

The Metaphysics of Perspective: Tense and Colour

A. W. MOORE
St Hugh's College

1. Is tense real? It is as difficult to know how to interpret this question as it is to know, on any reasonable interpretation, which side to take. But I am persuaded that there *are* reasonable interpretations, by which I mean interpretations whereby neither the view that tense is real nor the view that tense is unreal is crazy. On one such interpretation, to affirm that tense is real is to be committed to the following, and to affirm that tense is unreal is to be committed to its denial.

Given a true tensed representation, in other words given a true judgement, thought, assertion or suchlike from a particular temporal point of view, there is no conveying what makes it true except from that same point of view. Thus suppose I know that it is humid today. Then what makes my knowledge true is the fact that it is humid today. But this is a fact that can be conveyed only today. If I say tomorrow, 'It was humid yesterday,' that will not convey the same fact. At best it will convey some intrinsically related fact, about (as it were) hesternal humidity, which can itself be conveyed only tomorrow. Reality fractures into different temporal worlds. The facts that peculiarly constitute one of these worlds can be conveyed only from the corresponding temporal point of view.¹

I myself would deny that tense is real on this interpretation. But I am not concerned to defend that position now. I am concerned to signal the fact that there is a live metaphysical issue here about the character of reality; and that it is an issue with obvious potential for generalization. The potential arises

¹ Why might anybody think this? One reason would be to accommodate an intuition which many people have, that the future is open, which is to say, roughly, that nothing is the case at any given time about what is contingently the case at later times. Suppose the future *is* open. And suppose I said yesterday, 'It will be humid tomorrow.' Then not only did this fail to convey the fact that verifies my knowledge that it is humid today. It was not even true. For it was not (then) the case that it would be humid today. By far the most natural way to capture this idea, if not the only way, is by appeal to different temporal worlds; more specifically, by appeal to a sequence of temporal worlds such that those later in the sequence contain details corresponding to gaps in those earlier in the sequence. (For further related discussion see Robin Le Poidevin and Murray Macbeth (eds), *The Philosophy of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Introduction and Pt 1.)

because the issue is an issue about points of view. Granted that talk of temporal points of view is already metaphorical, there is the prospect of analogous issues concerning points of view of other kinds, captured by some further metaphorical extension of the notion. Thus we can ask: is perspective of any other kind real? Are there points of view of any other kind such that, given a true representation from one of these points of view, there is no way of conveying what makes the representation true except from the same point of view? Or is there perhaps some general reason, having to do with the very unity of reality, for denying that such a thing is ever possible, however broadly the notion of a point of view is construed?

Notice that these questions have no direct connection with the question whether there can ever be representations that are not from any point of view. The possibility of such representations does not immediately preclude the reality of some kind of perspective: perhaps there are limits to what can be achieved with representations from no point of view. Nor, conversely, does the *impossibility* of such representations immediately guarantee the reality of some kind of perspective: perhaps, in order to convey what makes a true representation from a point of view true, it is necessary to do so from some point of view or other, even if not from that one.

Nevertheless, although there are no direct connections between these questions, there are indirect connections. The view that there can be representations that are not from any point of view, or *absolute* representations as I shall call them, does go naturally with the view that perspective of any given kind is unreal. And anyone who holds both these views—as I do—is but one step away from the following ambitious conclusion.

(A) Any fact can be conveyed from no point of view.

I cannot even begin to rehearse arguments for (A) here.² But I do want to insist that (A) is an interesting and defensible claim, with far-reaching consequences, both about the character of reality and about the metaphysics of perspective. Arguing for (A) would be one way, I believe, of successfully undertaking what Barry Stroud calls ‘the philosophical quest for reality’ (p. x) in his fascinating and thought-provoking book.

This belief will play a sufficiently prominent role in what follows to merit a label of its own. Thus:

(A) To argue for (A) would be one way of successfully undertaking the philosophical quest for reality.

Now Stroud is sceptical about whether the philosophical quest for reality can be successfully undertaken. He does not argue outright that it cannot. He

² I try to do so in *Points of View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

is aware, amongst other things, of the threat of self-stultification in doing so (p. xi). But, by probing and dissecting various manifestations of the urge to undertake the quest, he makes clear the sorts of reservations he has. And, although he does not address (A) head-on, there is plenty in his book to indicate where, in (A), those reservations would find targets. What I should like to do in this essay is to deflect some of these reservations.

2. In general, reservations about (A) will fall into two categories: those that concern the truth of (A); and those that concern the capacity of (A), even if true, to provide what is required. The second category will include reservations about how far the notion of a point of view can be extended. Many people will deny that it can be extended far enough to give (A) any metaphysical bite.

Although the two categories are not merely separate, but in some tension with each other, sceptics about (A) are liable, in practice, to voice reservations of both sorts. This is not least because defendants of (A) are liable, in practice, to respond to successive attacks on their position by alternately weakening and strengthening (A), for instance by alternately contracting and expanding the notion of a point of view. There is enough in Stroud's book to indicate how he would react if he found his target moving in this way. I shall accordingly cull reservations of both sorts from his book, though obviously I hope that my own conception of (A) is sufficiently stable that, were I to try to present Stroud with arguments for it, his scepticism would eventually settle—in a way that would make some of these reservations look, to him as well as to me, irrelevant.

3. Before I proceed I want to make two observations about the particular focus that Stroud gives his book. First, although he begins at the same high level of abstraction at which we now are, by the end of Chapter 2 he has narrowed his discussion down to a discussion of colour. It is not that he is unconcerned with the more general metaphysical issues at stake. It is rather that he doubts whether we can get far with these unless we have a sharper focus. Indeed that doubt is itself part of his overall scepticism about the philosophical quest for reality. When, in his final chapter, he warns of the dangers of generalizing from what he has been arguing about colour, there is a sense in which this adds to the force of his arguments rather than detracting from their force.

Although I too shall focus to some extent on colour, I have given my discussion an additional focus on tense, because I think that this will assist me in my project of deflecting reservations about (A). But of course, the most obvious reservation about (A), as far as its application to colour is concerned—a reservation which belongs to the second category—is precisely that no extension of the notion of a point of view entitles us to assimilate tense and

colour in this way; that colour is not a matter of perspective at all. Indeed Stroud spends much of his book—in effect—developing this very reservation. Obviously I do not share it. It seems to me that what makes tense a matter of perspective has something fundamental to do with the following fact: if I say truly, on 25 June, ‘It is humid,’ and if I say truly, the following 25 December, ‘It is snowing,’ then it is not possible to convey what makes my two representations true simply by saying, ‘It is humid and it is snowing.’ This impossibility, it seems to me, is importantly reflected in the impossibility of conveying, simply by conjoining representations of the two relevant types, what makes true both my claim that lemons are yellow and a true representation produced by some creature, even some imaginary creature, whose sensory apparatus is incompatible with normal human vision. Not that I expect these highly schematic remarks to satisfy Stroud. But I hope they do enough to prevent what follows from being void of interest even before it starts. At any rate I shall assume henceforth that colour *is* a matter of perspective.

My second observation concerns the fact that Stroud several times adverts to physics. The concepts of physics might be expected to provide flesh for the skeletal idea of an absolute representation. And it is in this sort of connection that Stroud mentions them. But here too he finds a natural target for his scepticism. For, as he complains on p. 53—again, in effect—unless ‘physics’ is understood in a question-beggingly indeterminate way, then there is no good reason to expect its concepts to provide flesh for these bones. I agree. Even so, I do think that there is good reason to expect absolute representations to be couched in physical terms. This is simply because I do not understand this expectation in a relevantly meaty way. I understand it as a defining characteristic of physics, or better, perhaps, as a directive for physicists.

4. I shall now list various reservations about (A) that I think can be found in Stroud’s book. (Of course, since Stroud never explicitly addresses (A), I have, in most cases, had to extrapolate from what he says. It is for Stroud to tell me if I have extrapolated so far that the reservations are no longer his.)

First Reservation: (A) is not itself absolute.

This reservation belongs to the first category. It derives from Stroud’s observation that ‘if we assert [all the sentences in the vocabulary of current physical science that are taken to be true]... we will not so far have said that the world we believe in is a *physical* world;... [we] will have said things in a certain vocabulary about the world, but we will not have said anything about that vocabulary,’ (p. 52, his emphasis). Stroud’s point is that physicalism is not itself the stuff of physics. On my non-meaty understanding of ‘physical’

and its cognates this is pretty much equivalent to the claim that (A) is not itself absolute.

Indeed it is not. (Talk of ‘conveying facts’ has to be from some interpretative point of view for example.) But this does not prevent (A) from being true. There would of course be a threat to the truth of (A) if, granted its truth, it conveyed a fact that could *only* be conveyed in that way. But there is no reason to suppose that this is the case. Indeed if the truth of (A) is conceptual, as I take it to be, then there is good reason to construe the notion of a fact in such a way that (A) does not convey any fact at all—or in such a way that it conveys a fact which could just as well be conveyed, from no point of view, by saying, ‘0 = 0.’

Second Reservation: Many facts are facts about particulars, but it is impossible to refer to particulars from no point of view.

This reservation likewise belongs to the first category. It derives from scepticism that Stroud voices (pp. 55 ff.) about the possibility of expressing the fact that the earth is 93 million miles from the sun, in suitably general terms.

But is this what (A) requires? What (A) requires is the possibility of ‘conveying’ the fact that the earth is 93 million miles from the sun in suitably general terms. (In suitably general terms, because it is indeed impossible to refer to particulars from no point of view.) Admittedly, I have so far made free use of this notion of ‘conveyance’ without any explanation. But all that matters for these purposes is that conveying a fact can involve conveying not just that fact, but more besides: conveyance is a sort of implication.

Stroud anticipates such a response. He extends his scepticism (pp. 57 - 58) to the possibility of even implying that the earth is 93 million miles from the sun in suitably general terms. In particular, he points out, this cannot be done by saying that there is a planet of a certain kind which is 93 million miles from a star of a certain kind. True; but can it not be done by saying that *any* planet of a certain kind is 93 million miles from a star of a certain kind, where the earth and the sun are understood to be, or at least can be understood to be, *this* planet and *this* star of those respective kinds?

Third Reservation: Many facts are facts about people’s psychology, but no amount of knowledge from no point of view can suffice for knowing anything about anyone’s psychology.

This is another reservation belonging to the first category. In fact it is a variation on the second reservation. It forces us to consider once again how much ‘conveyance’ requires. There is an implicit statement of this reservation in Stroud’s claim (p. 89) that ‘if we restrict ourselves to [a full account of

what goes on physically in a certain area during a certain period of time], we will not know whether anything psychological occurs during that period.'

Perhaps we will not. But likewise, if we restrict ourselves to a full tenseless history of the world, we will not know what is happening *now*. Yet surely there is a good sense of conveyance in which such a history will convey what is happening now. It remains to be shown that it is not also good enough to deflect this third reservation.³

Fourth Reservation: Even if facts about the colours of things could be conveyed from no point of view, without the use of colour concepts, it would not follow that colour was unreal.

This reservation belongs to the second category. It finds expression towards the end of Chapter 3 (e.g. p. 61). And it invites the use, in response, of that most familiar of philosophical tactics: it all depends on what you mean when you say that colour is unreal.

Reconsider tense. I began this essay by specifying a debate about the reality of tense which, if (A) is true, must be settled negatively. *In that sense* (A) entails both the unreality of tense and the unreality of colour. But (A) does not entail the unreality of tense in any sense that means that we are wrong to think of ourselves as now living in the third millennium A.D. Nor, by the same token, does it entail the unreality of colour in any sense that means that we are wrong to think of lemons as yellow. In this respect, much of Stroud's extremely interesting and powerful critique of what he calls an 'unmasking' explanation of our belief in colour, that is to say an explanation which 'explains [our] belief in [colour] without having to suppose that that belief is true' (p. 75), is beside the point. (A) does not entail the falsehood of any of our beliefs about colour, save the beliefs of those few metaphysicians who have pondered whether, *in the offending sense*, colour is real and who have decided that it is. (A) even allows that no explanation of 'our belief in colour', in any sense in which we do by and large have that belief, could get anywhere without the supposition that the belief is true. As for whether this deprives (A) of its metaphysical bite, surely there is bite enough in the claim that colour is unreal, in the only sense in which (A) entails that it is.

Fifth Reservation: It is not clear that we can draw any reasonable and relevant distinction between a sense in which colour is real and a sense in which it is not.

³ This is a summary allusion to an extremely familiar and large debate. For two important contributions to the debate see David Lewis, 'What Experience Teaches', and Laurence Nemirow, 'Physicalism and the Cognitive Role of Acquaintance', both in W.G. Lycan (ed.), *Mind and Cognition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

This reservation obviously reinforces the fourth, in light of the response just given. Stroud voices it in terms of what he calls a ‘felt conflict... between two opposed conceptions of... what the world is like,’ a conflict which he says arises from ‘two apparently incompatible ways’ of answering the question ‘whether objects are coloured,’ (p. 186).

But once again I urge the comparison with tense. The view that tense is unreal, as identified at the beginning of this essay, is not in any conflict with the view that some events have occurred, others are occurring, and others are yet to occur.

Sixth Reservation: No expansion of the notion of a point of view capable of sustaining this comparison between colour and tense would leave us ‘with [any] determinate beliefs about the world at all,’ (p. 187).

This reservation reinforces the fifth, and thus, indirectly, the fourth. It finds expression on pp. 186 – 187. The underlying worry is that the notion of a point of view is being extended so far that, for any given belief, the conceptual apparatus needed to frame that belief is itself a point of view that the belief is from. This in turn threatens a vicious regress: in order fully to specify the content of any given belief, it is necessary to make explicit mention of this conceptual apparatus; but then it is necessary also to make explicit mention of the conceptual apparatus needed to frame this fuller specification; and so on *ad infinitum*. This seems to preclude a full specification of the content of the original belief, which in turn suggests that the belief has no determinate content at all.

There is much to say in response. First, of course, once the notion of a point of view has been extended *that* far, then there is an altogether more urgent concern about (A): namely, that (A) is false. This brings us back to the question of whether a balance can be struck between maintaining the truth of (A) and maintaining its capacity to provide what is required of it. I still see no reason why not. But in any case I think this reservation betrays certain misunderstandings about the very idea of a point of view. Let *b* be a belief from a point of view, however narrowly or broadly construed. Then it is not clear in what sense of ‘full specification’ a simple expression of *b* does not already constitute a full specification of its content. (If I believe that it is humid today, then the content of my belief is that it is humid today, neither more nor less.) Suppose, however, that some such sense of ‘full specification’ can be given. Suppose, in particular, that in order fully to specify *b*’s content, it is necessary to make explicit mention of any point of view that *b* is from *and* of any point of view that one’s own explicit mention of any point of view is from. Suppose, finally, that the resultant regress cannot be blocked by fully specifying *b*’s content from no point of view. (This may be true even if (A) is true: the notion of a point of view may itself be unfit to

appear in an absolute representation.) *Then* it is not clear why, in order for *b*'s content to be determinate, it has to admit of full specification.