». The forms that colours assume in the synesthetic experience are also very simple and similar to those of fireworks: they are «generic shapes such as lines, crosshatchings, circular forms, spirals and tunnels».

The link between fireworks and the colours of synesthesia seems to lie, therefore, in this primitive emergence of colours and shapes as something that already has a regularity, but still waits to be elaborated upon. In fact, Cytowic's thesis is that synaesthesia is intertwined in many ways with language, but concerns at the same time the interaction between language and what precedes it<sup>15</sup>.

For these reasons synaesthesia could perhaps allow us to rethink the ontological challenge of colour: the conflict between realism (physicalist or naive) and subjectivism (eliminativist or relationalist), "real" and subjective colour. Would it be possible to think of colour as something real, the existence of which does not depend on us, and which for precisely this reason may surprise us (like a firework), but at the same time as something still indeterminate, which still waits to take place in our language and in our memory? The challenge may be to think of "colour before language", though it can never be thought of as such, but only thought of in the context of its emergence to consciousness and to language itself. Focusing on this moment may not mean embracing a relationalist ontology – as the few colour scholars who approached the problem of synaesthesia have argued<sup>16</sup> – but rather to consider the independent reality of colour, its ontology, in its relationship to *time*. The perception of colour would become the perception of a reality full of time and possibilities.

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<sup>15</sup> See on this R.E. Cytowic, *Synesthesia*, MIT Press Essential Knowledge series, Cambridge Ma. 2018, and Id., *Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses*, MIT Press, Cambridge Ma 2002, p. xi and pp. 146-176. For an investigation of the consequences that synesthesia could have on the philosophy of perception and the philosophy of colour, see B. Brogaard, *Colour Synaesthesia and Its Philosophical Implications*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Colour*, cit., part III.

<sup>16</sup> See for example A. Revonsuo, *Putting colour back where it belongs*, in "Consciousness and Cognition", 10(1), 2001, pp. 78-84, pp. 78-84; W. Lycan, *Representational theories of consciousness*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006 (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-representational/>; ultimo accesso aprile 2020); W. Fish, *Philosophy of Perception: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge, New York 2010.



This arising moment of colour is the object of Saverio Campanini's paper, which addresses the question of the names of colours through the examination of a Medieval cabbalistic text and its Renaissance translation. In his *Perush 'al 'eser sefirot*, "Commentary to the ten sefirot", the Catalan Cabbalist 'Azriel of Gerona compares the emanation of the multiplicity of the world from the divine to the emergence of the multiplicity of colours from one, still hidden light. It is, Campanini writes, as if the colours were the natural consequence of the essence's differentiation. What is the difference, however, between the colour of the second sefirot (usually called *Keter*, crown), which represents the beginning of all colours, and the last one (usually called *Malkut*, the Kingdom), which marks their end or the accomplishment of their differentiation process? The answer will have to be sought in the names that are used for these colours, and in the way they have been translated by a Renaissance interpreter, Flavio Mitridate. The beginning and the end of colours will prove to be very close to each other, but also very different, as the two poles of a movement that can be inverted through the meditation.

Colours seem to hint, therefore, at the infinite possibilities of experience and its encounter with language. This aspect of colour has to do of the strangest and most fascinating questions that the debate on colour has known, that of "impossible colours". "Impossible colours" or "alien colours" are, as already noted, all colours that humans cannot see: other species' colours, but also colours that would result from the proximity between opposite colours, like yellow and blue, or green and red. Impossible colours are the object of a paper by Fiona Macpherson that is coming out in the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Colour*, and they are also the focus of a poem by Christopher Norris, published in this issue.

Christopher Norris is an important English philosopher, of whose work this issue will try to give a short presentation. For the past few years, he has started to write philosophical poems, which very often concern the question of colour. One of these, called *Missing Hues*, begins not by chance with a quotation from Crane and Piantanida's experiment on impossible colours. We will try to say something about this experiment in the presentation of Norris' work. For the moment, what is most important is an image

that Norris uses throughout the poem. It is the image of a spinning disc, in which all colours blend and turn into white. White here represents the possibility of reaching new colours, against any rigid division between colours themselves: «Just spin the disc: it's paint-box shades you lose». It is not by chance that Norris refers to Goethe in this poem, as the one who best understood this ephemeral aspect of colour. According to the *Farbenlehre*, colours arise, transform, and die incredibly fast, and the eye has to be able to follow them as they flash past.

This intangible characteristic of colour is also the object of Norris' second poem, *Giverny*, where an aging Monet tries to catch the colours before «they die». The colours of the eye become the lost colours of memory. Memory and photography, «a new trick» that Monet starts to use, both have this function of once again «conjuring up» the vanished colours.

It is exactly this relationship between photography and colour that is the object of the following paper that Martina Conti dedicates to Giuseppe Turrone, one of the first scholars to address the question of colour in photography. Are coloured photographic pictures more realistic than black and white ones? Or is colour, on the contrary, something subjective and illusory? With these questions, the theoretical investigation on photography meets the philosophical debate on colour. Photography has long been considered something that could copy the real colours of the world. Yet this idea of coloured photography leads directly, according to Turrone, to the unreal and inauthentic world of advertisement. The real and authentic colours that photography should show are not something that is already there, nor something that arises merely from the “natural” interaction between object and subject. Real colours always result, as Turrone shows, from the contact between personal and social memories, nature and history, objective and symbolic elements. It is this contact, with its surprising and unpredictable outcomes, that has to be sought time and again by the photographer (and also by the philosopher).

The role of colour in Nineteenth Century art is the object also of Marcello Sessa's paper, which is dedicated to Clement Greenberg's notions of “painterly” and “post-painterly”. The notion of “painterly” represents, according to Greenberg, the

culmination of modernism: the moment in which colour emancipates itself from any representative intent and dominates the picture, as it does in Abstract Expressionism. This development, however, leads to its own dissolution: in the “post-painterly” moment in which colour absorbs the space of the picture and becomes the picture itself. The picture opens itself to space.

A consequence of this “openness” of the artwork can be seen in James Turrell’s work, which constitutes the subject of Gabriele Gambaro’s paper. In Turrell’s installation *Sight Unseen*, visitors move in different rooms pervaded by coloured lights. Colour is perceived with the whole body. It is experienced as something real and strictly connected to the nature of light. The “Purple haze” is no longer “all in my brain”, as in Hendrix’s song. One of the most interesting aspects that Gambaro underscores is that visitors maintain a stronger perception of colours even when they have left the installation: they can see shades and hues that they didn’t notice before.

This recalls a short novel by Philip Dick that it could be worth mentioning before beginning this issue. It is the story of a wife, Jill, who has a very frustrating husband, Lester, a scientist who thinks only of his career and has no interest on everyday life<sup>17</sup>. One day Lester’s work requires him to visit a foreign planet and when he returns he is completely different. He has a greater appreciation for food and he can see the colours of spring. The only problem is... that Lester is probably not Lester anymore, but rather an alien who took possession of his body to escape his own exhausted planet. Quite surprisingly, and lying to the police, the wife chooses to keep the alien instead of her old husband. At the end of the story they have this dialogue:

Jill turned abruptly. «What is your name? Your real name».  
The man's gray eyes flickered. He smiled a little, a kind, gentle smile. «I'm afraid you would not be able to pronounce it. The sounds cannot be formed...»  
Jill was silent as they walked along, deep in thought. The city lights were coming on all around them. Bright yellow spots in the gloom. «What are you thinking?» the man asked.  
«I was thinking perhaps I will still call you Lester», Jill said. «If you don't mind».

«I will still call you Lester». This could also be applied to the names of colours. Our colour names and concepts never completely coincide with something already given,

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<sup>17</sup> P. Dick, *Human is*, in Id., *Electric Dreams*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2017.

but they have an entire story within them, which includes the possibility of alien reversals and new beginnings. It is to these “alien colours” this issue is dedicated.