

# The Mind's Provisions: A Critique of Cognitivism (New French Thought Series)

**Vincent Descombes**

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*Review by Géry Derbier*

In his book *The Mind's Provisions: A Critique of Cognitivism*, Vincent Descombes, a French philosopher we could qualify as Wittgensteinian, addresses the question "Where is the mind?" Responses to this question divide into two camps: *inside* say the mentalistic heirs of Descartes, among whom we find modern cognitivists; *outside* claim the philosophers of the public usage of signs drawing upon Wittgenstein and Pierce.

Descombes supports the second thesis: the mind should be searched for in the human exchanges rather than in an internal flow of representations. In this pretty readable first opus, he is very articulate in his criticism of the mentalistic theory of mind. He exposes the following thought experiment. Let's imagine Mr Smith wants to go the bank. A cognitivist would say his brain is in a certain physical state: that is, a particular configuration of his neurons and other material entities would explain his desire. Let's imagine now that a Piraha (a Amazonian forest native I'm using here in reference to an other extraordinary book *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* by Daniel Everett, 2009) is hit by lightning so that the electrical shock puts his brain in exactly the same configuration. Will we conclude that this man thinks of going to the bank? It's hard to say so. It is even harder to say something like he had a thought that he cannot think. And the difficulty here seems to point to the need to take context into account to attribute some content to a mental act. That is, something like a desire cannot be circumscribed to a private space.

Moreover, Descombes, drawing upon Wittgenstein's philosophical work (in particular the later work showing the logical nature of the link between the concepts 'inside' and 'outside'), shows that the thesis of internal mental states does not fit our linguistic usages. As an example, we could not say Vincent Descombes' book contains interesting ideas (which would be a mere figure of speech). You should say that the ideas are only in the head of the author or in the head of the reader. And then you are necessarily introducing some form of dualism. And naturally once the mental and the physical have been dissociated, cognitivists have to find a way to reunify them. For example, what is the link between my desire to drink water and my going to the kitchen. If an action is not a mental act, you have to find a way to explain how the latter is *caused* by the former. Cognitivists look for a materialistic form of explanation there. We must note that the whole causality conundrum only originates from having introduced the idea of a distinction between mental and physical activity.

In a central chapter of his book Descombes examines one of the last resorts of the cognitivists: the analogy with the computer. They claim that this is the case of a material construction that manipulates symbols and performs "intelligent" process. And as such it is possible to produce thoughts with purely material elements. They claim they have found with the computer the best model to understand how a computational process inside the brain can operate in such a way that a desire, an idea *causes* another mental phenomenon or an action.

However, Descombes says, the comparison is wrong from the very beginning: it is not the mind that is compared to a computer, but the reverse. And more, cognitivists ask us to compare the computer with a particular kind of thinking individual, one with a *representational capability*, one loaded with internal symbols. That is a Cartesian subject. However, the discussion here is fruitful and the need to examine the concept of symbol will give interesting clues to help solve the problem at hand. When the cognivist says a computer manipulates symbols, he is right. When he says these symbols do have a

causal role, only due to their physical properties and not for their content, he is right again. However, the cognitivist has forgotten that when a computer operates on symbols, the status of symbols has been given by *us* and not by the computer itself. A computer does not have symbols *of its own*. And this is because a computer does not participate in a proper form of life, as Wittgenstein would put it or, in Descombes wording, a computer does not have an institutionalising capacity by means of which we can use something as a symbol to communicate a thought about something else.

In this book, I would say Vincent Descombes has made a quite convincing work of showing that no mentalistic theory conceiving thoughts as independent things that could be counted like physical objects can be coherent, and that such a theory faces the decisive holistic objection: when you want to *identify* someone's thought you cannot do so without taking the historical context into account. But now, any alternative has to provide for the necessity to *identify* a thought. Otherwise, any idea would be equivalent to another and it would not be possible to say anything at all about the mind.

In the more demanding sequel *The Institution of Meaning: A Defense of Anthropological Holism* (Descombes, 2014), the author examines how a holistic theory of mind – that is our thinking occurs in the public space – can be coherently presented. In particular Descombes shows that thoughts can nevertheless be distinguished, and this can be done by means of institutions of meaning that build what we would call an *objective mind*.

In my opinion, we Solution Focus (SF) practitioners are an interesting species: it seems that our daily practices and results corroborate the holistic thesis.

## References

Descombes, V. (2014). *The Institution of Meaning: A Defense of Anthropological Holism*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Everett, D. (2009). *Don't Sleep, There are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*. London: Profile Books.

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