

Philosophy Seminar: G.E.M. Anscombe on Perception

The influence of G.E.M. Anscombe (1919-2001) can be observed in a wide range of topics in contemporary analytic philosophy. To name a few instances: her *Intention* (1957) gave impetus to the philosophical interest in intention and action; “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958) brought the concept of virtue into contemporary philosophical ethics; “Causality and Determinism” (1971/81) undermined the, until then, orthodox Humean account of causation. The aim of the seminar is to discuss Anscombe’s view on the nature of perception put forward in another extremely influential article, “The Intentionality of Sensation: A Grammatical Feature” (1965). Anscombe argues in the article that neither the Sense-Datum Theory nor “Ordinary Language” Philosophy gets perception right, and proposes the view according to which objects of perception are intentional objects whose ontological status is akin to the status of direct objects in grammar – we cannot sensibly ask about it.

Our seminar will take as its departure points Roger Teichmann’s *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe* (2008) and Howard Robinson’s *Perception* (1994). Teichmann’s book is a discussion and defense of, among other things, Anscombe’s view on perception. Robinson, one of the contemporary defenders of the Sense-Datum Theory, in a chapter of his book *Perception* argues against Anscombe that the question of the ontological status of intentional objects makes perfect sense (the argument was first advanced in his “The Irrelevance of Intentionality to Perception” (1974)). The seminar will begin with Roger Teichmann and Howard Robinson presenting and discussing Anscombe’s and Robinson’s arguments. As the discussion progresses, the floor will be open to all participants.

Summary

According to the Sense-Datum Theory, once the prevailing theory of perception, what we take ourselves to be aware of in our perceptual contact with the world is

not what we are really aware of; there is *always* something (idea, impression, sense-datum) which, on a representationalist version of the view, stands between perceivers and the ordinary objects which they take themselves to perceive, and this something has the qualities of which they are aware.

One of the main arguments for the theory is the Argument from Illusion. It begins with the observation that in many cases of perceptual awareness the objects that we take ourselves to be aware of appear to have properties which they do not have, and ends with the conclusion that in these cases we are aware of something else which has those properties (e.g. of sense-data). There are two essential premises needed both to establish the argument as it stands and to argue further to the conclusion that not only some but *all* instances of perceptual awareness are awareness of sense-data. The first premise is known as the “Phenomenal Principle”, (Robinson, 1994), according to which whenever it appears to a person that there is an object which has some qualities, there is an object, of which she is aware, which has these qualities. That indistinguishability of appearances entails identity of objects of awareness is the second premise supposed to establish that both illusory cases and non-illusory ones involve awareness of sense-data.

Both premises have been targets of fierce controversy and it seems that wide philosophical consensus has been reached that the conclusion of the Sense-Datum Theory does not follow. The ordinary-language philosophers referred to in Anscombe’s article, notably J.L. Austin (1962, pp. 48-54), argue that sameness of appearances does not entail sameness of objects of awareness. Thus, even if in illusory cases one is aware of sense-data, and even if the illusory experience is subjectively indistinguishable from a non-illusory one, the two situations may differ with respect to what objects one is presented with in the experience. The first premise, the Phenomenal Principle, does not hold, it has been argued, because perceptual appearances can be explained in other terms than by the presence of objects instantiating the properties of which we are aware, and thus it can be demonstrated that the appearing to a subject that there is something which is F does not entail that there is anything which is F.

Anscombe's is a different strategy. First, she observes that there are familiar contexts in which the talk of objects of awareness does not entail talking of anything that exists; for instance, one can desire x and think about y , even though neither x nor y exists. In such cases x and y are merely objects of awareness; they are "intentional", as opposed to material objects of one's thought. However, the claim that objects of perception are intentional like those of desires and thoughts does not resolve the puzzle by itself, for one can still inquire what these intentional objects might be. The crux of Anscombe's argument is that intentional objects are species of direct objects (they are objects taken by intentional verbs) and that, even though talk of direct objects makes perfect sense, the question of the existence of direct objects is nonsensical. That is so because of the two and only candidates for what 'direct object' might denote, namely a piece of language or what the piece of language stands for, none seems fit. This is, in a nutshell, Anscombe's solution. Once we realize this feature of direct objects, understand that intentional objects are species of direct objects, and that objects of perception are species of intentional objects, we should see the problem of their ontological status vanish into thin air.

Robinson, one of the few contemporary defenders of the Sense-Datum Theory, argues against Anscombe that likening of objects of perception to direct objects of grammar does not solve the puzzle of how to explain, without ontological commitments, perceptual appearances. The argument is that 'direct object' in fact has two legitimate uses, the two Anscombe considers and rejects, none of which renders the question of ontological status of what the term purports to refer to as nonsensical; 'direct object' denotes either a piece of language or an object that the piece of language stands for. Thus, Anscombe's claim that the inquiry into the ontological status of intentional objects, *qua* direct objects, is a misguided matter fails. Furthermore, according to Robinson it seems that direct objects are what 'direct objects' refer to, and so even if Anscombe's claim were true (that neither of the two candidates under consideration is what the 'direct object' denotes), it would still be legitimate to ask about what the nature of these objects is.

Readings for the seminar

- Anscombe, G.E.M. “The Intentionality of Sensation: A Grammatical Feature” (1965).
- Robinson, H. The Intentional and Adverbial Theories, especially sections 1-3. In his *Perception* (1994).
- Teichmann, R. Mind and Self, especially section 1, Perception and Memory. In his *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe* (2008).