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CRITICAL NOTICE

The Capacious and Consistent Mind of Elizabeth Anscombe

Logic, truth and meaning: writings by G.E.M. Anscombe, Edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, Imprint Academic, 2015, xi + 317 pp., £ 19.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-845-40880-0

The St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs, a series run under the auspices of the Centre for Ethics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs at the University of St Andrews and overseen by John Haldane, has now published the fourth and final volume of Elizabeth Anscombe's hitherto uncollected and unpublished papers. For those who have been waiting to see what remains of her *Nachlass* that has been deemed worthy of publication, this is a significant event.

Previous volumes in the series have brought together Anscombe's work in practical philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and the history of philosophy; the present volume, in addition to bringing back into publication her commentary on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, collects some of her papers in the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of logic. Of the twelve papers on these topics, however, only six have not previously appeared in print, although it is worth stressing that of the six previously published papers, four of these appeared in venues that are onerous for most people to access. For those who wish to make a serious study of Anscombe's contributions to twentieth century debates, this volume will surely be a welcome addition to their library.

Not surprisingly, there is much in this volume for those who are interested in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. In addition to the *Introduction to the Tractatus*, there is a review of Kripke's influential book, *On Rules and Private Language* (a longer and more comprehensive review can be found in the third volume of the series). Anscombe is careful to separate out Kripke's skeptical worries about a subject's psychological continuity in applying a rule – i.e., whether one now means the same thing by '+' as one did in previous applications of the sign – from Wittgenstein's anti-skeptical position about rules in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Having explained why Wittgenstein's discussion of rules is anti-skeptical, *pace* Kripke's exegesis, Anscombe concedes that Kripke's own skeptical worry is still a genuine one, and that 'we should be grateful to him' for bringing it to our attention. What is of philosophical

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interest in Kripke's reflections, from Anscombe's perspective, is how we should understand statements of first person past tense indicative statements such as 'I meant', 'I intended', or 'I believed.' She seems moved by Kripke's suggestion that it is difficult to prove to someone who reasonably doubted it that there was in fact something particular I meant in the past when I applied the rule +, as there seems to be no mental fact of meaning that I can recall that could settle the matter.

Another essay that concerns itself with Wittgenstein's later philosophy is 'Private Ostensive Definition', a text that is based on a manuscript which served as the basis of two publications which are not collected here. The reasons why the editors opted for the original manuscript rather than the materials Anscombe herself put up for publication are left unstated; perhaps sheer novelty suffices.

Anscombe's main targets in this essay are Locke and Russell, and by extension anyone attempting to fill in the details of their general empiricist program of building up the contents of mental states or acts and the meaning of words, sentences, and a theory of language from what is 'given' to us in particular sensible experiences. She begins with Locke's idea that the mind is a *tabula rasa* such that 'all the materials of thinking' (ideas) come from observation. Locke's simple ideas are immediately and non-inferentially known through the exercise of our sensory powers, whose objects are 'givens', which in turn serve as the foundation of all our knowledge. It is part of this view about the given objects of experience that an ostensive definition of words that signify the object stands in for the most basic ideas out of which all other ideas are supposed to come. So there is, in addition to a commitment about given objects of acquaintance, a related view about how to understand language and meaning, both of which Anscombe thinks rest upon a neglect of the role of grammar in naming these objects of experiences and also in specifying the contents of these experiences.

According to Anscombe, Locke's simple ideas, the particular sensible objects delivered through sensations, are 'givens' in the sense that the mind simply receives them and then 'through the power to repeat, compare, and unite them' builds them up into complex ideas (227). Anscombe argues that the idea of *substance* is an obvious counter-example to the theory. Although Locke wants to stave off the objection by saying that '[t]he mind does a lot of work in constructing the idea of substance' out of simple ideas (cited 229), he would have to concede, Anscombe argues, that any such work will rely upon grammatical or logical categories that his theory of ideas does not and could not in principle include.

The larger point Anscombe is making here, and one of the central claims of the paper, is that 'generality is a feature of any idea represented by a general term; an individual idea of a sensible property is not e.g. an individual event of a sensation of it; it is already a general idea' (229). Even a particular idea of a sensible property depends upon a grasp of something general, the concept which the particular idea instantiates. As she puts it later on in the essay, any sensation, or inner act or state of mind must be understood under the general umbrella of obeying rules, since any example of a sensible quality, like 'seeing red' is already the application of a rule. Thus the general cannot be 'an invention of the mind' constructed out of particular sensations that stand in for simple ideas, as Locke suggests, because to have the experience of a particular sensation as a 'seeing red' is already to bring something particular under something general: a concept. And to do that presupposes that one is operating with a certain grammar, which further presupposes that one has begun to participate in a practice or language game (in short, that one already knows quite a bit of English).

In a similar vein, ostensive definition of a term already depends upon one's (at least partial) mastery of grammar. One way to understand what Locke and Russell are up to is to say that they think private ostensive definition lies at the bottom of our understanding of language and of our knowledge of the world. By 'ostensive definition' Anscombe means naming something by an act of pointing where someone says, 'this is called red', which serves to give the word a meaning it previously lacked.

But if we are to understand such a definition, we already have to know what *kind of thing* is being named. Imagine that I point to a pencil and say, 'This is tove'. It is ambiguous whether I mean:

'This is a pencil'
'This is round'
This is wood'
'This is hard'
'This is one'

The lesson is familiar from Wittgenstein: Since an ostensive definition can always be variously interpreted in every case, in order to deploy it effectively the learner must already participate in the language game whose grammar could give the act some sense, some notion of agreement about how to go on using the word correctly in future cases. To assign a name to a thing is to be able to use it again properly, but mastering the proper use is to know what kind of thing, grammatically speaking, is being named, and that further implies sufficient mastery of a set of rules. Furthermore, one masters a set of rules by participating in a practice. Since experience cannot give us the grammar of a word, it cannot give us objects to be ostensively defined either. Both the content of sensory experience and what can signify that content depends upon the subject's (at least partial) mastery of grammar.

Public ostensive definition, the kind deployed by someone who is trying to teach someone else the meaning of a word, is not only legitimate but necessary. It is *private* ostensive definition that is problematic, and we get it by thinking first of private objects of experience, the 'givens' that make up Lockean simple ideas or Russellian sense-data. These objects are private because, as we have seen, there are no public criteria by which we could determine whether other people have the same kinds of experiences. How do we give names and fix the meanings of such objects? Locke apparently thought that 'no one can signify anything but his own ideas' (233). But how, Anscombe wonders, is signifying one's own ideas even possible? How do words get related to the 'givens' of experience, these private objects, in the first place? The only way is through an act of private ostensive definition.

We can see then that Anscombe is here introducing a different argument against what Sellars called 'the myth of the given' in his famous essay, 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.' By contrast with Sellars, Anscombe emphasizes the importance of grammar in Wittgenstein's sense. It seems to me that Anscombe's arguments against the given are more cogent than those advanced by Sellars, and therefore surely deserve to be read and discussed as widely.

There are two essays in this volume (previously published) that further clarify what Anscombe means by grammar: 'Knowledge and Essence' and 'Grammar, Structure, and Essence.' In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein declares that 'essence is expressed in grammar' (371). Anscombe's example of a paradigmatic grammatical distinction comes from Frege. In 'Function and Concept' Frege noticed that the expression of a function, such as $2 \times y^3 + y$, is something quite different from the expression of a number, which we find when the function has been numerically instantiated, as in $2 \times 2^3 + 2$. This difference is made plain by the different uses to which we can put the two expressions. She writes, 'it is the mode of use that shows that it is not a numeral but is used to form the expression of a function' (210).

Anscombe insists that by grammar Wittgenstein did not mean anything different than what an ordinary person means by it – the rules that govern proper sentence construction in a language. Philosophical grammar is merely broader than its grammar school counterpart. For example, we can ask whether 'three' is an adjective in 'Three men went out to mow a meadow?' (210). Ordinary school grammar lacks the resources to answer this, but philosophical grammar can and must answer it. Knowledge of grammar, Anscombe argues, is not a knowledge that, but a knowledge how; we display such knowledge when we show that we are competent in applying the distinction according to the rules that make up the language game in question.

Anscombe also remarks that we will misunderstand Wittgenstein's use of grammar if we think that grammar is an arbitrary invention that one might change at will. Although she concedes that some essences are 'productions of human intelligence' she thinks that the majority of them are not. The grammar of substantial terms, she argues, is bound up with the notion of a 'pure sample' which is not an invention. She also remarks that living things have a unique grammar, a thought she had previously developed in connection with the concept of 'oughts' and 'needs' in her famous paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy.'

Of special interest in this volume are three essays on beliefs, all of which are undated typescripts. In 'Motives for Beliefs of All Sorts', the question at issue is whether we can have motivated beliefs (that is, beliefs based not on grounds that show or tend to show the truth of the proposition believed, but motives that explain beliefs by reference to some end or good).

That motives can and do play such a role is evidenced by the fact that we sometimes make remarks such as 'he was under a strong temptation to think that p' or 'out of loyalty, he remains convinced that such and such'. One is only tempted by something one desires, and one desires what one finds (in some sense) good. Moreover, some beliefs, such as the belief that my spouse loves me and only me, may be too painful to give up in spite of compelling evidence to the contrary; contrariwise, some beliefs are so satisfying or so tied to my self-identity that I don't even see the things that would count as evidence against them. In all such cases, the explanations of what I believe bring in factors about what I want (or what I am desperate to avoid). But all the same, Anscombe concedes that the idea that motives can and do play a role in our belief formation is 'a bit queer' (190).

The queerness of the idea of motives for beliefs comes from certain features of the concept of motive that appear to divorce it from our concept of belief. First, Anscombe remarks that it's 'crazy' to announce that one believes something on purpose. If one does something on purpose, this implies that one might have done the thing accidentally (that is, not on purpose). But no one can believe something accidentally. It is absurd to say 'By a slip of the believing mechanism I believed p when I meant to believe not p'; Anscombe thinks this reveals a deep metaphysical truth about belief: it is not the product of a mechanism that might misfire – to believe something is to mean to believe it.

It is possible, by contrast, to *think* of something on purpose in order to achieve some end: one might think of something boring in order to fall asleep, or think of something sad in order to elicit a certain emotion, as actors do. One can also believe something with a *further* purpose in mind, such as cases of wishful thinking, in which one believes that one will do something – make this free throw shot – in order to bring it about that one actually does it. But, she writes, 'believing something on purpose ... in the way in which one can think of something on purpose, though not with a further purpose: this concept has no foothold' (191).

It is also impossible to believe something just for the fun of it, or because one is feeling rambunctious or depressed, or for no reason at all. Nor is it possible to obey a command to believe a random proposition for which one has no reason other than the fact of the command. All this suggests that belief is simply involuntary but Anscombe rejects this. The very idea of motives for belief is the idea that one can give a reason for believing that does not point to the truth of its content, and Anscombe has already allowed that this is possible and even common in human life.

It is possible that one believes something because one sees that 'it would be better to do so'. An example:

> It is rather beastly to harbor suspicion against a man if one hasn't got to. It's better – pleasanter or nobler or better general policy for the sake of human relations, if in the particular case it is not unwise – to think well of someone than ill, or to think well of him than to remember he may equally well deserve to be thought ill of, if one hasn't got to, so let's accept his story. (193)

One might be motivated by one's conception of the good life to believe something, but only if one is faced with a case in which the evidence is underdetermined for believing one way or another. In such cases, one doesn't dwell or seek out evidence against the belief, and one might have to remind oneself of other interpretations when such evidence is brought to one's attention. These motives for belief, even though they do not relate to truth but the good, seem to be reasons we can give in response to a doxastic sense of the question 'Why?' that do not immediately call the belief into question; for this reason Anscombe declares they are 'announceable'. They are also 'reputable' because they do not call into question one's doxastic credentials.

Some motives for belief are of obvious ill repute. An example is 'I believe it because I hate him'. This is announceable because in saying it one does not invalidate the claim to believe (though one does show bad character). But some motives are 'unannounceable' because putting them forward shows that one doesn't really believe; an example of such a motive is, 'I believe it because, if it is true, the inheritance is mine'.

How can we come up with a satisfactory explanation of the difference between the unannounceable motives and the announceable ones? Anscombe says that of the former group, the general form of explanation is: 'it is better, more pleasing to me, if p is the case' (194). This tends to show that one doesn't really believe it at all, because beliefs cannot be indifferent to the way things are, what is actually true. Contrast this with 'I believe that because I hate him'. This is a possible expression of belief, because the general form seems to be that 'it is better to believe that p is the case' rather than 'it is better if p is the case'. And while the former is of ill repute it is still possible as an expression of belief, whereas the latter is not.

Anscombe thinks that a distinction between belief and believing will help make the subject matter clearer. If I am under the strong influence of someone, a powerful man in my field who is mentoring me, I may be inclined to believe things just because he says them. But if you ask me why, the answer does not involve any appeal to truth, but just that he said it. His saying it leads me to believe. So I have a motive for believing but no ground for the belief. This is possible, but as soon as I admit that I have no grounds, the belief is called into question. In the end, Anscombe seems to be saying that motivated belief is possible but psychologically tenuous. It seems that she is suggesting that the more reflective we are about our beliefs and our reasons for holding them, the less likely we are to be motivated in our beliefs in a problematic way. This in turn would suggest that reflection is not similarly motivated, but we may ask why we are entitled to this assumption.

Grounds for belief, by contrast with motives, can serve as premises for arguments that purport to show that the belief is true. Anscombe's main thesis in 'Grounds for Belief' is that what typically serves as a ground for our beliefs belongs to the category of what she calls 'common knowledge'. Take, for instance, our beliefs about the life of Julius Caesar – including his conquests, his rule in Rome, and his death by assassination. What grounds do we give for these beliefs in response to the doxastic sense of the question 'Why?' All we can say, she argues, is that this is what we've been taught to believe.

Anscombe does not think we should worry about this, even though it's true that 'what everyone knows' may be wrong. She reasons that 'belief on grounds which can be considered as premises for arguments presupposes belief without grounds, or at any rate without grounds that can be so considered' (183). While many empiricist philosophers put forward sense impressions as candidates for these groundless beliefs, Anscombe suggests that what we know by transmission from past generations is a better suited to this necessary category. Such knowledge may be traced back to witnesses or not (she contrasts the case of Julius Caesar with the biblical story of Adam).

If pressed to give further grounds for one's beliefs about Julius Caesar, Anscombe thinks we have to admit that we can't. It's no good to suggest that one read the ancient sources, because if I doubt whether Julius Caesar existed and did the things my common knowledge says he did, then how can I rely on the fact that Seutonius is a credible ancient source? Seutonius will face the same challenge as Caesar. The best one can do is read the history books, but that is simply to further rely upon and expand one's common knowledge – of what we've been taught to believe or what we have received from tradition.

But can't we justify the historical record itself by reference to something outside of it? It is strange that Anscombe does not consider the physical evidence that exists in support of the claims we find in our history books, such as the archeological records we have collected. This information has not simply been received – in fact, much of it has been discovered and collected only recently by comparison with the written sources. Archaeological data is not the stuff of common knowledge but surely stands in support of it. She remarks that the existence of Julius Caesar is not a theory, but that is compatible with the fact our belief in his existence need not be groundless: it can be supported by compelling physical evidence that fits what we have received by common knowledge. Perhaps she would insist that the physical evidence relies on common knowledge for interpretation. That is, we can take it as evidence but not as evidence that stands outside of the sphere of common knowledge; it provides no Archimedean point.

Anscombe argues that it is wrong to treat common knowledge as knowledge by testimony, since its relation to testimony is rather remote and only indirect. Nor is it knowledge I get from experience. This knowledge is taught to me, it is handed down or passed on, and what justifies it is my participation in the practice – the form of life – in which the common knowledge centrally figures. Nothing outside the practice justifies this sort of common knowledge. She writes:

> I have been taught to join in doing something ... but because everyone is taught to do such things, an object of belief is generated. The belief is so certainly correct (for it follows the practice) that it is knowledge; for here knowledge is no other than certainly correct belief in pursuit of a practice. (189)

We can read this essay as an attempt to expand on the idea that much of what we know is justified by our participation in a practice, a theme one finds throughout her work under various guises. It is a further attempt to push back against the empiricist claim that the foundations of our knowledge are the sensible deliverances of private objects of experience. To be initiated into a practice is to be justified in believing certain things with certainty.

What should we make of this suggestion? It is difficult to assess given how loosely defined the concept of common knowledge is. At one point Anscombe characterizes it as what 'I have been given as part of my understanding of things'. This is very broad – surely *too* broad for us to accept. Given that the practice of being British (that is to say growing up in and participating in British forms of life) is what justifies this common knowledge, it is unclear how we can explain the rationality of questioning what we have been taught as members of 'British civilization'. Perhaps we can say that common knowledge can only be called into question in a very piecemeal fashion, a bit like the metaphor of Neurath's boat, in which we can only replace one plank at a time while the rest of the ship remains fixed in place as we travel on the sea.

And now we come to the most substantive essay on belief, 'Belief and Thought'. It too is unfinished (there is a footnote that references two further sections that have either been lost or that never came to fruition). The essay is mostly taken up with various puzzles about belief and thought that arise as we think through assent and assertion, concepts that are central to the distinction between thinking and believing. Its main contribution, I think, is its attempt to take seriously the separation of the logical and the psychological in an account of belief.

Anscombe notes that belief is a 'curious concept' because its grammar seems to shift when we apply the concept in different contexts. Sometimes belief is treated dispositionally, but in other cases it isn't (cases of suddenly believing something, for instance). It seems wrong to say that there are two equivocal senses of belief, as there are two equivocal senses of bank. Nor does it seem right to say that the non-dispositional use signifies a mental act or state of consciousness, since we fail to find such a thing when we survey our mental lives.

A somewhat traditional understanding of the distinction between mere thought and belief is that belief is what one gets when something is added to a mere thought: a mental act of assent. We are tempted by the view that something needs to be added to thought because thought can be a mere grasping of a sense, and understanding, without endorsing what is thought – without in any sense taking it to be true. Thus we can separate judgeable content, something assertable, and assent to what is assertable. When someone does think that such and such is the case, he has done two things: grasped a judgeable content and inwardly assented to it.

Assent is assertion of what is assertable (perhaps the assertion is only inward). There are two ways we might conceive of this. The first is that it is an extra feature which attaches to thought; the second is that it is intrinsic to the thought unless special circumstances take it away. Let us call the former the additive view and the latter the defeasibility view.

There are many considerations that seem to support the additive view. First, the same judgeable content when placed in an if-then clause is not asserted. Second, one can obey a command to think something as being so without thinking it as so: one says, 'think of a man with a horse's tail' and straightaway I do it. Third, things can just cross my mind, but this in no way implies that I believe them. Fourth, when fictional accounts are brought to the mind I don't believe that they are true. And so on.

But there are equally many reasons to think that assertion is not something added to thought. First and foremost, there is the fact that when I search around for this inner act of assent, I simply do not find it. And though it is true that thoughts can come before the mind, this is thought understood in its logical and not its psychological sense, and thought in its logical sense can contain within it assertion in its logical sense. Assertion needn't be some extra, psychological ingredient.

Ultimately, Anscombe rejects both accounts. She writes:

> Each seems to involve a myth: the defeasibility theory, that of a sort of content which if it occurs in the mind at all must be being believed, or must be being believed unless there is some explanation why not…; and the other, that of the indescribable addition, the act of assent. Both views must arise from a failure to understand. (163)

I think the failure that Anscombe is pointing to is the failure to see the distinction between logical and psychological accounts of assertion.

The defeasibility theory fails as a psychological theory; it says that we must believe any judgeable content that is present to our minds unless special circumstances can explain our not doing it. But this denies the possibility of entertaining mere ideas. It also has trouble accounting for negation. If 'p' is before the mind, then the mind must be assenting to it. But if ~p is before the mind, then so is p, for the negation contains the thought that it negates. But I can't be assenting to both at the same time. But if we say that the corresponding negative idea is not in the offing, then it is unclear what assent amounts to.

Anscombe thinks it will help us to distinguish between grammatical kinds of assertion – logical and psychological. Assertion might be a personal act of mind, but it might also be 'a logical character of the proposition as such' such that it can be the 'instrument of personal assertions' (166). But there is still logical unassertedness, such as what falls within an if-then clause – here the propositions are asserted in neither sense. How can we say both that the proposition itself asserts and that it occurs unasserted?

Anscombe's solution, which she takes from Julianne Mott Rountree, is that assertion is context dependent and that we need to be able to grasp the completeness of a context in order to know whether a proposition is asserted. Skipping over the technical details, assertion is not a matter of adding something or taking it away in specified circumstances; rather, 'a proposition in itself is an assertion' but 'it is not asserted in every context in which it occurs'. The basic notion here is 'assertedness in a context'; if the context is simply the proposition, then it is logically asserted, but if it is placed in a different context, say within an if-then clause, it is not. We can only get there if assertedness is fundamentally contextual. The understanding of the completeness of a context is a kind of skill or knowledge-how, rather than a knowledge that, and this implies that once again this knowledge is justified by one's mastery of a practice and a set of rules. It is also important to this account that psychological assertion depends upon the logical character of assertedness. She writes:

> personal asserting is something we can do because the tools of assertion – the propositions we can construct in our language – lie ready to our hand, and it is not the personal act of asserting which confers their assertive character on the propositions. (169)

So much, then, for the traditional view of the distinction between thought and belief.

The essay ends with some reflections on Moore's paradox. Moore thought it was absurd to say 'I believe p, but not p' or 'p, but I don't believe that p'. It is tempting to understand the paradox in terms of contradictory assertions, but Anscombe thinks that would be a mistake. First, 'I believe p, but perhaps not p' has nothing wrong with it; whereas both 'p, but perhaps not p' and 'I say that p, but perhaps not p' are objectionable. The absurdity of the paradox is better understood in terms of expressions of beliefs. For *p* does not occur asserted in 'I believe that *p*' and the problem with assertion drops out. The absurdity is just that one cannot at one and the same time take p to be the case and p not to be the case. Here we see something fundamental about what it is to express a belief – to express that one does so take p. To believe something is indeed to mean to believe it.

I have only skimmed the surface of what is worthy of discussion in this volume, and on principle I've stuck to the material that's never before been published, though I haven't even covered all that falls under that category. By contrast with the other volumes in this series, the essays in this volume all fit squarely within the category of analytic philosophy, and without a strong background in that philosophy and first order predicate logic I doubt a reader could get much from them.

In closing I'd like to address the question of Anscombe's continued relevance. It is well known that Anscombe's influence has been profound in practical philosophy, in particular ethics and the philosophy of action. By contrast, her influence in other areas of philosophy has waned, in part no doubt because Wittgenstein has fallen out of fashion. As a result of this, far too often she is only read and discussed in piecemeal fashion. Philosophers of action, for example, tend only to read *Intention* and perhaps a few other essays while ignoring the rest of her corpus; virtue ethicists tend to stick to a few influential essays. But this piecemeal approach is bound to lead to profound misunderstanding of what she is up to in her practical philosophy. We will misunderstand the main claims of *Intention*, for example, if we do not understand that it is a grammatical investigation, and that intention and intentionality are grammatical concepts. A grammatical investigation is *logical* rather than *causal*, a distinction that gets worked out elsewhere but that is applied in her practical philosophy and crucial to its proper understanding. We will similarly misunderstand her claims in 'Modern Moral Philosophy' if we do not understand her conception of the general shape that a philosophy of psychology must take, and how the notion of a practice figures within it.

For these reasons I suggest that those who claim to follow or be inspired by Anscombe's practical philosophy would do well to make a serious study of her theoretical writings as well. Now that we possess the entirety of Anscombe's corpus collected in seven volumes, this critical task is far less daunting.

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