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Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*

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1. The task of giving some sort of interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*[1] is an extraordinarily difficult one. The book is exceptionally fragmentary. Many of the remarks seem to raise questions that are then left completely unanswered, or to invite us to imagine various circumstances that are then left without any further comment. Although nearly all the remarks are related in one way or another to the problem of colour, the range of topics that Wittgenstein touches on is extremely wide, and covers areas that are not normally mentioned in contemporary philosophical discussions of colour. For example, apart from the familiar 'Why can't there be a transparent white?' and 'Why can't there be a reddish-green?', he asks 'Can a transparent piece of glass have the same colour as an opaque piece of paper?', 'Is white always the lightest colour?', 'Do I see blond hair in the black and white photograph of a blond youth?', 'Does it make sense to point to a colour in the iris of a Rembrandt eye and ask for the walls of my room to be painted the same colour?', 'Do the colour-blind have the same concept of colour-blindness as the normally sighted?', 'Can normal vision be described?', and so on.

It is clear that in asking at least some of these questions Wittgenstein is attempting to achieve clarity about the way we actually use colour-language. It is also clear that he believes that it is by achieving this clarity, and not by means of a scientific theory of colour, that we shall resolve the questions about colour that puzzle us most deeply. It is unclear, however, how the work as a whole fits into the traditional philosophical discussion of colour that has arisen in the wake of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. The distinction as such receives no discussion at all in the work, and although it may be clear that the distinction is one Wittgenstein rejects, it is initially obscure whether, and if so how, he intends his exploration of our ordinary language-game to confront the traditional distinction. The main purpose of this paper, therefore, is to offer one suggestion for how the aims and the philosophical method of *Remarks on Colour* might be interpreted. Before I do this, however, I want to consider Peter

[1] *Remarks on Colour* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).

Hacker's attempt[2] to represent a Wittgensteinian view of colour and a Wittgensteinian critique of the primary/secondary quality distinction.

2. Hacker's fiercely polemical book does not, it must be said, set out to provide an exegesis of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*. Yet it is clear that Hacker intends his view to be taken as Wittgensteinian in both spirit and inspiration. The book is at once a defence of the view that colours as such are objective or intrinsic properties of physical objects, and an onslaught on what Hacker regards as the deep conceptual confusions that allow the scientific mythology that underpins the primary/secondary quality distinction still to 'hold us in thrall'.[3] The aim of the book, and by implication of Wittgenstein's philosophy, is unequivocal:

> The result of our enquiry is intended to be a *clarification* of this fragment of our form of representation, a clarification that will make perspicuous its abuse in science and philosophy. The consequences of such abuses of language are not merely [a] disgrace to philosophy and [a] disservice to truth . . . , but above all *nonsense*, a violation of the bounds of sense.[4]

Or again:

> [P]hilosophy is not the underlabourer of the sciences but rather their tribunal; it adjudicates not the truth of scientific theorizing, but the sense of scientific propositions. Its rewards lie not in furthering our knowledge, but rather in restraining us from nonsense and in giving us a proper understanding of what we know.[5]

Hacker's metaphor of a tribunal, and his generally harsh and unforgiving tone, is in sharp contrast with the descriptive, exploratory style of *Remarks on Colour*. While Hacker is out 'to convict the scientist of transgressing the bounds of sense',[6] Wittgenstein seems very little concerned either with the diagnosis of past conceptual confusions or with the conflict between the assertions of traditional science and ordinary grammar. However, what makes the question of how representative of Wittgenstein's views Hacker's book is particularly pressing is that there appear to be several major flaws in the overall position Hacker presents.

First of all, the framework for the objectivist conception of colour that Hacker develops in opposition to the primary/secondary quality

[2] Peter Hacker, *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
[3] Ibid., p. 2.
[4] Ibid., p. 40.
[5] Ibid., p. 52.
[6] Ibid., p. 99.

distinction is provided by the claim that it is grammar, not science, that tells us what anything is. Yet, despite the *prima facie* implausibility of the claim, it is given virtually no defence. Hacker seems simply to assert that although science may discover all sorts of interesting facts about the distinctive properties of objects of a given colour, it cannot tell us more about what colour *is*, for that is purely a conceptual matter, a question about the linguistic rules that govern our ascription of colour to objects. Thus, Hacker insists that anyone who asks the question 'What is red?' *must*, if he is to make any sense at all, be asking for an indication of how the word 'red' is used; any attempt to ask the question in a way that would require a scientific theory to answer it is, we are told, simply confused:

> If someone were to ask 'What is red?' we should rightly point to a sample and say 'That ↑ colour is red'. If he were to insist impatiently that of course he knows what 'red' *means*, but that he wants to know what red *is* (or, *really* is), we should judge him confused.[7]

This is not, it seems to me, immediately persuasive. If the questioner goes on to explain that he is asking about what it is that makes a surface look red, or about what it is that, as it were, makes it red, then we not only seem to understand the question, but also to have a fairly clear sense of what would count as an adequate answer to it. The questioner wants a scientific unpacking of the property that confronts him, in scientifically more basic terms, e.g. in terms that relate perceived colour to the light reflecting (or absorbing) properties of the surface. If someone were to respond to such a questioner by saying 'I've already told you what red is. It's that ↑ colour', then I think we might well be inclined to judge *him* confused: He hasn't understood that the request is for a scientific account of colour, not for an indication of how we use the word 'red'.

The problem is that simply confronting someone with the fact that in ordinary life the question 'What is red?' is answered by pointing to a sample cannot be enough to show that it is conceptually incoherent to expect science to provide an informative unpacking of what colour is, or of what makes something the colour it is. It seems useless to insist that 'there is no explanation of the "essential nature of red" that goes deeper than that',[8] for it does nothing to undermine our strong (though not necessarily unprejudiced) intuition that the phenomenon of colour cries out for informative explication in terms of what science regards as ontologically more basic. To a modern ear it is simply bizarre to insist that we must take the world at face value and treat all phenomena as on

[7] Ibid., pp. 185–6.
[8] Ibid., p. 185.

an equal footing. The whole success of science surely resides in its ability to explain the less basic in terms of the more basic. Why should science's ability to penetrate phenomena come to a halt just because the phenomenon happens to be something we describe or refer to in ordinary language?

The sense of an unacceptably dogmatic element in Hacker's view becomes still stronger when he confronts what some regard as the major problem for any objectivist conception of colour, namely the apparent relativity of colour both to the perceptual equipment of the perceiver and to the circumstances of observation. In both cases, Hacker appears to be prepared to bite the bullet. He argues, on the one hand, that our tendency to discern the relativity of colour to perceptual equipment or to observational circumstances arises in conceptual confusion, and on the other, that when these confusions are put aside, there is no obstacle to treating colour as an absolute property of objects as they are in themselves. He writes:

> Furthermore, it is altogether mistaken to suppose that characterizing objects in terms of their secondary qualities is *not* a description of things as they are in themselves independently of observers. Objects do not become colourless or invisible when no one is looking at them; . . . It is a fallacy bred of misinterpretation of scientific theory and of bad philosophy that the *esse* of secondary qualities is *percipi*. There are no grounds for denying that our descriptions of objects as coloured, . . . , are any less 'absolute' (observer-independent, characterizing the world as it is in itself) than descriptions of sizes, lengths, masses, and so forth.[9]

How, then, does Hacker cope with the fact that the colours that an individual, or a species, perceives is dependent upon the nature of that individual's, or of that species', visual equipment? The answer is that he copes with it by taking the colour descriptions of normal human beings as the measure of the colour of objects and regards those who do not see the world as thus described as in possession of a visual system that does not permit them to perceive the colours that objects objectively and intrinsically are:

> Secondary qualities are not relative. . . . 'This is red' does not mean 'This is red for me' or 'for human beings', although it may be that the colour-blind and members of other species cannot discriminate red.[10]
>
> That this rose is red, that one yellow is not a 'function of consciousness' but a function of the pigmentation of the petals, . . . What

[9] Ibid., p. 188.
[10] Ibid., pp. 182–3.

> *is* a function of consciousness, and of individual and species-specific peculiarities, is *the capacity to perceive those qualities*.[11]

There is nothing in what Hacker goes on to say to dispel the sense that he is dogmatically insisting that normal human beings are in a privileged position when it comes to perceiving the colours of objects. It is not, of course, that this is something that he should first of all have *established*, for the idea of establishing it is plainly incoherent. However, this fact is not on its own enough, it seems to me, to counter our sense that our perceptual perspective is contingent upon empirical facts about our perceptual equipment, and that there is to that extent something *prima facie* problematic in the idea that our perceptual perspective offers 'a description of things as they are in themselves independently of observers'.[12] To recognize that others see the world differently and then go on to insist, as Hacker does, that the perceptual capacities of others are to be measured against the qualities that we, i.e. normal human observers, ascribe to it seems to reject the apparent question this raises about the contingency of our own perceptual perspective far too quickly. It is hard to escape the sense that Hacker has, quite without warrant, assumed that, of all the different perceptual perspectives that exist, it is that of normal human observers that allows for perception of colour as it is objectively, or intrinsically, *in the object*.

Hacker's desire to treat colour as an objective property of objects as such involves him also in arguing that the standard examples by which philosophers try to show that colour is relative to observational circumstances are again badly described, and that when we describe these examples correctly, we can see that there is no obstacle to the idea that every object has its own intrinsic colour. It is not, Hacker argues, that the colour of an object is dependent, e.g., upon the nature of the illumination, and that ordinary colour descriptions are relativized to standard (i.e. white light) conditions of illumination. Rather, an object is the colour that it is, say, red, and certain conditions of illumination are optimal for discovering its colour, while in other conditions of illumination it may *look* some colour other than the colour it really is. Thus:

> Statements about colours of objects are not statements relativized to standard or normal observational conditions; but rather normal observational conditions are optimal opportunity conditions for perceiving what colour things really are.[13]

Hacker finds matters less straightforward in the case of surfaces that present a uniform colour, say, green, when viewed from a distance, but

[11] Ibid., p. 183.
[12] Ibid., p. 188.
[13] Ibid., p. 202.

are revealed as covered in minute blue and yellow dots when examined more closely. He has no difficulty with the case of a pointilliste painting:

> There is no doubt that if a Seurat canvas looks green from 20 feet and is revealed at 5 feet to be a mass of blue and yellow dots, then it is not (we do not count it as) green.[14]

The problem arises only when we begin to think of cases that present a uniform appearance however closely they are examined with the naked eye, but are revealed on inspection with an ordinary magnifying glass to be composite. Would we say that such a surface, unlike the Seurat canvas, *is* green, or only that it looks green but is not? For once Hacker is inclined to hesitate:

> Here I think we hesitate, for to be uniform in colour means that all constituent areas are visibly of that colour. That below the threshold of vision there may be colourless or differently coloured parts or particles does not imply that the surface is not uniformly coloured. *That* is what is meant by 'being uniformly red all over', we say, pointing at an object which *can be seen* to be thus. Nevertheless the determination of what counts as *visible* is vague. An ordinary magnifying glass is not so different from a lorgnette, and a lorgnette is just a kind of spectacles. And that seems to explain our hesitation. We can and do live happily with it.[15]

Hacker's aim, therefore, is to preserve the determinateness of colour that the objectivist view has traditionally been thought to require, by locating all the indeterminateness in the concept *visible*. Putting this vagueness aside, Hacker seems to be suggesting that the colour that a surface is, i.e. objectively is, is described by dividing the surface up into the largest possible monochrome patches and assigning a colour to each of these. Yet this is surely an extraordinary idealization of our ordinary language-game. It may represent *one* way of describing the colour of a surface, and it may be one that a painter, say, is particularly interested in. However, it does not represent our ordinary use of colour words. Our ordinary language-game seems to have very little use for the notion of 'uniform colour' that Hacker is led to construct in defence of his objectivism. Our colour words are employed in the description of a world in which surfaces are very rarely of uniform, flat colour, and our descriptions do not normally aim at the sort of absoluteness Hacker suggests. It would, moreover, be an extraordinary divergence from his central doctrine of the autonomy of grammar, for Hacker to insist that

[14] Ibid., p. 203.
[15] Ibid., p. 203.

when we describe a brick house as red, or someone's flesh as pink, or a dog as brown that we are using colour-language imprecisely, or that we are not really describing the colour of these things, but merely their apparent colour. Yet it is hard to see how Hacker could avoid the decidely *un*Wittgensteinian idea that behind our ordinary imprecise rules for the use of colour terms, there are absolutely precise rules that issue in a unique, determinate description of the objective colour of any object.

Hacker sees those who believe that science, and in particular physics, tells us what the world is really (or intrinsically) like, and who regard perceptual concepts as anthropocentric, indeterminate and unsuited to the objective characterization of the world, as victims of 'an illusory quest for a description of reality in terms of *true concepts*, concepts which in some ineffable sense mirror reality'.[16] If this is so, then it seems that in pursuing the ideal of the absolute or objective description of the colour of a surface, Hacker has himself fallen foul of the same illusion. For behind his pursuit of determinateness there is the same fundamental idea that there is only one determinate way the objective world is, and if our concepts are to describe that determinate, objective world, then our descriptions must mirror this absolute determinateness. It is this thought, in part, that prompts the tradition to exclude descriptions of colour from the objective conception, on the ground that they are inherently indeterminate. It is surely the same thought that prompts Hacker to argue against any indeterminateness in colour descriptions, and thereby rehabilitate colour for the objective description of what the world is like. The result, as we have seen, is as great a misrepresentation of the grammar of our ordinary language as any that Hacker believes to be perpetrated by the tradition.

If these criticisms of Hacker's position are correct, then it clearly becomes important to establish exactly how representative the views he presents are of Wittgenstein's thoughts about colour. I have already observed the apparent difference in tone and in focus of attention between Hacker's book and *Remarks on Colour*. Now that we have looked at some of the details of his position, we are, I believe, in a position to uncover much more important differences between Hacker and Wittgenstein.[17]

3. I want to suggest that it is a mistake to try to derive from *Remarks on Colour* any set of statements that sets out what colour is, or any

[16] Ibid., p. 193.

[17] This way of reading *Remarks on Colour* is influenced in part by my reading Beth Savickey's M.Litt. thesis, *Voices in the Later Wittgenstein*, which I examined for Cambridge University in Summer Term 1990.

principle or rule that uniquely settles what the intrinsic colour of an object is. Rather, Wittgenstein's fragmentary remarks are intended to bring us by degrees to a clearer vision of the language-game in which we describe the colours of the visual world, of the relation between this language-game and the 'geometry of colour' as it is represented by the colour wheel, and of the relation of both of these to normal vision. What makes colour such a 'spur . . . to philosophize'[18] is, in part at least, that initially all of these things are obscure to us. The problem of colour has the form 'I don't know my way about',[19] and the method of *Remarks on Colour* is to achieve a clearer view of the grammar of our language-game for describing the colours of the natural world, of the relation between this language-game and the precise system of concepts that is defined by monochrome samples of colour arranged on the colour wheel, and of how the concept of normal vision relates to these two distinct but related language-games. Wittgenstein clearly believes that it is by achieving a clearer vision of these things that we shall succeed in countering our urge to form false pictures of how our language functions. However, he also clearly believes, not only that the result of this enquiry is *not* something that can be *stated* in a series of propositions that answer the question 'What is colour?', but also that this enquiry reveals that the notion, so central to Hacker's account, of the uniquely correct description of the intrinsic colour of objects in a natural scene is itself highly suspect.

It is not, therefore, as Hacker's work would suggest, some identified or unidentified other, whose wilful straying from ordinary usage he is attempting to curb, who is the target of Wittgenstein's remarks. Rather, Wittgenstein is attempting to achieve a clarity which he (and we) initially lack, and which lays us open to embracing false pictures of how our ordinary colour-language *must* work; in particular to our overestimating both the importance for our ordinary language of the concepts of pure colour and monochromatic patch of colour, and the degree of independence of colour concepts and spatial concepts. The prejudices and distortions that his exploration throws up are, therefore, present in *his* (in *our*) preconceptions, and not merely in the thoughts of those who have been 'gullible'[20] enough to swallow the primary/secondary quality distinction. Thus, it is not to some benighted other but to himself (and to the reader) that Wittgenstein speaks when he remarks:

> In every serious philosophical problem uncertainty extends to the very roots of the problem.

[18] *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 66e.
[19] *Philosophical Investigations*, 123.
[20] Hacker, op. cit., p. 50.

We must always be prepared to learn something totally new.[21]

For here (when I consider colours for example) there is merely an inability to bring the concepts into some kind of order.

We stand there like the ox in front of the newly painted stall door.[22]

We have *prejudices* with respect to the use of words.[23]

The logic of the concept of colour is just much more complicated than it might seem.[24]

If these remarks about Wittgenstein's method are correct, then it seems to me clear that there can be no substitute for reading the text itself. For only in that way will the reader be led to cross and re-cross the landscape of our ordinary language-game, and only in that way will Wittgenstein's aim of giving us a sense or vision of that landscape, which outstrips our ability to put it into words, be achieved. It is only by reading the text that one can appreciate Wittgenstein's method of 'showing my pupils details of an immense landscape which they cannot possibly know their way around'.[25] The hope is that by acquiring a sense of this landscape we shall gradually lose our preoccupation with a preconceived, idealized image of how our ordinary colour concepts must work, which owes more to the abstract 'geometry of colour' than it does to observations of how we actually use our language in the description of a natural scene.

Thus, one of the most important motifs of *Remarks on Colour* is the idea that the grammar of the language in which we describe the colours of objects in a natural scene diverges quite radically from the grammar of colour concepts that are introduced in connection with flat, monochrome samples of colour arranged in the colour circle. Wittgenstein thinks of the latter language-game as equivalent to a 'mathematics of colour'. It is to be seen as an abstract system of propositions and samples that together, determine an abstract system of concepts, within which every individual concept has, via the sample that defines it, a determinate structural relation to every other. Within the abstract system of colour concepts fixed by means of the colour circle, the concepts 'lighter than', 'darker than', 'pure colour', 'mixed colour', 'saturated colour', etc, pick out salient, non-temporal or structural, features of the pattern of colour samples in the colour circle. The question of whether this abstract system records the *correct* relations among colour concepts makes no sense; the system itself is what determines the structural relations between the elements of the system.

[21] *Remarks on Colour*, p. 4e, 15.
[22] Ibid., p. 16e, 12.
[23] Ibid., p. 29e, 101.
[24] Ibid., p. 29e, 106.
[25] *Culture and Value*, p. 56e, quoted in Beth Savickey.

The pattern within the system does not record relations between colours that were already there to be discovered. Rather the system itself constitutes the grammar of these colour concepts in the same way that arithmetic constitutes the concepts of addition, multiplication, etc. There is no justification for the system as a whole, but to a human being who has acquired these systems of concepts, these patterns, these orderings and relations, are not only experienced as inevitable, but define what it is to calculate, or to use colour terms, correctly.[26]

It is clearly one of Wittgenstein's central claims that we understand the apriority and necessity of propositions like 'There cannot be a reddish-green', 'White is the lightest colour', 'Nothing can be both red and green', etc., by reference to the geometry or mathematics of colour. These propositions do not record anything that lies in the unknown nature of colour, nor do they record phenomenological laws, but rather they state or describe the structural relations within the system of colour concepts that is defined by means of the colour circle. 'There cannot be a reddish-green' is therefore to be seen as strictly analogous to 'There cannot be a regular biangle'.[27] However, as I remarked just now, it is one of the major concerns of *Remarks on Colour* to show that understanding the grammar of the mathematics of colour does not on its own give us an understanding of the grammar of our everyday colour-language, as we use it in the description of the natural world we inhabit. The mathematics of colour represents an ideal, determinate system; part of the temptation to misunderstand the grammar of our ordinary language-game lies in our tendency to read the grammar of this ideal abstract system into our ordinary language:

> Lichtenberg says that very few people have ever seen pure white. Do most people use the word wrongly, then? And how did *he* learn the correct use?—On the contrary: he constructed an ideal use from an actual one. The way we construct a geometry. And 'ideal' does not mean something specially good, but only something carried to extremes.[28]

Our tendency to think of our ordinary language-game of describing the colour of natural objects in terms of two-dimensional, monochrome

[26] *Remarks on Colour*, p. 17e, 3.

[27] Wittgenstein seems to be more equivocal when it comes to propositions like 'There cannot be a transparent white', 'There cannot be a shining brown', which belong essentially to our everyday language-game, rather than the idealized 'geometry of colour'. He finds these propositions so perplexing partly because they seem to hover on the boundary between the grammatical and the empirical. Thus: 'The question is: is constructing a "transparent white body" like constructing a "regular biangle?"', ibid., p. 35e, 138.

[28] Ibid., p. 21e, 35.

patches of determinate colour is to be seen as an application of a preconception of how our colour language must work, which is derived from our mistaken preoccupation with the abstract geometry of colour over the workings of our everyday language-game. Our mistake is analogous to the error of supposing that Euclidean geometry fixes the grammar of our ordinary language-game for describing visual space. In both cases, the result is a pressure both towards thinking of our ordinary description of, say, a brick house as red, or of a road as straight, as imprecise, and towards insisting that a correct description of what we see will be one that meets the standards of these idealized geometries. So, like Hacker, we are sent in search of the unique, absolutely determinate, correct description of the colour or shape of an object. Instead of recognizing that our ordinary language-game is related to, but nevertheless distinct from, our abstract, idealized geometries, we conclude that behind our ordinary, hasty description there must lie a single, absolutely precise description of the world. Wittgenstein describes this tendency in a number of remarks:

> We are inclined to believe the analysis of our colour concepts would lead ultimately to the *colours of places* in our visual field, which are independent of any spatial or physical interpretation.[29]
>
> There seems to be a more fundamental colour concept than that of surface colour. It seems that one could present it either by means of small coloured elements in the field of vision, or by means of luminous points like stars. And larger coloured areas are composed of these coloured points or small coloured patches. Thus we could describe the colour impression of a surface area by specifying the position of the numerous small coloured patches within this area.[30]
>
> The first 'solution' which occurs to us for the problem of colours is that the 'pure' concepts refer to points or tiny indivisible patches of colour.[31]

Wittgenstein's technique is to show us the error involved in thinking this way by repeatedly focusing our attention on the conflicts between this idealized image of how our ordinary colour concepts work and our actual language-game. The idea seems to be that by focusing on aspects of our ordinary language-game that either conflict with or escape capture within the restricted conception of grammar that our preoccupation with the geometry of colour has given us, we shall gradually come to a more adequate picture of the grammar of our ordinary language, one that *preserves*, rather than legislates away, the indeter-

[29] Ibid., p. 10e, 61.
[30] Ibid., p. 24e, 28.
[31] Ibid., p. 30e, 108.

minateness and lack of precision inherent in our ordinary colour descriptions. The picture of our colour-language that Wittgenstein builds up by degrees reveals that our ordinary colour concepts have little or nothing to do with the idea of a monochrome patch of colour, or with the ideas of pure or saturated colour. Rather, our ordinary concepts function to describe objects with a variety of textures and with different degrees of transparency, opacity, cloudiness, etc., that are embedded in the context of a larger visual scene with which they interact, that may be variously illuminated, and that themselves have varying degrees of luminosity. What we need is to forget our idealization and come to a clearer view of the grammar of this ordinary language-game, as it is revealed in our everyday use of colour terms:

> In my room I am surrounded by objects of different colours. It is easy to say what colours they are. But if I were asked to say what colour I am now seeing from here at, say, *this* place on my table, I couldn't answer.[32]
>
> And we must not forget that our colour words characterize the impression of a surface over which our glance wanders. That's what they're for.[33]

Our idealized image of the grammar of our ordinary language makes us inclined to think that the way to determine what colour a point in the visual field really is we should have to isolate it from its surroundings and view it on a neutral background. In fact, our ordinary use of colour terms is generally a response to the scene as a whole, so that we are describing the colour as it is in a context, and not as it is in isolation. Again, our preoccupation with the grammar of a language that relates to monochrome patches of colour leads us to overlook how the three-dimensional world of objects is deeply implicated in our ordinary language of colour description. The fact that we have the concepts silver- and gold-coloured, where these descriptions imply a surface that shines or glitters as our gaze passes over it, brings out how our ordinary colour-language describes surfaces, not colour patches. Similarly, the way our ordinary use of colour concepts is generally independent of the effect of highlights and shadows, and of wide variations in illumination, shows how our ordinary language functions to describe objects situated in the illuminated space that surrounds us. Finally, the way our colour concepts interact in a complex way with concepts like transparency and reflection, which require the notion of three-dimensionality or depth, shows again that our ordinary colour concepts are not independent of spatial ones.

[32] Ibid., p. 28e, 95.
[33] Ibid., p. 25e, 64.

In so far as the search for determinate descriptions of colour was prompted by a mistaken preconception of the grammar of our ordinary language, so, alongside Wittgenstein's attempt to show us the unexpected richness and complexity of our ordinary language-game, there is a concern to bring us to acknowledge the indeterminateness that is inherent in our everyday concepts. Thus, without further specification of a method by which the description of colour is to be determined, it simply makes no sense to ask, within our ordinary language-game, 'What is *this* colour, here, at *this* spot?'. Do we mean what colour would we use to represent this spot in a painting? But what colour is that? Is it the colour of the pigment used, or the colour we would describe it as in this context? Or is the colour of the spot the colour of a sample that it matches? And again, how should we allow for the effect of the surrounding context? And how do we allow for the fact that the mattness or shininess of a surface is an integral part of the overall colour impression that we have of it? Is matt black the same colour as shiny black? And can a transparent green glass match an opaque colour sample? Can the red of a sunset or the blackness of a dark night match a colour sample? The whole idea of a unique, determinate colour description is shown to be an illusion created by our tendency to idealize the grammar of our ordinary language-game.

The point here is not that colour terms are vague, in the sense that the boundary between two colours, say red and orange, is not a sharp one. Rather, the point is that there is a complexity or richness in our ordinary language-game that is itself a source of indeterminateness. The fact that we use colour terms to describe a variety of sorts of thing—flat coloured surfaces, surfaces of natural objects, transparent objects, shining objects, the sky, flames, the illumination, vapours, etc.—means that the concept sameness of colour is inherently indeterminate. A flame may be orange and so may the surface of an object, but can the flame and the surface match one another in colour? Similarly, the fact that we use colour terms to describe surfaces with different textures, and with different degrees of mattness, or of transparency, or of luminosity also entails an inherent indeterminateness in the notion of sameness of colour. The fact that the colour of an object (or of a patch of colour) is affected by its surroundings means that there is no determinate answer to the question 'What colour is it?'. The fact that we use colour terms to describe objects, such as human flesh, animal fur, wooden objects, areas in a landscape, etc., the surfaces of which do not present either flat blocks of colour or even small patches of flat colour, also entails an inherent indeterminancy in our colour descriptions. I do not speak loosely or inaccurately when I describe a dog as brown, or flesh as pink, or a field as green, although for another purpose, say for

the purpose of painting, I may want a more fine-grained description. The error is in thinking that only *one* description can be the right one:

> [L]ook at all that can be meant by 'description of what is seen'.—But this just is what is called description of what is seen. There is not *one genuine* proper case of such description—the rest being just vague, something which awaits clarification, or which must be swept aside as rubbish.[34]

4. As I have interpreted it, *Remarks on Colour* is primarily concerned, not to advance a conception of colour, but to provide a corrective to the false idealizations that afflict our preconceived idea of how our ordinary, everyday colour-language works. One of the most unsatisfactory aspects of Hacker's book is that the author remains throughout in the grip of the very picture of our ordinary colour language that Wittgenstein is attempting to free us from. It is, moreover, a complete misrepresentation of Wittgenstein's aim to try to derive from his discussion any set of statements that we might put in opposition to a scientific theory of colour. Yet while Hacker asserts all along that the question of what colour is is a conceptual one, the statements about colour that he goes on to make seem indistinguishable from a substantive theory of colour. Hacker's reassurance that he is making only grammatical remarks does nothing to dispel the impression that he is actually out to show, simply through the examination of our concepts, that, contrary to what scientists have long believed, *colour is in the objects*; not only that, but objects are the very colours that human beings take them to be.

The absence of any direct criticism of science in *Remarks on Colour* certainly encourages the thought that something quite different is going on in Wittgenstein. I have already suggested that we should read Wittgenstein's text, not as a tribunal in which the conceptual abuses of others are revealed by appeal to ordinary language, but as an attempt to achieve a clarity about how our everyday colour-language functions, which Wittgenstein (and the reader) himself initially lacks. The question arises, however, of what exactly Wittgenstein believes a perspicuous representation of the grammar of our everyday language achieves philosophically. Is it possible for him to represent the clarity we achieve concerning the grammar of our language as clarity concerning the *phenomenon* of colour as such, without appearing to fall into the sort of *a priori* theorizing that I have suggested Hacker may be guilty of? The question raises the wide and difficult issue of how Wittgenstein believes we must conceive of the relation between the subject, his language, and the world. I want to suggest that it is only by

[34] *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 200.

examining this issue that we have any chance of understanding what is going on in *Remarks on Colour*. I believe, moreover, that the question receives quite explicit discussion in Wittgenstein's text, in the form of numerous remarks on the issue of whether normal vision can be described.

Within ordinary life the relation of the world to my language and to my subjectivity is not in question. I live unaware of my point of view *qua* point of view. What I am confronted with is *the world*, which is given as independent of me, as something that discloses itself to my gaze, and as something that I describe in my language. However, when I become philosophically reflective, I seem forced to recognize that there is the one and only world that I confront only in so far as I am a subject that confronts it, and that the subject that confronts the world is itself only contingent. This seems to put the world that I confront and its relation to this contingent subject in question. For what I pre-reflectively took to be *the* world is now revealed as *my* world, as a world that exists for this contingent subject. I should like to argue that it is an overriding concern of Wittgenstein's philosophy to achieve some sort of resolution of the tension between our ordinary attitude and what philosophical reflection reveals that does not force us to qualify or compromise either. He is fundamentally concerned to do justice both to the reflective discovery that the world I confront is the world as it exists for me and to our ordinary attitude that the world is wholly outside and wholly independent of my subjectivity.

One of Wittgenstein's most significant attempts to achieve a stable balance between the fact that what is given immanently as *the* world is revealed reflectively as *my* world occurs, of course, in the discussion of solipsism in the *Tractatus*. Rather than see these remarks as an aberration,[35] I would like to interpret them as an attempt to resolve the tension we have just identified, in such a way that the end result is a motivation of a form of naturalism that provides the framework for Wittgenstein's philosophical method. Wittgenstein's aim in these remarks seems to be to show that a proper appreciation of the reflective discovery that subjectivity represents, as it were, the outer limit is completely at odds with any attempt to put this view in the form of a philosophical theory. The solipsist's error is that he tries to construct a philosophical theory about the relation between the subject and the world, which requires him to constitute the subject as an object that can be represented and theorized about, and thereby to transend the very limit he is attempting to make manifest. A genuine appreciation of the subject as limit must be shown in a total unwillingness to theorize at the transcendental or

[35] For the contrary view, see Hacker, *Insight and Illusion* (Oxford University Press, 1972), chap. III, section 3.

philosophical level. At the same time, our acceptance of subjectivity as the limit must be expressed in my complete acceptance of the world that I confront as the one and only world. Reflectively recognizing the subject as limit is shown to harmonize with our ordinary attitude in so far as it is seen to be properly expressed in nothing more and nothing less than my adoption of the naturalistic attitude towards the phenomena that constitute the world that I confront:

> Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.[36]

The suggestion is that Wittgenstein's descriptive method in philosophy can only properly be understood in the context of the naturalism that is the outcome of the reflection on the way subjectivity is implicated in what is for me the one and only world. It is not that Wittgenstein dogmatically asserts that The World, or Reality, is the-world-as-it-is-for-me; something which, as we have seen, Hacker seems tempted to do. Rather, it is that he sees my silent acceptance of the world I confront as the one and only world as an acknowledgement of my inability to transcend the limits of my own subjectivity. It is, I believe, in connection with this idea that the remarks on normal vision in *Remarks on Colour* are to be understood. The point of these remarks is, on the one hand, that we cannot describe the phenomenon of normal vision in the same way as we describe the phenomenon of colour-blindness, and on the other, that our description of colour-blindness is not something that the colour-blind can understand in the same way that that normally sighted do. It is normally sighted people who discover the phenomenon of colour-blindness, not the colour-blind, and they describe it in the concepts of the normally sighted, as a deviation or defect. The only understanding that the colour-blind (or totally blind) have either of normal vision or of their own condition must be in terms of the *abilities* of the normally sighted, not in terms of what it is to see as the normally sighted do. What it is to see as the normally sighted do is not something that can be described at all; normal vision is something that one has; it is implicated in what the world is for me, without itself being something within that world that can be identified (except in terms of abilities) and described.

Normal vision represents, therefore, one aspect of subjectivity *qua* outer limit. We cannot theorize about the relation of normal vision to the world, for this would be to try to go beyond the limit that subjectivity represents and constitute it as a phenomenon within the world.

[36] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.64.

Our acknowledgement of normal vision *qua* limit must be expressed, therefore, purely in our acceptance of the world we confront as the one and only world that we can represent or speak about, i.e. in our adoption of the naturalistic attitude. The motivation for carrying out the philosophical task of describing the phenomena that constitute this world, as they are represented in my language, lies in the fact that we do not initially command a clear view of them. Moreover, in the absence of a perspicuous representation of the phenomena that constitute the world I confront, we are inclined, in philosophy, to idealize that world, and project on to it an idea of determinateness that is entirely of our own making.

I think that this view of Wittgenstein's method at least makes it clear why he is so convinced that a scientific theory of colour is not what he is seeking. Wittgenstein is concerned with a description of what *essentially* lies open to view, namely the phenomena that constitute the world that we inhabit or confront. A scientific method that aims to penetrate phenomena and uncover what is hidden from us necessarily makes no connection with what Wittgenstein has set himself to achieve. Likewise, it seems clear that nothing that Wittgenstein's descriptive method reveals about the grammar of the everyday language-game in which we describe the colour of the objects of our lived world could possibly be represented as a theory of colour. Wittgenstein is concerned purely with the task of bringing us to a clearer vision of the phenomena of our lived world, or form of life. However, while I think this shows that it is wrong to think that there could be a direct confrontation between the results of a scientific theory and Wittgenstein's account, I think it would also be wrong to conclude that there is a complete stand-off between science and Wittgenstein's philosophical method.

For one thing, it seems clear that while the primary/secondary quality distinction influences or informs scientific theorizing, it is not itself properly seen as an empirical or scientific theory. Rather, the metaphysical picture that is expressed by the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is itself an attempt to theorize about the relation between the world and the subject. Yet in so far as the distinction is an explicit attempt to separate out the contribution of The World and the contribution of The Subject, it necessarily crosses the boundary of what can coherently be said or theorized about. The philosophical cost of this misguided theorizing is, moreover, manifest in the plethora of philosophical problems that come in the wake of the distinction. The problem of how the mind and the so-called secondary qualities 'fit into nature', the sceptical problem of the external world, and the problem of other minds can all be traced back to the idea that The World is not the lived world we inhabit, but the world conceived as something hidden behind the phenomena of our lived world, and

describable only in an impoverished language unusable within our ordinary lives.

A large part of the appeal of the picture that Wittgenstein rejects lies, of course, in its promise to *explain* some phenomena (e.g. consciousness and colour) in terms that are, within the picture, more fundamental. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to accepting Wittgensteinian naturalism is its apparent abandonment of all explanatory ambitions; all phenomena are treated as on an equal footing, and all are subject to the same purely descriptive technique. Yet the idea that *everything* can be explained is clearly an illusion: we must accept that *something*, the existence of the physical world, for example, *cannot* be explained. Furthermore, even the more restricted explanatory aim of accounting for the emergent 'subjective' phenomena of consciousness and colour in terms acceptable to physical science has led only to the intractable philosophical problems connected with reductionism. As long as we preserve the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, it seems clear that we shall be faced with the following unattractive choice. Either we can accept the universality of scientific explanation and commit ourselves to a reductive account of the mind and secondary qualities, but fail thereby to do justice to the notion of a phenomenology. Or we can do justice to the phenomenal nature of secondary qualities and to the distinctive phenomenology associated with being minded, but at the cost of compromising on the universality of scientific explanation, and still worse, at the cost of being forced to conceive of subjectivity as an intensional realm that is not immediately revelatory of the objective world, but consists in awareness of the experiential states that the objective world causes or occasions in us. Faced with this choice, it seems hard to maintain that the explanatory ambition associated with a Seventeenth Century metaphysics is entirely a good thing.

Wittgensteinian naturalism is not the idea that nothing can be explained, but the idea that explanation is restricted to the empirical or causal explanation of what happens in the one and only world that we can coherently speak about or represent, i.e. the natural or lived world of phenomena. What Wittgensteinian naturalism rejects is the idea that explanations that are constructed by the human subject can coherently transcend that subject and explain not only its existence and nature, but the relation between the world as it is for that subject and the world as it is objectively. A proper recognition of the limits of subjectivity is expressed in the silent acceptance of our world as the one and only world. It is not, therefore, that Wittgenstein is attempting to enforce a clearly established set of linguistic rules on the scientist, nor is he attempting to derive from our linguistic rules a set of statements about what there is that conficts with the statements made in science. Rather

he is attempting to achieve a philosophically more enlightened conception of the relation between the subject and the world, which replaces the Seventeenth Century division of The World and The Mind or The Subject, by a thoroughgoing naturalism that seeks to uncover the phenomena of the world we confront by means of a purely descriptive enquiry.

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