

KBNS Self-knowledge Seminar 2018.3.8: Anscombe, “The Subjectivity of sensation”

Present: Xintong, Giacomo, Giovanni, Alisa, Josh, Peter, Paul, Gabriela Besler, Indrek, Sam, Carrie, Jonathan, Crispin

Presenter: Paul

Jonathan disagreed with a basic presupposition of Anscombe’s paper, objecting that, at least on some views and in some circumstances, there is a sense in which one can be wrong about one’s (sense) impressions. Suppose it is known that a certain physiological condition is incompatible with the obtaining of a certain kind of experience – couldn’t one find out that one’s judgment about one’s own experience was wrong, based on information concerning one’s physiological condition?

Giovanni distinguished two questions: whether judgments about one’s own impressions are incorrigible, and whether there are some aspect of one’s mental life (perhaps not sensory impressions) such that judgments about them must be incorrigible. In reply, **Jonathan** suggested that even in the case of something like moods, it seems perfectly reasonable to revise one’s own judgments, e.g. if one is irritable, but only report being tired, one may later realise they were in fact irritable.

Peter asked what the main point of Anscombe’s paper is going to be. **Giovanni** directed our attention to p. 54 of Anscombe, where she claims that, because judgments about one’s own sensations are incorrigible, they do not constitute knowledge.

Carrie drew our attention to the doctor case discussed at the outset of the paper. There are many reasons why one may ask another person to have a look at the sample, and some of these reasons do not presuppose that colours are objective properties. In reply, **Giovanni** pointed out that Anscombe (p. 44) claims that, in the case of colours, the assumption is that (i) there is such a thing as *competence*, and (ii) competent subjects do not disagree. **Paul** asked how objective does Anscombe consider what she calls ‘standing colours’? Giovanni suggested they are somewhat objective, but not wholly so.

Jonathan drew our attention to Anscombe’s example of an optical illusion (pp. 46-7), He distinguished between appearances being different and there being the appearance of a difference. **Giovanni** suggested that it might be useful to consider this case in the light of what a sense-datum theorist would say about it. A sense-datum theorist would explain the appearance of a difference in terms of there being appearances which *are* different.

Jonathan elaborated on his interpretation of the optical illusion case; we can say that the subject represents the first patch as F the second patch as F, and yet the two patches as different. This captures a sense in which each patch looks the same as before and yet there is a change in how the patches look. **Peter** questioned the coherence of this interpretation of the case. Under this reading what would be the importance of saying that each of two patches didn’t seem to change?

Xintong asked Jonathan about how he was interpreting what could give rise to differences in seemings: could it be conceptualisations, comparisons, or such? **Jonathan** clarified that what he had in mind was some kind of meta-thought about what experiences are like.

Carrie wondered what was meant by narrowness in Anscombe's 'narrowly sensory'. **Paul** said he had read Anscombe with the 'narrowly sensory' just being of a kind with phenomenal experiences. Carrie suggested that it might be a sensory experience which does not require an object to cause such an experience. But, she raised that this is unclear for how we might interpret Anscombe original doctor case: is 'These two match' narrow or 'these two seem to match'? **Giovanni** claimed it was the former which is 'narrowly sensory' for Anscombe.

We then moved to discuss the Anscombe's reconstruction of the private language argument on pp. 52-3, **Crispin** asked whether Anscombe was overreading Wittgenstein. The proponent of a private language need not have the conception of memory that Anscombe assumes in (1) and (2) (p.52). **Carrie** suggested that Anscombe could be responding on Wittgenstein's behalf to a supposed target, and strengthening his argument against those who use such a conception of memory.

Giovanni asked about point (4) on the handout: why should there be a problem with the reification of sensations? **Paul** replied that to claim what 'seems right is right' is for it to lose any normative force. **Crispin** suggested that the main point of the argument is that the proponents of private language is not in a position to point to a distinction between the conditions under which one would make a certain judgment and the conditions under which the judgment in question would be correct. **Giovanni** elaborated on his previous concern: it is not entirely clear why from the mere fact that a certain area of discourse is one in which 'whatever seems right is right' it should follow that that area of discourse is one in which that there is no such thing as right or wrong. **Indrek** pointed out that just by showing that a statement is vacuously true one has not thereby shown that it doesn't describe anything. Further argument is needed.

Paul suggested that Anscombe's reconstruction of the private language argument and discussion of sensations undermines Chalmers part-constitution account of phenomenal concepts. **Peter** agreed, saying this would rule out Chalmers' privileged class of phenomenal states, or one can give Chalmers what he wants for this class of states, but then he cannot build empirical knowledge out of those states. what he wants for this class, but then one cannot build any empirical knowledge the states.