

***The Mind's Provisions: A Critique of Cognitivism*, by Vincent Descombes, trans. Stephen Adam Schwartz. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, 304 pp. ISBN 0-691-00131-6 hb £24.95**

The grand opposition between theories of the mind which is presented in this book will be familiar, in its broad outlines, to many readers. On the one side we have the Cartesians, who understand the mind in terms of representation, causation and the inner life; on the other we have the Wittgensteinians, who understand the mind in terms of activity, normativity and its external embedding in its bodily and social environment. In this book—one of a pair, the second of which has yet to be translated—Vincent Descombes puts up a spirited defence of the Wittgensteinian approach. The Cartesian approach, which he calls ‘mental philosophy’, and which is exemplified most typically in the ‘cognitivism’ of Jerry Fodor, is fundamentally mistaken, he argues, since it underestimates, neglects or ignores both the *active* and *external* characteristics of the mind.¹ Instead we should² understand the mind in terms of a human being’s participation in a culture or a ‘form of life’, a form of engagement which is structured by norms rather than causal laws. This ‘anthropological holism’ draws not only upon the work of Wittgenstein, but also on Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and, among other things, on the role of fiction in shaping our self-understanding.

Cognitivism is that manifestation of ‘mental philosophy’ which attempts to construct a systematic science of the mind based upon the notions of representation, causation and law (p. 66). As characterised by Descombes, it is a sorry sight indeed. It understands the mind as ‘utterly separate from the world’, as a passive receiver of empty, meaningless causal signals from the world outside, and therefore as trapped within what Heidegger calls an ‘inner sphere’. This is because, according to cognitivism, ‘psychology has a justification precisely in the fact that the psychological subject does not have a direct relation to things but only to its *representation* of things’ (p. 10); and this is ultimately why ‘the psychology of a representing mind is a cognitive psychology but *without cognition proper*’ (p. 16). At its worst, cognitivism collapses into a form of solipsism (p. 220).

Such a picture of the mind runs counter to all of our experience. It does not seem to me that I am in perceptual and cognitive contact only with representations, in such a way that I have to (for example) infer the existence of things around me. On the contrary, it seems to me that I am here in the world alongside the things I am thinking about and perceiving. I do not experience my mental life as that of a mere spectator of the passing show; I am actively engaged with the world and my ability to act is so tied up, phenomenologically speaking, with my abilities to perceive and think that I find it hard to draw sharp lines between them. I feel myself to be an embodied agent, immersed in the social world around me and directly engaging with it. And I am sure you feel the same way yourself.

The picture of the mind which Descombes characterises as cognitivist therefore appears, at first sight, phenomenologically unrealistic to the point of absurdity. If the phenomenological observations just made are at all on the right lines, then any theory

which is attempting to save the mental phenomena and yet gives no account of them will have to be rejected. So if cognitivism is committed to the denial of these phenomenological claims, one might reasonably wonder why anyone would try to defend cognitivism in the first place. Unfortunately, Descombes does not do much to answer this question; one of the shortcomings of his book is its failure to present the view he is opposing in a way which makes it in any way plausible. Here I will not try to remedy this deficiency (see Crane 2003 for a more sympathetic presentation for the motivation for cognitivism). Rather, I will look more closely at two central ideas in Descombes's presentation of cognitivism: the idea that the mind is *separate* from the world, and the idea that the mind is *inactive*. According to anthropological holism, by contrast, the mind is *external* and *active*. In focussing on these central themes of externality and activity, I will inevitably have to ignore some of the many interesting aspects of Descombes's anthropological holism.

First, externality. What might it mean to say that the mind is something 'utterly separate from the world'? According to one interpretation, a mind that is separate from the world is something like a Cartesian soul, defined as something which is capable of independent existence, and therefore whose cognitive and epistemic links with reality are precarious. This was not, of course, the way that Descartes would have described his own view, given both his understanding of the causal relationship between body and mind, and his conception of our knowledge of the world. But nor is it a description that contemporary cognitivists would accept. Cognitivists are, as Descombes recognises, naturalists—and whatever else this means, it certainly means that they think the mind is a natural or physical object, the product (as it may be) of natural selection and subject to natural law.

Perhaps a better way to fill out the description of the mind as 'separate from the world', and one which Descombes himself discusses later in the book, is by saying that psychological states are *narrow* in Hilary Putnam's (1975) sense: that their ascriptions do not entail the existence of anything other than the subject to whom they are ascribed. The idea is that being in a state of mind does not entail the existence of anything other than its subject, and therefore in this sense the mind is separate from the world: logically or metaphysically *separable*.

Of course, being separable in this sense is compatible with being connected causally, and cognitivists will typically say that the mind is causally connected to the rest of reality. But it may be responded, by someone who defends this understanding of 'separateness from the world', that causal connection to the world is not what matters; what matters is a constitutive or conceptual or metaphysical connection to the world, and narrow states do not have this kind of connection. This distinction is certainly worth making; but the trouble with defining cognitivism in terms of its commitment to narrow states of mind is that the orthodoxy in the philosophy of mind for the last twenty years or so has been strongly opposed to the idea of narrow states of mind. (Or rather, the orthodoxy is strongly opposed to the view that *all* states of mind are narrow.) So if cognitivism is defined in terms of separateness from the world, and separateness from the world is defined in terms of narrowness, then most contemporary philosophy of mind is not cognitivist. The dominant philosophy of mind, among the kind of reductionist theories Descombes aims to attack, is 'externalist' in character (see Crane 2001 chapter 4 for a survey). So Descombes is either attacking a very unpopular thesis, or he has mischaracterised his target. I suspect the latter is the case, and the externalist tendencies of contemporary philosophy of mind do not remove this philosophy from belonging to the style of theorising which Descombes calls 'mental philosophy'.

However, even if such theories do not believe in narrow states, they may still be vulnerable to the other kinds of criticism he brings against mental philosophy—for

example, that it is insufficiently holistic. So it may well be that 'narrow-mindedness' is not essential to mental philosophy, or even to cognitivism. But what I want to focus on is not this question, but rather the puzzling fact that Descombes's conclusions about the mind being separate from the world at the end of his book are in clear conflict with some of the things he says at the beginning of his book about the phenomenon of intentionality.

Descombes (correctly, in my opinion) places the concept of intentionality at the centre of his philosophy of mind (pp. 19–29). The most puzzling—but also one of the most philosophically fascinating—aspects of the concept of intentionality is its *merely apparent* relationality: thoughts and other intentional acts are not relations to their objects, even though they appear to be. One reason for this is that, as Brentano put it, 'if someone thinks of something, the one who is thinking must certainly exist, but the object of his thinking need not exist at all' (1874: 272). Assuming that relations imply the existence of their relata, then Brentano's point clearly entails that intentionality is not a relation. Descombes agrees: 'one cannot . . . conceive of intentionality as a relation between subject and object' (p. 25; see also p. 28). Like many philosophers, he thinks that this apparent relationality has to be explained in terms of the modification of individual acts or states of mind: 'When someone thinks about [e.g.] the present Director of the Opera, there is no relationship between a subject and an object but simply the determination of the act of thought by an intellectual content' (p. 24).

Descombes's emphasis on the importance of intentionality and on its fundamentally non-relational character seems to me to be absolutely the right way to approach these issues. Unfortunately, however, he muddies the waters somewhat when he introduces the relationship between the phenomenological notion of intentionality and the grammatical notion of transitivity. When he introduces the notion of intentionality, he claims that traditional formulations of this notion, like 'anyone who thinks must think something', obscure 'the decisive issue by conflating the intentionality of acts or mental states with a certain grammatical transitivity or property by which certain verbs require a direct object. Yet the notion of intentionality is useful precisely to the extent that it allows us to avoid conflating the grammar of psychological verbs . . . with those of ordinary transitive verbs' (p. 22). He concludes that the non-relational character of intentionality shows that intentionality 'is in no way a kind of transitivity' (p. 22). For 'if we were to take at face value the apparent transitivity of intentional verbs, we would have to say that the act signified by such verbs *always has an object even when it doesn't*' (p. 25; original emphasis).

Well, yes and no. Intentional verbs are transitive—that is, they take direct objects—and there is no need for a philosopher of intentionality to deny this. What they must deny, as Anscombe showed some years ago, is that 'object' in the phrase 'direct object' means the same as 'object' in the sense of *thing* (see Anscombe 1965; for some discussion, see Crane 2001 chapter 1). This is not an *ad hoc* stipulation, but rather derives from the etymology of the grammatical term 'object' (see Smith 2002 chapter 8). So in the sentence 'Vladimir is thinking of a unicorn', the phrase 'a unicorn' gives the direct object of the sentence. The sentence does not express a relation between Vladimir and any real thing, since there are no unicorns; but this is consistent with saying that 'thinks of' is a transitive verb. Once we distinguish the grammatical question from the metaphysical one, we can see that there is no inconsistency in saying that intentional verbs are transitive and also that they do not express relations. Of course, this is not the end of the matter, and a proper understanding of intentionality must offer an understanding of the puzzling phenomenon of thinking about objects which do not exist. To lessen the sense of paradox which Descombes tries to draw out, we might say instead that 'the act signified by an intentional verb always has an intentional object even when it doesn't have a real object'. There is still a puzzle here; but

puzzlement is not removed if we deny, as Descombes does, the obvious fact that intentional verbs are transitive.

Nonetheless, Descombes's remarks about the non-relational character of intentionality are surely on the right track. It is therefore somewhat strange that he does not consider the relation between this claim and his main arguments for the view that the mind is not 'detached' from the world (in chapter 11). Descombes begins by observing that a belief, for example, would be the same state of mind regardless of its truth-value: the truth-value of a belief is not essential to it (p. 218). He then argues that the narrow conception of mental states does not follow from the fact that subjects can be in error in their beliefs:

There is nothing particularly Cartesian (or representationist) about declaring that there is no difference between someone who believes that *p* and happens to be right and someone who believes that *p* and is wrong. Everyone grants this. (p. 218)

This is, of course, quite correct; one cannot argue for narrow states of mind simply from the existence of error. Descombes goes on:

What is Cartesian about the argument . . . is that it posits no difference, from the cognitive perspective of what is present to the mind, between someone who sees a piece of paper and someone who believes he sees a piece of paper. (p. 219)

But if we compare this quotation with the one from p. 218 above, then a tension begins to emerge. For suppose we replace '*p*' with 'There is a piece of paper here'. Then we have:

(A) There is nothing particularly Cartesian (or representationist) about declaring that there is no difference between someone who believes that there is a piece of paper here and happens to be right and someone who believes that there is a piece of paper here, and is wrong.

Now if it makes sense to suppose that perceptual experience has a propositional content—that is, that a perceptual experiential state can be attributed to a subject *S* by saying things of the form '*S* experiences that *p*'—then we can replace 'believes' with 'experiences' in the passage above, and obtain the following:

(B) There is nothing particularly Cartesian (or representationist) about declaring that there is no difference between someone who experiences that there is a piece of paper here and happens to be right and someone who experiences that there is a piece of paper here and is wrong.

I think Descombes would say that (A) is true and (B) is false. This is because he would say that the idea that there is a psychological identity between perception and a hallucination is a Cartesian idea, given what 'Cartesian' means in this context. But the move from (A) to (B) only relies on the assumption that perceptual experience, like belief, has an intentional content, and that this content, like the content of belief, can be correct or incorrect. Now Descombes may wish to reject this assumption, along with contemporary disjunctivists (see McDowell 1987, Martin 2002). But he does not argue for this rejection, and without such an argument, he leaves himself without a way of blocking the move from (A) to (B).

Descombes does seem to agree with disjunctivists that perception must be understood relationally, and that this is what it means for perception to be direct. In the case of

perceptual error, he says, perception 'ceases to be direct and becomes an act of cogitation. The perceiving subject is not in relation with a piece of paper but is only having the experience of seeing one' (p. 219). So perception, properly understood, is a relation to the environment, whereas belief is not. This is, in itself, not such a remarkable claim; as I have just noted, it is at the heart of the disjunctive theory of appearances. What is more remarkable is the passage that follows this claim:

A new concept of representation has thus emerged: the idea that there is a common core to the representation of someone who sees a sheet of paper and the representation of someone who merely believes he is seeing one. This is the solipsistic, narrow conception of a mental state: one can see a sheet of paper without there being a sheet of paper in much the same way that one can be afraid of the bogeyman when no bogeyman is present. (p. 219; original emphasis)

Descombes goes on to describe this new concept of representation as the concept of 'representations that represent nothing ... *Nothing is represented*' (p. 220; p. 222; original emphasis). This is obviously an instance of the sort of thing he means by his earlier claim that 'the psychology of a representing mind is a cognitive psychology but *without cognition proper*' (p. 16). And this is clearly intended as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the narrow conception of mental states and of cognitivism in general.

But this 'new concept' of representation is not new at all: it is simply the concept of non-relational intentionality, which Descombes endorsed earlier in the book. And it would distort the entire earlier discussion of intentionality to say that intentional states and acts 'do not represent'. A belief about unicorns represents unicorns; it does not represent nothing. This would only be a 'new' concept of representation if it were true that the 'old' (or more intuitive, natural or commonsensical) concept of representation implied that representation must be relational. But, assuming that talk of intentionality and talk of representation go hand in hand—something Descombes does not deny, as we shall see—it is not true that the ordinary concept of representation implies that representation is relational. Indeed, this was the burden of Descombes's discussion of intentionality at the beginning of the book. Even by Descombes's own lights, then, a defender of the narrow conception of mental states does not have to say that they are 'representations which do not represent'. And since the argument of chapter 11 was intended to commit the narrow conception to this absurd conclusion, we must conclude that the argument fails. Whatever the problem with the narrow conception is, it is not that it introduces a new or bizarre concept of representation.

Descombes holds, then, that intentionality is non-relational, and that perception is relational. He therefore must deny that perception is a form of intentionality. So he cannot think that intentionality is the essential characteristic of mental phenomena, since perception is not intentional. But Descombes does not discuss this non-intentional conception of perception, and therefore leaves the role of intentionality in what he calls his 'intentionalist' theory of mind rather obscure. Nonetheless, it is clear that one thing which is supposed to be new about this intentionalist theory is the role that it assigns to action and activity in accounting for mentality. This is the second main theme I will discuss.

One of the main errors of mental philosophy, Descombes argues, is that it does not treat representation as appropriately active. Descombes is keen to insist that there is nothing wrong with talking about representation as such. In itself, the word 'representation' is 'innocuous' (p. 10). The point is how the word is used:

Among mental philosophers, representation is not a vital activity and in this regard differs from other activities like extracting information from the flux and variation of one's environment or drawing up a plan of action so as to be ready to move within a milieu whose complete contours can only be guessed at based on the partial information at hand. Representation, for a subject or 'intelligent system', involves entering into a certain relationship with a cognitive entity: for the mentalists of the past, a representational idea; for those of the present, a real and physical symbol located within the organism. (p. 10)

One source of mental philosophy's confusion here is supposed to be the fact that it attributes to parts of the thinker states and capacities what can only be intelligibly attributed to the whole. This is described at one point as 'the difficulty for every mental philosophy: How can the attributions of a personal subject be transferred to a part of that subject?' (p. 186). Mental philosophy looks for representations inside the organism, and ends up saying things like 'the brain represents the world' or (even worse) 'the brain thinks'.

Descombes does not doubt that the brain has something to do with thinking, he argues that we must distinguish between the conditions for thinking and the abilities which constitute thinking: 'the conditions in which we can do something are not those abilities themselves' (p. 72). Once we make this distinction, then we can see that 'the physiological conditions for psychological phenomena are in the brain. . . [but] these phenomena of mind are only phenomena of *mind* insofar as they exist outside, in the public world' (p. 73). His view is nicely summed up as follows:

mind is present in its phenomena and therefore in the world, in symbolic practices and institutions. Within people's heads, there are literally only the personal (and therefore physical or physiological) conditions for participation in these practices and institutions. The mental, however, is everywhere that it manifests itself, therefore in both discourse and action, whose conditions of existence are of a holistic nature. (p. 65)

Descombes's views here involve the following four claims: (i) the person is the locus of mental activity, not the brain; (ii) action is a mental category; (iii) mental activity presupposes the existence of social institutions; (iv) mental phenomena are holistic in character.

Claims (i) and (ii) cannot really be matters for disagreement between Descombes and the mental philosopher. For in defending (i), Descombes finds himself in the company of such an eminent defender of mental philosophy as Chomsky, who once wrote that 'people think, not their brains, which do not, though their brains provide the mechanisms of thought' (1995: 8). There is nothing in the essence of mental philosophy in general, or cognitivism in particular, which forces it to say that the brain must think, or forces it to deny the distinction between psychological capacities and the conditions for their possibility (indeed, some cognitivists talk explicitly about 'sub-personal' mechanisms forming the 'enabling conditions' of mental processes and activity). Similarly, there is no reason for a defender of mental philosophy to deny that action is a mental phenomenon; indeed, many orthodox philosophers of mind see action/behaviour as a fundamental mental category, and try to understand mental life partly in terms of it. Descombes is anxious to insist that mental philosophy denies real cognition or psychic life because it denies that behaviour is mental or psychical; but it is not clear why mental philosophy is supposed to be committed to this.

The real differences begin to emerge when considering (iii) and (iv). The claim that mental activity presupposes the existence of social institutions in which it is embedded (claim (iii)) is part of Descombes's externalist conception of mind, and as we saw above, sits unhappily alongside his denial that any intentionality is relational. And the claim (iv) that mental phenomena are holistic is certainly one which many cognitivists see as inimical to their enterprise (see especially Fodor 1998). However, just as there are mental philosophers who are externalists (as we noted above) there are also mental philosophers who are holists (see Peacocke 1992 and Block 1986 for examples). So once again it becomes rather hard to locate the essence of Descombes's objection to mental philosophy.

Perhaps Descombes's difficulties in pinning down the essence of mental philosophy are more due to its own protean character than to his procrustean assumptions. If we were to find one thing which characterises all of the philosophers attacked here—apart from their antipathy to Wittgenstein—it would only be a doctrine as vague as naturalism. And it is very rare for enlightening philosophy to be generated by a full-frontal attack on vague doctrines. Out of the vague comes only the vague. Descombes does not spend much time on the subject of naturalism—a good thing, in my opinion—and instead focuses on specific theses put forward by specific naturalist philosophers. But lacking the enthusiasm or goodwill to interpret mental philosophy with any charity, Descombes tends to attribute traits to the whole which are only true of the parts (the converse of the intellectual error he attributes to cognitivists!). Directed on mental philosophy or cognitivism as a whole, his attacks fall short of their target. This is, surely, only to be expected; for it is very unlikely that a philosophical position of the complexity and lineage of cognitivism has nothing to be said for it at all. *The Mind's Provisions* could become the kind of book which is taken up enthusiastically by people who dislike contemporary philosophy of mind and want to see it as resting on some fundamental mistake. My own view is that it is as unlikely that there is such a mistake as it is that there is one thing called contemporary philosophy of mind, or mental philosophy.

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NOTES

¹ Newcomers to this area should be warned, however, that Descombes's understanding of the issue of externalism is not as secure as it should be. Consider for example, his claim on p. 202 that Putnam's concern in 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' (Putnam 1975), was to refute the claim that meaning determines reference or extension. This is a mistake: Putnam retains (without argument) the claim that meaning determines reference (i.e. difference in reference implies difference in meaning) and rejects the claim that knowing the meaning of a term is a matter of being in a psychological state. Indeed, without the claim that meaning determines reference, Putnam could not argue for his externalism in the way he does, *viz.* by arguing that because psychological doppelgängers are referring to different things, then they mean something different by their words. The assumption that

meaning determines reference is an essential step in the argument for externalism. Without it, an assertion of the externalist thesis would beg the question.

² I have been helped in coming to understand *The Mind's Provisions* by a symposium on the book organised by the Forum for European Philosophy in January 2003, and attended by Professor Descombes himself.

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