

COLOUR

Philosophical Puzzlement

There are plenty of books about elephants, but books about grey things or green things are probably non-existent, or at least are very rare. Why is this? If you were asked to write a book about colour, what would you write? What *could* you write about grey and green things in general? After all, they come in all shapes and sizes and with many different properties. Can we say more than that these things *look* green or grey to humans? Or, are colours *real* properties of objects?

As long ago as the 16th century, Galileo Galilei wrote:

But I cannot believe that there exists in external bodies anything, other than their size, shape, or motion,...which could excite in us our tastes, sounds, and odours. The latter...I believe to be nothing but mere names. (Quoted in *Philosophy in Practice* by Adam Morton.)

Nothing but mere names?

Is a colour a real property of an object? According to science, the world is colourless; *ie* objects are complexes of material particles that are too small to have any colours at all. Electrons have no colour and colour doesn't help us explain scientifically what objects do. Even so, colour does have an important *psychological* and *social* function and helps us to explain human behaviour (see below).

A scientific explanation

According to dominant scientific theory (simply put), white light strikes an object and reflects off it towards a person's eyes. The particular colour that the object will be seen as having depends on the wavelengths of the light reflected. The longer the wavelength, the redder the object looks. As the wavelength gets shorter the object looks by turns, yellow, green and, eventually, blue. So, scientists say that colours are physically related to an object in two ways. Objects reflect wavelengths towards people, and people see a colour according to the length of those wavelengths (*eg* they see red if it's a long wavelength). Colours seem real to us, but the way in which we experience this colourful world is far removed from the scientific description of what colour is.

Three philosophical positions

Roughly speaking, there are the three different philosophical perspectives on colour:

Colour is real

Colour is real, *ie* it belongs to a thing. Even if no one in the world were looking, an elephant would still be grey. Greyness is the property of elephants.

- Colour is relational* Colour is relational. It belongs to the world as we *perceive* it. Both my eyes and the elephant are needed to make me see a *grey* elephant.
- Colour is illusory* Colour is illusory. It is just the way *I* see the world. I see a grey elephant, but the greyness needn't have anything to do with this elephant.
- Is your grey like my grey?* All three positions seem to assume, however, that the grey we see is the same grey for all of us. But how do we know that what *you* call grey is what *I* call grey? The awe-inspiring fact is that we could never find out, as we are each 'imprisoned' by our own individual way of looking at the world. None of us can distance ourselves from our own way of looking at things and compare it with the way others look at the world. So, how could we possibly even begin to know whether one person's grey is the same as another's? A possible solution could be that while we might not be able to answer this question in theory, the way we live our lives *in practice* does seem to suggest that we have little difficulty in finding common ground in how we experience certain colours. This is what Ludwig Wittgenstein argues in his *Blue and Brown Books*.

The social significance

Colours perform a variety of *social* functions. The red carpet is used for important people, literally or figuratively. Evening dress is black, and black is the colour of funerals. Lots of women get married in white. Red can be associated with sex: sexy underwear is often red and prostitutes work in the red light district. (It is probably no coincidence that red light hides imperfections in the skin.)

Baby boys are usually dressed in blue and baby girls in pink. Experiments in which the same baby is dressed first in pink and then in blue have shown that people respond differently to the same baby, depending on whether they think it is a boy or a girl.

Green, orange and red help to regulate traffic, and for the national and international identification of political preferences we use a variety of colours: red for labour, blue for conservatives, yellow for liberal democrats, green for environmentalist parties. We also use colours to indicate personal and corporate identity. For example, some people like to wear predominantly one colour, and companies stick to using the same colour in letterheads, websites and business cards. Countries have flags in a variety of colours. Football supporters use the colours of their team with great passion (and sometimes aggression).

- How colour adds meaning* Colour is also used for *social status*. Gold is associated with wealth; bath taps and ornaments can be coloured gold to suggest opulence. Doctors and scientists' white coats apparently add authority to their words and deeds.
- White is associated with cleanliness. There is no real reason to assume that a white tablecloth is any cleaner than a brown one.

People of a skin colour that is different from the skin colour of the majority in any given social group are likely to be treated differently by members of that majority. Sometimes colours are associated with gender identity too. Traditionally in the West, pink is for girls and blue for boys. Even if these strict divisions have relaxed a little, is it not still the case that we think some colours feminine and others more masculine? And still on the theme of social divisions, we have ‘blue-collar’ and ‘white collar’ workers. We have ‘men in grey’. Colours, and patterns of colour, are associated with uniforms and with institutional identity. Think of military uniforms, school uniforms, nurses’ uniforms, waitresses’ uniforms.

The psychological significance

Different colours are associated with different emotions and feelings. They significantly influence our moods. They also have a more abstract use in everyday life. Blue is cool and trustworthy, but also represents sadness. We can sing or listen to the Blues. Red means passion, love, but also anger and hate. We talk about ‘seeing red’ when angry. But we can also be described as looking at the world through ‘rose-tinted spectacles’, implying optimism or naivety. Green stands for envy, jealousy and immaturity. Yet painting a room green is also supposed to induce a state of calm. Grey stands for being mediocre, dull and lacking in distinctiveness. Grey hairs are sometimes associated with wisdom, though witches are often portrayed with grey hair. Black stands for grief and evil. If we wear black we communicate to others that we are in mourning and so invite them to respond to us appropriately. But if we are superstitious, we will feel lucky, or unlucky (depending on what we have been told as children) if a black cat crosses the road in front of us. White we associate with purity and innocence. In the Christian tradition, angels are dressed in white and so are brides. In the Sikh tradition, brides wear red. Colour associations seem to be culture bound. Religions vary a great deal in their use of colour symbolism.

Colours and organs

In the Eastern philosophy of Taoism, colours are associated with particularly major organs which are believed to be the seats of certain emotions: the lungs are white (and store sadness and courage), the heart is red (cruelty/ love), the liver is green (anger/kindness), the spleen is yellow (worry/fairness) and the kidneys are blue (fear/gentleness). In a complex matrix, Taoists cross-associate colours with many categories of phenomena, including, for example, the human sense organs, and the seasons of the year.

Awareness of how colours are used in stories and in the world around adds meaning for reader and thinker. The activities and the questions below could help us to reflect on how significantly colours structure the way we think and act.

- Thought experiment** A wonderful way of becoming aware of how colour influences our lives is to conduct the following thought experiments. You could use the following questions, one at a time, as the basis for an enquiry:
- What would happen if you woke up tomorrow *colour-blind*? Think carefully about the things you do and how you think. How would being colour-blind affect the things you do, think and say?
 - What if no one in the world could see colours? What would be the similarities with your life as it is now? What would be different?
- Comparing photos* A follow-up activity to this might be to compare black and white photographs with colour photos of similar events or scenes. Equally, pupils might enjoy comparing experiences of working in pencil or pen and ink with colour work.
- Listening to music* Consider the relationship between sound and colour. Arrange for the class to listen to some pieces of music (it might make a difference if their eyes were closed), and to notice whether certain colours can be ‘heard’. Provide some coloured paper and/or pencils/paints for this exercise. The class could compare their different responses with each other.
- Ponder activity** Invite the children to look at the colours in the classroom. Which colours are predominantly used? What about in the rest of the school? Why do we use so many primary and bright colours in school? What would it be like if we used different colours? Would it make you feel different? Would you have different thoughts?
- You could follow this activity by making the children draw their ideal classroom. What sort of colours would *they* use?
- Drawing and colouring activity** Ask each child to draw a shape of any kind, though it should not be too complicated to colour in. Photocopy those shapes. Let the children work in pairs. Each child in each pair is given a copy of the shape that was drawn by his/her partner. Together they have to decide on what colour to use for colouring in the two photocopied shapes. Each will colour in the photocopy of his/her partner’s shape, but not his/her own. Beforehand, make sure that each pair has at least two pencils of the same colour. This will make it possible for both people to colour in at the same time, as they need to use the same colour pencil for this activity. Each pair should end up with two different shapes of the same colour. Give each pair some time to discuss their choice of colour, and whether they agree that they both see the *same colour*! How would they know? You could then open up the investigation to the entire class.

Colouring activity

Let the children colour in two similar shapes in different colours. Give them some quiet time for reflecting on the different pictures. Do the different colours affect them in different ways? Explore the ideas that emerge.

Ask the children for their *favourite* colour. Some might not have one. You could arrange the children in a circle and ask this question of each of them in turn. Let them explore the importance of their favourite colour.

Possible questions

- Does a favourite colour belong to each person, and if so, in what way?
- Would changing a person's favourite colour, make them a different person?
- What does it mean to *not* have a favourite colour?
- How do you decide what your favourite colour is? Does it have to be the one you choose the most?

Famous Painting Activity

Make a photocopy of a famous painting and let the children colour it in. Make the original available to them by using, for example, an overhead projector. (A good choice would be one of the paintings featured in Anthony Browne's *Willy's Pictures*. After the colouring activity is completed, you could then also use the latter thought-provoking book for enquiry in the usual way.)

Give plenty of time to explore the differences and similarities between the original painting and the children's version of it.

Possible questions

- Does changing its colours change the meaning of a painting? If so, in what way?
- Does using different colours change how beautiful a painting is? If so, how?

Highlighting in colour to investigate ideas

(For Years 5 and 6)

Find a poem or passage from another story that is connected to the themes you have discussed in an enquiry. Make a copy for each group to work on. Provide each group with two differently coloured highlighter pens.

The groups have to decide two types of things they want to look for (certain kinds of words, key ideas, evidence of the theme in question, aspects of style, things that are puzzling, words to look up, words they would like to use themselves). They have to decide which colour pen to use for which of the two different aspects they are looking for and they then should highlight the passage accordingly. Each group reports on its work to the class as a whole.

Make up your own story**'Little Blue and Little Yellow'** by Leo Lionni

Read with the class Leo Lionni's *Little Blue and Little Yellow*. This old classic's hero is a little bit of blue paper, called *Little Blue*. He has many friends (bits of paper that are red, brown, orange, etc), but his best friend is *Little Yellow* who lives across the street. One day, *Little Blue* has to stay at home while his mum goes shopping, but he decides to look for *Little Yellow* instead. When *Little Blue* finally finds *Little Yellow* they hug each other until they both turn green! They play and play until they are tired, but when they finally go home, *Papa* and *Mama Blue* say that this is not their *Little Blue* (now green), and *Papa* and *Mama Yellow* say this is not their *Little Yellow*. The two little ones are so sad that they cry big blue and yellow tears until they are all tears. When they finally 'pull themselves together' *Mama* and *Papa Blue* are very happy to see *Little Blue* back again. When they hug *Little Yellow* they realise what must have happened – for they too become green!

This story can raise a large variety of questions and issues that are unrelated to colour. It may be helpful to look up topics such as *Self and Personal Identity* in the *Web of Intriguing Ideas* when preparing for this lesson. At some point it may be appropriate to follow up the children's enquiries with an activity specifically focused on colours. Get them to make up their own colour-based story, working in pairs and using transparent coloured paper that can be cut up and glued into a little booklet to illustrate their tale. You could use their own stories for further enquiries.

Source

Adam Morton. *Philosophy in Practice*. Blackwell.

WHAT IS COLOUR?

Name:

Class:

Task

Colour in a large shape (*eg* an elephant shape – see the **What Colour is Your Elephant?** activity in *Tusk, Tusk*) and hang all your pictures on a wall next to and under each other like wallpaper. Next time, make sure everyone can see the ‘wallpaper’ and discuss the following questions. Add questions of your own if you like. It would be a good idea to do this in small groups first. You can compare notes with the others later. Afterwards write down your answers to the questions in the columns provided.

Possible questions

1. Focus on one colour on our wallpaper. Imagine now that the room suddenly becomes dark. Is the colour still there?

My answer

2. Are some colours scarier than others are? If so, which ones in the wallpaper do you think are scary and why?

My answer

3. Could aliens see colours we cannot see?

My answer

4. How would you explain to aliens what a colour is?

My answer

5. Suppose our eyes changed overnight so that the grass now looked to you like blood used to look. And blood looked to everyone the way grass used to look. Would that mean that the grass was now red?

My answer

6. Do certain colours make you have certain thoughts?

My answer

7. How important is colour for how we think about people? (*eg* the colour of their hair, clothes, skin)

My answer

8. Does everything have a colour? (What about dreams or thoughts or numbers?)

My answer

